

Proverbs 4: 1-9

Listen, children, to a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight;
for I give you good precepts:
do not forsake my teaching.
When I was a son with my father,
tender, and my mother's favourite,
he taught me, and said to me,
'Let your heart hold fast my words;
keep my commandments, and live.
Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away
from the words of my mouth.
Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;
love her, and she will guard you.
The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
and whatever else you get, get insight.
Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;
she will honour you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a fair garland;
she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.'

Even Success Has Failed Me
Rev. Charles Schuster
October 14, 2007

There are children in the congregation today, and I've authorized them to make a little noise while I'm preaching. So I don't want any of them to get in trouble because of it. Come talk to me, if you don't like their making noise. They are the future. It's a beautiful thing.

I'm sitting toward the back of the bus. This is the bus we hired to go to Walden, for me, yet a second time, this past Friday. The reason for the trip, we wanted to see dead leaves. We wanted to go to a museum to take us back to an age that used to be, and we wanted to see wild animals, you know, elk and deer and moose. The only wild animal we saw was a chipmunk. However, it was a wonderful trip. The wildlife must have heard that we wild Methodists were on the way, because they weren't there. At least, they weren't to be seen. To liven up things, from the back of the bus, looking out the window I said, "Look there – two moose, three elk." It was actually three cows and two dogs. One of the people on the bus, in disgust, looked at me and said, "Ministers are supposed to tell the truth." So on this Children's Sabbath, I will tell the truth. Today when in our service we tie wishes to the balloons of our children, and lift the children high, we release the balloons. It's a day to tell the truth, to say something to our kids.

This Book of Proverbs is an interesting book. It's a collection of wise sayings put together after the Exile. This section that we read today is especially interesting because it focuses on children, advice to children. It must have been their Children's Sabbath when it was written. The section

begins, “My child, listen closely to my teaching, and learn common sense. My advice is useful. Do not turn away.” So we put the words of prayers and hopes on a piece of paper, we tie it to a balloon and release the balloons. “Children, listen closely to my teaching. Learn common sense. My advice is useful. Do not turn away.” I know what they’ll learn from us, I think. They’ll learn from us, because we will see to it that we learn, they will learn from us to strive, to tap into the Spirit. Strive to be the best. Strive to be the best. Strive to win. We tell them stories, stories from the Bible to enable them to know what it is to tap into the Spirit and strive to be the best. Did you hear the one about David and Goliath, and how David stood in front of the giant and all he had was a slingshot? Did you hear the one about Samson who was weakened when Delilah cut his hair and he pulled down the pillars of the temple on the enemy nation? Did you hear the one about Moses, who went to Pharaoh with, “Let my people go.”? Did you hear the one about Ruth who saved her people and saved the day? Strive to be the best. Strive to be the best. Strive to win.

Brian Bauknight is a United Methodist pastor in the Pennsylvania area, Pittsburgh, actually. He likes to tell the story about the little boy and his dad going into the department store and there’s this toy, it’s an inflated plastic toy, and it looks like a boxer, about the size of the kid, and the dad says, “Go ahead and punch it.” He walks over and he takes a swing at it, and it falls down and pops up. Dad says, “Do it again.” He takes another swing, punches it, it falls down and pops back up. He does it again, same thing – falls down, pops back up. Finally the kid looks at this dad and says, “Why does it keep popping up?” Dad says, “I don’t know, why do you think?” Kid thought for a long time, then he said, “I think maybe it’s the case that it’s standing up on the inside.” Strive to be a winner. Strive to stand up on the inside, becoming a winner, getting from life. Live the day, *carpe diem*.

Let me tell you about Marion. Marion was in eighth grade when she watched the Olympics and she saw Florence and Jackie win their gold medals. And in eighth grade she walked up to the chalkboard and wrote on the board, “I want to be an Olympic champion” – and she did. She became it, tapped into her spirit. That part was great, she learned to strive, to take from life. She was an Olympic champion, a winner. She won. She ran faster than anybody else. Three gold medals, two bronze medals. She was an Olympic champion, but she lost. She had to give her medals back, as we’ve heard. She lacked common sense. Marion Jones took drugs. She cheated. It made her run faster. She never understood that the biggest challenge we have in our life is ourselves. But you don’t win if you cheat. Cheating isn’t winning, it’s gaining advantage. It’s making victory certain. It’s no contest, and when the game is fixed, you don’t win when you can’t lose. Our children need to know that. And I don’t need to tell them. They don’t have to go too far to learn it because there’s somebody here that would tell them. Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy, a runner like Marion. One of the fastest runners in the state, one of the finest athletes in the city. One of the finest people in the church, Jeremy Helpert. He’d tell the children. He’d say, “Look, learn to take some risks. You have to find the guts and the strength to go for it. You have to overcome. One of the things you have to overcome is the fear of failure. You have to take a risk in a race. You have to risk the possibility you’re going to run a poor race. Confront what keeps you from fulfilling your full capacity as a runner. Leave your comfort zone. Strive, and never get comfortable.” Tapped into the Spirit, Jeremy will win no matter where he finishes, because he’s running against himself.

Muriel James wrote a book entitled *Born to Win*. She writes, “Every human being is born to something new. And when I refer to someone as a winner, I don’t mean somebody who defeats somebody else in a game or in a race. A winner is somebody who responds authentically by being humble and trustworthy and responsive and genuine.” The Rockies seem to be winners now, not because of the scoreboard and how they’re doing, but by the way they play the game, and the game they play. Did you see the catch by Willie Taveras on Friday night? Oh my goodness, did you see that? Did you see Troy Tulowitzki go to his right, pick up the ball at shortstop and fire that thing across the infield like a laser? Did you see Hernandez pitching a hundred miles an hour? You’ve got to have a goal that exceeds your reach, you’ve got to have a dream that goes beyond your potential, you’ve got to be able to be standing up on the inside when you’re knocked down on the outside. All of us (James Thurber) all of us should strive to learn before we die, what we’re running from and what we’re running to, and why. Strive to be the best. Strive to be a winner. Tap into the spirit. Take from life what is there. *Carpe diem*, take from the day.

Children listen to our teaching and learn common sense. Our advice is useful. Do not turn away. We put our words on paper, we tie them to the balloons, and later we release the balloons we did. Let us tell the children to live to give, as well as take. Let us help them to know how to tap into the soul, and thrive. The good life, may they know the good life. May they know that it’s so good that the only thing they can do is savor it and share it. We tell them stories. Did you hear the one about Zacchaeus, there’s little children singing that song, climbed up in a tree and Jesus said, “Come down to earth, Zacchaeus, let’s go to lunch.” Did you hear the one about Jonah and the whale, and how Jonah spoke to the enemy people because God told him? Did you hear the one about the little child who came to the picnic and it didn’t rain, and he brought some fish and a loaf of bread and everybody ate because he shared? To thrive in life is to tap into the soul and to give to life, to share. Edwin Markham once said, “We have committed the Golden Rule to memory, now let’s commit it to life.”

Probably our children will learn this when something gets their attention. In the neighborhood where we live, the people in the neighborhood seem to be, some of them anyway, going crazy with Halloween decorations. You used to live there, you know what I’m talking about. It’s amusing how they keep adding stuff to what they’ve had. But there’s this one house, and you go past it and there is a sign that’s posted on the tree, and I know it’s just for Halloween, but it gets my attention every time I see it, and it says, “Lost – large poisonous snake.” I may change my itinerary because of that.

Let me tell you about Jay. Jay awakened to this one day. He was in high school. He had this opinion that many teenagers have, and younger, that his parents were old, irrelevant. Ever hear that? “When we go to the mall, Dad, walk behind us.” He was able to scrape up enough money to buy a truck, and he was so proud of it he washed it, polished it, reupholstered it, worked on it. One day he shut the door and the window on the driver’s side shattered and he didn’t have enough money to replace it. He was in his class at high school, a class that overlooked the parking lot, when he saw the rain come in. It started raining horizontal to the ground, into his truck, but there was nothing he could do but sit there and watch. All at once he saw a car pull up beside the truck. It was his parents. I’ll let him tell the story. “Dad left his office in the middle of the day, picked up my Mom and they bought this hunk of plastic to save my seats. I watched

them do this, and I just started crying right there in class.” Jay concludes, “My parents, I know, looking back, they were with me every step of the way. When I made mistakes, they were there to support me. When I had some victories they were there to cheer me.”

Jay Leno learned to tap into the soul and thrive when he realized that he was loved. It’s common sense. We thrive when we discover the good life has come to us because people have loved us and cared about us, and our job is to pass it on. We thrive when we know that everything we do matters and every word we speak has power. We thrive when we build our life as if it were, in the words of Abraham Heschel, a work of art. We thrive when we realize our cup runneth over and goodness and mercy follow us. We thrive when we look around and realize that what is have is because as we move toward our best it’s because people helped us become what we are, and the best thing we can do to help them is to pass it on to somebody else, to be a blessing because we know we were blessed. We thrive because we know that our days are too short and when we wake up in the morning there’s too much to do to get done, too many ways in which we can be of help. It’s a good life that we have and that we’ve been given, and the best thing we can do is to share it so that it spreads. Our children might notice how the Rockies are winning. How they are winning. They’re winning because, it seems to me, they’re a team. Because the name on the front is more important than the name on the back, as they say, because there is no “I” in team, as they say. *Carpe diem*, live the day, thrive, tap into the soul, give, live as you live life, we tell them.

We write our wishes to our children, we write on a piece of paper, we tie it to a balloon, we release the balloon. Children, listen closely to our teaching. Learn common sense. Our advice is useful. Do not turn away. Tap into the eternal, we will tell them. Someday you’ll stop striving and you’ll know you’re thriving and you’ll reach a time in your life when you are arriving. Arriving at the point when you are true to your compass and have freedom to travel. Arriving at a point when you do not care where the path used to be because you have gone off-road and are making a trail of your own. We tell them stories. Did you hear the one about the apostle Paul who was walking down the road headed to Damascus, and then he was blind, and then he could see? He arrived. Did you hear the one about Mary who was confronted by the angel in a vision telling her that she was to be the mother of the savior of the world? She arrived.

We had a dog. I’ve talked about it before, his name was Kefauver. Kefauver was nothing special about that dog, he was a cocker spaniel. He flunked obedience school – doesn’t every cocker spaniel? He bit a Presbyterian, I kind of always praised him for that. The house we bought in Boulder where we lived with him, we bought the house because it had a big back yard and a fence. He climbed the fence, got hit by a truck, and from then on was bald on the back. When the two of us would walk, people would laugh. I don’t understand. You understand. He never came when we called him. The only time I could ever get him to come was pretty serious profanity which I couldn’t use with my family around. But the one thing he could do was sing. He could sing one song. The tune was “Nearer My God to Thee,” the words were, “Nero, my dog has fleas.” And if that dog were still alive, which he isn’t, I would bring him in here and he would sing with that choir “Nearer My God to Thee” just like he had sung with other congregations to which I had been appointed. Generally, I had him sing toward the end of that appointment. I’ve just been whistled that the sermon is too long and it’s time to quit. If you’ll give me just a few more minutes. He had a tumor, and it was malignant, and the vet in the Arvada area said he would die very soon, but suggested we bring him to Fort Collins, to CSU, which we did. That’s

when we met Steve. Steve said he had an idea. He said he might be able to save his life. Steve said it might save some people's lives too – could some experimentation be done? It was a new technique, it was heat and radiation, and it healed the animal. It was a miracle. Steve's approach has worked on children. Doctor Withrow, his research, our dog, "Nearer My God to Thee," "Nero, My Dog has Fleas." Yesterday there was a football game. I guess. It started when lightning hit the lights, I guess. The Rams are just having a hard year. They lost. That's thirteen times now, if you count last year, but who's counting? Fifty fans were invited to the game. Sky High Hope Camp, kids with cancer. Treatments developed by Doctor Withrow, something he learned from a dog. Treatments that seem to have made a difference for fifty kids, and one of our coaches, Marc Lubick, has been treated by the same research learned from our dog. Nero, my dog has fleas, nearer my God to thee.

Who won yesterday? I don't care. Who lost? Fifty kids won. Football's just a game. When you learn that you realize that much of life is just a game, and our task is to transcend it, to find the eternal in it. Then we have arrived, and we have arrived nearer our God to thee. Arriving means never looking back and never giving up. I hope our kids learn that. Arriving means keeping first things first. It means embracing the moment so you can transcend it. It means getting on the bus when you don't know where the bus is going, but trusting the driver to get you there. It's realizing that you and I are part of the greatest miracle on earth, maybe in the universe, that we are part of something eternal. It's understanding that if we have only one more tomorrow, that day will be the best day of our life, and whatever we do with it, we will not miss a chance to live it and we will not be afraid of the day after tomorrow, whatever that brings. Nearer, my God, to thee. We have arrived within our passion for life, we have transcended it, *carpe diem*, live the day. Now get ready with that whistle.

There always is the danger, when we want to speak the truth to our children, that like the balloons with messages, it will float over their heads. I want them to strive, to tap into their spirit, to excel, to take from life what is there. I want them to do that. And I want them to thrive, to tap into their soul, to know the good life and to share it, to share what is there. And I want them to some day in their life to arrive, to tap into the eternal and transcend what is there. That's what I wish for them. Children, listen closely to our teaching. It comes from God and it is common sense, don't you know? Do not turn away. Hear me out. Ministers are supposed to tell the truth. Most of the time, we do. Okay, blow your whistle. Thank you.