

The Way to Life

Proverbs 3: 1-12

**First Presbyterian Church
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On this Mother's Day Sunday, we are taking up a very famous passage from Proverbs. It's set in the framework of advice from a parent to a child. The speaker urges the son to receive this teaching because it is the very path to years of life filled with deep peace and well-being. In other words, this stuff is worth knowing and passing on!

We have all received the imprint of our families and communities of origin upon us. The emotional fingerprints of our parents are on us, for better or worse. The lives of siblings, cousins, neighbors, teachers who interacted with us in our early days shaped the very way we see the world. This happens whether or not parents are intentional about imprinting upon us or completely oblivious to this reality. For most of who we are and what we become happens by way of natural imitation. We become and mirror what is shown to us.

Good parents know this and get intentional about modelling what matters most. By what a mom or dad radiates toward the child, the child radiates out toward the world and inward into his understanding of himself.

Now, over the last year and a half, I have tried not to give *too* many examples from the life of my perfect grandson and his awesome parents. But this last week, we got a video that shows so clearly how this mirroring between child and parent works. Watch these 30 seconds as our daughter Leah teaches 18-month-old Grayson how to make an "O" sound. [show video]. There's a whole lot more going on here than a classroom lesson in vowel sounds. It begins with a relationship. This is a child who knows that he is regarded. His mother beams upon him. She looks at him and he looks at her. The black lab walks around trying to be part of it all. Grayson, while playing with a toy in the shape of an "O" relates to his mom. She is pleased with him and he wants to please her more. So as he babbles, she nudges him to imitate her sound. Smiling upon him, she says, "Say 'O.'" He mirrors her language. With enthusiasm. He is free to be creative. Enthusiastic. Serious. Exuberant. This was an ordinary encounter in a relationship characterized by extraordinary interactions.

Grayson is learning something way more important than the sound of “O.” It’s not about education; it’s about love. He is learning through his parents the truth that at the heart of the universe is a radiant, beaming, accepting, encouraging Presence. The enormous gift of loving parents is how they pave the way for us to believe that God exists and that God is love.

This is the core of Solomon’s words: “Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.” Solomon urges his son to be conscious of the reality at the heart of reality: steadfast love and faithfulness. The universe is not random. We are not alone. We are not simply heading over the cliff toward nothingness. There is a purpose. Underlying it all is a personal God whose nature is love. Become aware of that my son. We did our best to write it onto your heart. Become aware and cling to it when the harshness of this world calls it into question. Hold fast to the truth of who our God really is.

To the people in Solomon’s day, the phrase “steadfast love and faithfulness” was loaded with significance. This phrase appears throughout the Scriptures. Steadfast love and faithfulness speaks first to the character of our God. In Exodus 34, the LORD called Moses up the mountain to meet with him. God is going to renew the covenant with his people. A covenant is a solemn agreement. A sacred promise of relationship. When covenants were made between a king and his people, the king pledged himself based on his character and strength to protect, guard and deal justly with his people. The people pledged to respond to the king’s commitment with loyalty and obedience. In this way, the king and his people would grow in affection for one another. The realm would flourish. Peace would reign and justice would flow. So the LORD made his covenant pledge to the people by speaking to Moses. We read:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with Moses there...He proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...Behold I am making a covenant...” (Exodus 34: 5-6, 10).

Do you hear our phrase? God self-declares. He is abounding in “steadfast love and faithfulness.” This is the ultimate pledge of a king to his people. God says, “I will deal with you with abounding faithfulness and ever steadfast love.” This is the very core of our understanding of God. He is not indifferent to us; he cherishes us. He is not fickle; he is consistent. He does not think of us as slaves but as sons.

As we read Solomon's words to his son this morning, every parent feels the yearning. What I hope I communicated to you, dear sons and daughters, is steadfast love and faithfulness. Because that is who God is. And I want you to know through me the truth of our God's character.

Solomon learned this truth about God from his own parents. However imperfect David and Bathsheba were as parents, which is pretty imperfect, we know that David knew the LORD I Am and praised his character. David knew that trusting the character of the LORD was to be expressed through obeying his Word. And obeying his Word would lead to seeing God's hand in every circumstance of life. In Psalm 25, David the father of Solomon prayed:

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness
For those who keep his covenant and his testimonies. (Ps. 25: 10).

The steadfast love and faithfulness of God extends from his character to the story of our lives. When we live intentionally in covenant with this God, we discover that the paths of our lives are taken into the paths of God. The right roads, of course. As we love and live by God's Word we feel a sense of peace. We have the wholesome sense of being on the right path. But for those who belong to our covenant keeping God, even the wrong roads we take lead us back to him. God weaves our mistakes and our sins into his deeper, greater work in shaping us by his covenant, faithful love. As Paul said, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). Though we pay with the coin of tears and regret, we yet reap the riches of God's mercy even through our sin. For our steadfast God leads us in his paths as he keeps covenant with us down the long road of our life.

God leads us in the smooth roads of success, of course. Should we prosper, we know that this is a gift from God. We accept his leading down paths of blessing. But also he leads us through the hard roads. God turns the rough, wounding roads into paths of glory. What was done to us to knock us off the road of life becomes a truer path to knowing him intimately. We participate in what the patriarch Joseph discovered. As a young man, Joseph's brothers betrayed him and sold him into slavery. Decades later, they met again. By this time, Joseph had not only survived. He had risen from slave to the second most powerful man in Egypt. He declared, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). In fact, what looked like being sent down the road to the garbage heap became the royal highway to saving an entire nation. Less dramatically, this still occurs in the lives of those who are in covenant with the God of steadfast love and faithfulness. Even what people do to us exercising abusive power against us can come to be seen as

God leading us down a road to real joy and significance. The evil one was never in control; God had this the whole time.

So these stories of Joseph, Moses, and David are the backdrop to the wisdom of Solomon which he passed along in Proverbs 3. “Do not let steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you.” That’s actually a funny way of saying it. By definition, faithfulness doesn’t forsake us. But we may forsake it. By definition, the covenant keeping, steadfast God does not forsake us. But we may try to run away from our covenant with him. We may turn away from the truth we know. And sadly, the further down the path of infidelity and waywardness we go, the harder it is to get back. The more we harden our hearts, the harder it is to remember and feel the God who loves us. So Solomon is saying, “Hold onto steadfast love. Don’t let anything carry you away from knowing who God is and loving him. And don’t let anything carry you away from mirroring the character of God in your relationships. Cling to steadfast love and faithfulness as you relate to others. Go to him in his Word. Go to him in worship. Hear him speak his love to you. Hear how his face beams toward you in love. So that you can beam toward others that same love. Imitate the sounds of his voice. Say “Love” after him like Grayson rejoicing to say “O” after his mother. Don’t lose the connection.”

Solomon goes on to tell us how to do this. In one of the most famous Proverbs he says,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and
Do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and
He will make straight your paths.

This is the exact opposite of the advice of every Disney movie. Don’t follow first your heart. Turn your heart to follow the LORD as he makes himself known through his Word. This is the exact opposite of 3000 episodes of Oprah Winfrey. The key to life is not “Trust yourself.” Don’t be wise in your own eyes. The key to life is to trust in the LORD. With all your mind, heart, will, strength, rely on the God whose character is steadfast love and faithfulness. He is reliable when your own heart is not. He is the way to life when your own desires are leading you into destruction. He is faithful when you cannot even be true to yourself.

In the space of three verses Solomon tells us both to trust the LORD and fear the LORD. How can we hold those two together? Doesn’t fear seem contradictory to steadfast love and faithfulness? Think of gravity. It’s a fundamental reality of

life on earth. We trust it and we fear it. We trust that we're not going to float away. We have faith in its reality that the earth will hold together, the atmosphere will stay in place and the ground will hold together. Gravity is a great, helpful force and we trust it to be there. We also know enough to fear gravity: don't jump off of tall buildings. Take care when you're on the edge of a cliff. Gravity isn't mean. It doesn't hate you. But it is real. Defy its reality and you will pay—that's not a personal offense, that's just the way the world is. We fear God not because he is mean but because he is real. Apart from him we have no good. We cannot flourish without relating to him. We cannot know forgiveness of our guilt without him. We cannot solve our dying problem or our anxiety problem without him. That's not mean, that's just real. When we take heed of reality, and actually lean into him, we find ourselves deeply blessed and fulfilled. Fear and trust are not at odds with each other: they both have to do with believing God's reality.

So, finally, how can we deepen in our trust of the God who is steadfast love and faithfulness? Personally, I find a lot of energy and peace and strength from something Paul wrote to the Galatians. When I say this verse, it opens a channel in me to trusting Christ. In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes,

The life I live,
I live *by faith in the Son of God*
Who loved me and gave himself for me.

I live *by faith in the Son of God*.

I trust in him with all my heart. I believe that he loves me, even when my heart condemns me or the accuser slanders me. I cling to the faith that he loves me, and proved it by giving himself for me. I lean not on my own understanding of whether I am good enough, right enough, and loveable enough. I faith into Christ Jesus. I leap into his love and cling to it. I look at Christ on the cross and say, "He is there for me. It's beyond amazing. He did that for me, and loves me still."

But here's something wonderful and fascinating. There is another way to translate that verse. And it's just as good as the first one.

The life I live,
I live *by the faith of the Son of God*
Who loved me and gave himself for me.

I live by *the faith of the Son of God*.

I live by Christ's faithfulness. By his faithfulness to his Father. By his faithfulness to me. By his faithfulness on my behalf. By his obedience and righteousness, not my own. By his constancy and strength on my behalf.

Sometimes that's all I can do. I'm not sure I even have sufficient faith in the Son of God. I feel so weak. I feel so full of doubt. I feel so full of condemnation. I don't know if I have enough faith to hold onto all of this. So I have to live by Christ's faith. I have to let him carry me even in the realm of belief. He is upholding my faith. He is believing for me. He is carrying me. I put *my* faith in the faith of the Son of God.

Both versions are right. I have faith in the Son of God. I rely in the faith of the Son of God on my behalf. Because he is the perfect revelation of steadfast love and faithfulness. I can rely on him with all my heart. He makes every road, over time, a path into experiencing more of his steadfast love. He shines upon me with God's love so that I can imitate him. I can hear him make the "O" and I can answer back. In worship. And in turning towards others that same shining face of love. My son, these are the words of life and peace: do not let steadfast love and faithfulness get away from you.