

June 11, 2017 • Scholarship Sunday



## **“The Beginning of Wisdom is This...”**

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

*Proverbs 4:4b-7*

*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.*

Last month at the Claremont School of Theology, the commencement festivities concluded, as always, with the awarding of special prizes and scholarships. I was honored when Pres. Kuan invited me, as Chair of the Board of Trustees, to present the Edwin and Frances Witman Award in Pastoral Care to Abigail Eujenia Lee Clauhs, one of the two student commencement speakers who just moments earlier had been awarded a Master of Divinity in Interfaith Chaplaincy.

Given to a graduating senior who shows excellence or great promise in the practice of pastoral care, the Witman award in pastoral care is provided by the Foundation of the First United Methodist Church, Santa Monica, in memory of the Rev. Edwin H. Witman, a former pastor of the church, and his wife Frances.

I felt proud, grateful, and excited. Grateful to be standing in a long line of pastors of this church and proud to be representing a congregation that demonstrates our commitment to education and learning. Proud of the young woman receiving the award and excited by all the ways her unfolding ministry will bring healing and new life to so many, extending this church’s witness far beyond our walls and the city of Santa Monica.

We are a congregation that takes seriously Jesus’ command to love God with all our heart, soul, strength—and mind. And we demonstrate that commitment each year as we award scholarships on this annual Scholarship Sunday.

This is one of my most favorite days of the whole year here at Santa Monica First. It is thrilling to see the people whose lives are so tangibly and generously and lovingly impacted by the gifts of these scholarships. And how very grateful and inspired we all are at the generosity and dedication of all those who have established scholarships, whose generosity and vision reach out to this generation of students and generations yet to come in support of education, profession and vocation. Thanks be to God!

This support of education is a mark of being Methodist. Remember--the Methodist renewal movement began on a university campus. John Wesley was an Oxford don who lectured at the university. His first groups of Methodists were fellow students.

No wonder that during his own ministry, Wesley was instrumental in starting schools all over Britain. Here in the States, as the early circuit rider preachers traversed hill and vale to bring people the Word of God’s amazing grace, they also distributed Bibles and books as they went. They had virtually no possessions of their own. Instead, their saddle bags were packed with books and with Methodist periodicals.

The early preachers also knew that they needed to be teachers. So in addition to the gift of God’s love they gave people the gift of literacy, reading. And we, the people called Methodist, carry on this legacy even to this very day. We continue to support Sunday School for children and for adults. Our study groups, Disciple Bible Study, Covenant, the Lectionary Bible Study, and our Book Study carry on this tradition. We host the Destination Science program each summer. Our excellent and recently accredited Preschool witnesses to and carries on this commitment. Recognized as one of the finest in this area, our school has, since 1948, nurtured hundreds of children and their families. Who doesn’t enjoy their annual Book Fair and other opportunities to give books as gifts to the children in our lives and to expand and update the children’s book section in our library?

Our newest witness to the community that we are a congregation that values learning and loving God with our minds—our amazing Pop-Up Library that has enjoyed tremendous use since the first day it opened.

And that’s just this one United Methodist congregation. Through the larger church connection, through mission projects all across this land, in rural areas and in our cities, and all across the world, Methodist missionaries teach literacy for children and for adults. We provide schools, colleges and seminaries here and around the world.

In partnership with that global work, this congregation, just last year, raised \$2,000 to purchase TWENTY E-Readers, far surpassing our goal.

The E-Readers for Theological Education initiative is a partnership with United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry and UM Discipleship Ministries, committed to providing e-libraries on e-readers with important theological texts to the libraries of United Methodist-related and sponsored theological schools in Africa and the Philippines.

From nursery schools all the way through schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries, the Methodist church makes excellent education accessible.

We Methodists value learning. And parenthetically, we should be among the loudest voices demanding support for teachers and excellent education for all students at every level here, in this day and age.

But in all of this, remember that the early Methodist teachers--John and Charles Wesley and the circuit riders, were preachers first. The learning they promoted was not intended for the mind only, but for the heart and the soul. And to this day, Methodists value not only knowledge, you see, but wisdom, the Wisdom of God.

God's Wisdom gets at the question of not just what we need to know—but rather, how we are to live as people of God. In Proverbs, Wisdom is often described as the Way, meaning a path worn by constant use. A path frequently traveled. A way of living. It was from this understanding that the early Christians were known as the people of the Way, for this is what Jesus meant when he told us: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." This living way is the Wisdom of God.

There are admonitions in the Book of Proverbs about life lived along this Way. "Do not rob the poor", it tells us. Avoid gluttony, greed, lying, extravagance, arrogance and contention. Instead, Wisdom, the path of God's Way, directs us to live humbly, faithfully, obediently, respectably and securely.

It is through Wisdom that we are taught to pay attention to our relations with God and with one another, to seek harmony and right relationship with all. And it is through Wisdom that we attain what the Psalmist calls "the fear of the Lord", awe of God, the gut awareness that God is the Lord of Life, the Creator of everything, the source of all goodness, beauty and truth, justice and peace, amazing grace.

To our scholarship givers and recipients today, I want to say: May God's full blessings be upon you as you pursue your studies and expand your minds. But never forget to seek the Wisdom of God as well. The American novelist, Zora Neale Hurston, wrote: "Learning without wisdom is a load of books on a donkey's back."

As you learn, as you grow, as your knowledge increases, may your love of God increase as well. May you live more faithfully and more passionately. May you use your knowledge and the privilege it affords to serve others and may whatever privilege and status you attain through these pursuits enable you to give back more generously to those who still in need.

Our prayers go with you as you go forward, and may you be blessed to live in the Way of the Wisdom of God. Amen.

Notes:

Whalen, Paul. United Methodist News Service Commentary: "John Wesley's Impact Lives On". July 9, 2003.

The Living Pulpit. "Wisdom." July-September 2000.

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