

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Scriptures: Proverbs 4:1-9, 10-19

Last Monday Ben Roethlisberger, the quarterback of the Pittsburgh Steelers, was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident. He was not wearing a helmet. His coach Bill Cowher talked to him about this over a year ago. He told Ben not to take unnecessary risks of injury by riding a motorcycle, especially without a helmet. He pointed to the experience of Kellen Winslow, a tight end for the Cleveland Browns, who hit a curb, was thrown off his motorcycle, and tore his ACL, potentially ending his career. Even former Steeler quarterback Terry Bradshaw told Roethlisberger, “Wait until you retire.” But Roethlisberger said he was going to continue riding a motorcycle without a helmet. He said that Pennsylvania law did not require one and that he felt more free without one. He told his coach, “I’ll just continue to be careful” (*New York Times*, June 12, 2006). So, last Monday he ended up in the hospital with a concussion, a broken nose, a broken upper and lower jaw, fractured facial bones, head lacerations, two lost teeth, and several other teeth that were chipped.

There are two ways to learn from mistakes. One is to make them yourself. The other is to let someone else make them. The latter is what we call education, and that is what the book of Proverbs is pushing.

Last week in our scripture reading from Proverbs, chapter 8, wisdom itself called out to us saying, “And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.” Proverbs, chapter 8, is an appeal for us to study, to use our heads, to learn how the world works so that we can serve God more effectively. Today’s reading from Proverbs, chapter 4, continues this theme but with a new twist. Verses 1-2:

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.

Notice this time it is not wisdom itself that is talking to us, but a parent or teacher. In Proverbs, chapter 4, wisdom comes to us through the experience of others, through the wisdom of those who have gone before us.

Actually, if you look closely at our first scripture reading, Proverbs 4:1-9 is not the words of a father to his children, it is a father quoting to his children the words of their grandfather. Listen again to verses 3-4:

When I was a son with my father, tender, and my mother’s favorite, he taught me, and said to me, “Let your heart hold fast my words: keep my commandments and live.

If you look at the text, the quotation continues all the way through verse 9. The words in this scripture passage are not only the words of a parent to a child but the words of a grandparent passed on generation after generation to his grandchildren.

I understand that on cable you can still watch reruns of the old television show *All in the Family*. It was like the early seventies version of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. The family consisted of Archie Bunker, his wife Edith, their daughter Gloria, and her husband whom Archie affectionately called “Meathead.” I remember in one show that Gloria had just given birth to her first child and had a severe case of new mother anxiety. When her mother Edith tried to make a small helpful suggestion Gloria snapped, “Mother, what do you know about raising children?”

Sometimes it is hard to believe your parents know anything, even about raising children. But whatever their faults and limitations, parents have an advantage in at least one commodity: experience. If nothing else, gray hair means you are a survivor. Gray hair means we have lived long enough to get to this condition, and if along the way our marriage has survived and our children have grown up, sort of, I would say that is pretty good. To get to this point in life we must have figured out at least a few things about how to get along.

Proverbs wants you to take advantage of that. Learn from the experience of others, not just parents or grandparents but any teachers or people with experience. Here are some examples from the book of Proverbs:

Proverbs 12:15: “Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice.”

Proverbs 15:22: “Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed.”

Proverbs 27:17: “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.”

It is a standard joke among Presbyterians to make fun of committees. Presbyterians do everything through committees. Right now the biggest Presbyterian committee of all, the General Assembly, is meeting in Birmingham, AL. Robin is one of our Presbytery delegates to that meeting, along with Heather Knorr, our Presbytery’s youth advisory delegate. They along with over 500 other people are making decisions about the future direction of our church. It would be cheaper if we had a pope. But Presbyterians have always believed that we make better decisions when we draw on the collective experience of God’s people reading the Bible and listening to the Holy Spirit together. And that is what the book of Proverbs urges us to do.

Of course, you must be careful about the kind of advice you get. You have to be careful about the kind of experience on which you draw. Proverbs, chapter 4, verses 14-16 tell us,

Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evildoers. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on. For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.

We worry about our children getting in with a bad group of friends, and that is a fair thing to worry about. We also know that sometimes parents can have a bad influence on their children—parents who by example, if nothing else, have taught their children violence, sexual exploitation, prejudice, drug use, dishonesty, or self-centeredness. There are times, children, when you should not listen to a father’s instruction, or to a pastor’s or priest’s.

But there is a larger even more experienced family called the church that can help you in those situations. The church is a place where you can come and ask if something your friends or your boss or your coworkers want you to do is good or not. The church is place where you can come and ask if something your parents want you to do is good or not. And even in those situations where there have been cases of abuse by pastors or youth leaders—and unfortunately that has happened in the Presbyterian church as well as the Catholic church—even in those cases there are people in the Presbyterian church to whom you can go: to one of the elders or to Rick Melin, our Presbytery executive. These people can help you figure out what to do.

The point is that you don't have to try to figure out the Christian life on your own. You can draw on the collective experience of the church, your mothers and fathers in faith. In 27 years of ministry I have discovered there are people in the church who have made just about mistake there is. You can learn from their mistakes, so you don't have to make quite so many on your own.

Fred Craddock, a minister who for many years taught at Emory University, tells about a young woman coming to talk to him during her freshman year of college. She told him, "I was a failure in my classes; I wasn't having any dates; and I didn't have as much money as the other students. I was just so lonely and depressed and homesick and not succeeding. One Sunday afternoon I went to the river near the campus. I had climbed up on the rail and was looking into the dark water below. For some reason or another I thought of the line, 'Cast all your cares upon him for he cares for you.' I stepped back, and here I am."

Craddock listened to this and said, "Where did you learn that line?" She said, "I don't know." Craddock said, "Do you go to church?" The girl said, "No." Then she said, "Well, when I visited my grandmother in the summers we went to Sunday School and church." And Craddock said, "Ah..." (Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 33).

Listen, children to a parent's instruction, and sometimes even a grandparent's.

- Ken Onstot