



“A Feast for the Ears”

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***Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proverbs 1:20-33 (NRSV)***

President Obama had a banner week of speechmaking this past week. On Monday, he spoke at the AFLCIO Labor Day Picnic in Cincinnati.¹ On Tuesday he had a heart-to-heart with America’s school children via national TV, live from Wakefield High school in Arlington, Virginia.² On Wednesday the President addressed a joint session of Congress and the American people on Health Care Reform.³ And on Friday, he offered a tribute to the nearly 3000 people who died eight years ago in the September 11 terrorist attacks.⁴

Each of these speeches was memorable in its own right. (If you missed any, you may find and read them on www.whitehouse.gov.) The two speeches that garnered the most attention were the President’s address on health care reform and his address to America’s school children.

I’ll have more to say about the Presidents’ remarks on health care reform, in the next couple of weeks as we prepare for another community action on health care reform and efforts to improve community health right here in Cherryland. Today, I want to focus on the important topic of education, which was the subject of the President’s speech this past Tuesday, and which is the topic of today’s Old Testament lesson.

Before I dive into the Proverbs passage I feel called to say how ridiculous it was that a small, noisy faction was able to garner so much media attention by protesting the Presidents’ education speech.

I don’t care who’s in the White House, or what party affiliation a President may have, the Office of the President deserves more respect than we saw demonstrated this past week. The American people should welcome an address from any of our Presidents. And even if people don’t agree with the President’s politics, they missed an opportunity to discuss that with their children, too.

¹ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-AFL-CIO-Labor-Day-Picnic/

² http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-in-a-National-Address-to-Americas-Schoolchildren/

³ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-to-a-Joint-Session-of-Congress-on-Health-Care/

⁴ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Wreath-Laying-Ceremony-at-the-Pentagon-Memorial/

Also, as several journalists and historians have pointed out, it is normative for our nation's Presidents to speak to school children at the start of a new year. Several have done so in the past. President Obama's inclination to do so was not new.

Furthermore, I believe, our current President has a particularly compelling personal story to share with America's children that could inspire more young people to greater good, and that story ought to be told and heard. I further believe that it is better that this story be shared by the President himself in plain talk and in real-time with America's students than that it be told by some third party. Those who opted out of the address missed an important learning opportunity, even if they disagreed with the President's remarks.

II

If you listened to (or read) the President's address to America's school children, and if you were listening closely to Rob's reading of the Old Testament lesson from Proverbs today, then no doubt you heard a similar no-nonsense tone about the importance of learning that rings through both passages. The tone is serious. Both authors are dead serious about students buckling down and attending to your lessons. Also, the overarching themes of both the President's speech and Wisdom's speech in Proverbs are that individual lives and the nation's future depend upon taking students taking their studies seriously.

President Obama explained that he was inspired to lecture about the importance of education to school children, because he is aware of how critical a good education was to his success in life. He and his predecessors have spoken about how student achievements are essential to our nation's future, so that individual students, their families, and our nation as a whole we can grow stronger and remain competitive in the global marketplace.

The character, Wisdom, in the book of Proverbs makes a similar argument as President Obama did in several chapters where she is personified as the town crier, a school teacher, and a banquet hostess. In today's reading, Wisdom calls Israel to wake up and hit the books. She reminds her audience of the consequence of failing to attend to their studies, and she enumerates the moral pitfalls of a slovenly life, and the preferred blessings that flow from learning ones lessons well. Elsewhere in Proverbs, Wisdom describes knowledge metaphorically as a banquet table, and invites her audience to come to the feast—a feast for learning.

The truth be told, many of us have not experienced school or our learning processes as a feast. Learning has sometimes (maybe more often than not) seemed like a drudge. I recall, for example, that on the first day of college orientation one of my professors told us first year students to take a look at our neighbors to the left and then to the right, and to note that next year at this time, one of us wouldn't be at Lakeland College. He then went on to introduce us to a journal article titled, "Introduction to the Pain of Learning,"

and then passed out blue books and gave us a writing assignment, which I later learned was used to determine our placement in the English department. Personally, I had grown up with so much hype about how tough college was going to be, I didn't have to be convinced.

III

Given the fact that the learning process isn't the enjoyable banquet feast that Wisdom described for most of us, I think that it's important to reflect on the role models and teachers who have made a difference in our lives, as the President did in his speech this past week and as the sages do in their depiction of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs.

I wonder, "Who have been our most important school teachers, or most significant role models in the school of life?"

President Obama spoke about the important role that his mother and grandparents played in his educational process. Proverbs depicts Wisdom as the school teacher who demanded discipline and instilled in her students not only the 3Rs but, equally or more importantly, the moral lessons of life such as the importance of learning.

Who, I wonder, have been those positive influences for us? Was it a parent or grandparent, a teacher or counselor, a music director or a coach? Who got us to take school seriously, and to press on even when we found a subject boring or school oppressive? If we dropped a class, tried to avert a particular subject, or dropped out of school altogether, who nudged us to keep learning—if not in a formal classroom than through the school of life?

President Obama describes how his mother would roll him out of bed at 4:30 a.m. when they lived in Indonesia to study extra lessons, so that he would keep up with his English studies and stay on track with American schools while he was attending an Indonesian public school. Similarly, Proverbs describes Wisdom (the personification of the divine) as the one who makes the not-so-welcome-announcements, "Wake up! It's time to go to school!" "Do your homework." And who by extension asks the unpopular questions, "What do you have for homework tonight?" "Do you need help with your math?" "What grade did you get on your quiz yesterday?"

When I think back on all the years that I've been in school, I am reminded of how blessed that I have been to have had these significant learning opportunities, and to have had so many fabulous teachers such that if resources would permit, I'd probably never be far from a classroom.

My Grandma Thomsen told me numerous times when I was a kid how much she wanted to further her education, but was prohibited from doing so on account of the fact that her parents needed her and her siblings to go to work to provide for her family's basic necessities.

My mother was blessed to be the first one in her family to attend college. She attended two years of college and obtained a temporary teaching certificate in the early 1960s. She taught second grade for two years, then got married, and didn't return to the classroom until my sister and I were in high school. In those later years, she taught preschool, and eventually went back to technical college and obtained a degree in computer science.

Mom claimed that she wasn't a particularly good student. She wasn't generally able to help us with our homework, but she could always be counted on to spell-check my English papers, and she was adamant that we pay attention to our studies.

I can still hear Mom yelling from the kitchen, "No TV until that homework is done!" She never missed a parent-teacher conference in our 13 years of public school. And she never stopped asking about our grades—even when I was working on my Ph.D. Mother's words when we were younger were rarely popular. We often grumbled at her frequent and what seemed like nagging inquiries, but we complied. And we were all the better for her interest in our learning.

Based on the studies that I've seen in recent years about how much time children spend watching TV and playing video and computer games, I'm convinced that my mother could have a lucrative second career as homework monitor.

IV

Being a student, parent, teacher, school administrator, or even a politician is a tough business to be in these days, especially given the downturn in the world economy and its impact on funding for our public schools. Now, more than ever we need to embrace some fundamental lessons that Proverbs teaches about the importance of learning. Five notable examples follow:

Lesson one: We must take responsibility for our own learning and for the learning of the children in our families. We should not, and cannot, expect the teachers to do this all for us. Learning is a partnership between students, teachers and other school leaders, and families.

Lesson two: Not every parent is healthy enough to support or advocate for their children's success in school or in life. Here is where we as a church family can make a difference. Each of us can show an interest in the success of all of our children in the congregation. We can ask about how things are going at school, inquire about favorite subjects, offer to tutor students in a subject that they may find difficulty, and ask what books they are reading. We can also learn more about students' extracurricular activities and organize a car pool from church to show up at their athletic, performing arts, or service events.

Lesson three: We need to understand the important role that families and religious communities play in the moral development of students and our society, so that

students develop the capacity to not only make well-reasoned decisions, but also morally sound decisions in life. While there are some values that are distinct to our respective families and faith traditions, most of the values we share as a society are largely consistent with the core values of all of the world's major religions, not just Christianity. We should focus on affirming our shared values in public classrooms, and leave the exploration of distinctly different values to the purview of individual families and private institutions.

Lesson four: We must take an interest in who's teaching and leading our schools in this and every generation. These hard economic times take their toll on even the most dedicated school teachers and leaders. The news of layoffs, budget cuts, and increased class sizes abound. Such news may discourage otherwise well-intentioned people from pursuing teaching careers, running for school board, or even staying on the job, so we need to identify ways of encouraging and supporting school teachers and leaders in our midst.

Some simple, but important ways of offering such support may include these: helping with a school fundraiser, volunteering to help with photocopying or gathering supplies, setting up lab assignments, or coaching special needs students, so that the teacher can focus on lesson planning and preparation for the whole class.

Simply writing thank you notes to our children's teachers and encouraging students to do the same would mean a great deal to most educators and school leaders, since what motivated most to go into educational careers isn't to make a big salary, but to make a difference in the lives of others. Words of encouragement and an affirmation that one is making a difference could make a huge impact in an educator's morale.

Lesson five: We need to ensure that adequate resources are available for *all* schools to provide for the learning and growth of our nation's students, especially schools that are underperforming and that have higher proportions of underserved populations. This means that we need to become advocates for state and federal education dollars at the polls for ballot initiatives, and in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., and that we develop fair systems for evaluating teacher and school performance that energize rather than enervate faculties and administration in more challenged venues.

V

As the professor who spoke at my college orientation said, as President Obama's mother told him, and as Wisdom suggests in Proverbs, learning sometimes can be painful. It is not always a picnic for teachers or students. But failing to take studies seriously can result in numerous hardships. Moreover, for those who have ears to hear—who have the foresight to look beyond the immediate challenges to the brighter and better future to which learning leads—education can be a feast, a feast that not only enables us to be satisfied for a day, but that nourishes for a lifetime. So with Wisdom, I invite us to live into that future saying, "Come, come to the feast!" Amen.