



*Strengthening Your Core:*  
**“ENCOURAGE LIFELONG SPIRITUAL  
GROWTH”**

Rev. Laurie Haller  
First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan  
Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-8, 22:6

**We provide many avenues for spiritual formation for all ages through practical application of scripture and wisdom for daily living. We invest in our children and youth, as they are our future.**

*My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you. Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body. (Proverbs 3:1-10)*

*Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray. (Proverbs 22:6)*

When Gary and I were living in Grand Rapids, I had a friend in the church, Amy, who was a little bit younger than me, probably in her early thirties at the time. Her husband grew up in The United Methodist Church, but she had never been a member of any church before. One day, before Amy joined the church, we were playing a round of golf together. As we were walking from the tee to the green on the sixth hole, I made a reference to David and Goliath. I don't remember the context.

What I do remember is that Amy looked at me with a blank stare and asked, “What are you talking about? Who's David and Goliath?” Suddenly, it dawned on me. Amy had never been raised in the church. She'd never gone to Sunday school. She never had a Bible. Her parents never read the stories of Jesus to her growing up. She never sang in a choir. She never went to Vacation Bible School. Amy never participated in a youth group or a mission trip. She knew nothing about Christianity. She was never told about the unconditional love of Jesus for all people.

Friends, there are people all around us here in the Detroit metro area who are just like Amy. Boys, girls, teens, men, women, the elderly: you'd be astonished how many millions of people in our state, country and world still haven't heard about Jesus. And guess what? It's our calling to reach out to them with the love of Christ.

I'm fortunate to have grown up in a Christian family. When I was a little girl, my mother read to me from a big book called *Little Visits with God*. I still remember what it looks like after all these years. She read me Bible stories at night until I was old enough to read them on my own.

My mother and father made sure that my three siblings and I went to Sunday school every week. We sang in the choir. We participated in mission. We went to the equivalent of confirmation, which in our Mennonite church was a two year process. I loved my youth group leader dearly. I sang in major oratorios with our adult choir as a teen. I went to Bible studies with my grandmother. I had numerous mentors. I was truly blessed, for my church provided many avenues for spiritual formation. They invested in me and every other youth because we were the future of the church. In the same ways, we invest in our children and youth here at Birmingham.

Our scripture today is from the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Did you know that Proverbs has no references at all to Israel's covenant with God and the Hebrew law? Yet the wisdom laid out in Proverbs and the Hebrew law or Torah are not separate but complementary. Proverbs reflects the common sense that the Jewish faith community made of its collective experience. Therefore, the proverbs are spiritual guides for ordinary people like you and me.

The overarching theme of Proverbs is how to get wisdom. Wisdom is not necessarily connected with intelligence, education or age. Rather, Proverbs teaches us that wise people seek God's counsel. Wise people are those who foster spiritual formation for all ages through practical application of scripture and wisdom for daily living. Wise people are those who know how critical it is for our children and our children's children to become wise and trust in the Lord.

I want to share several things with you as we think about lifelong spiritual growth for all ages. First, think about your favorite teacher. What is it about that teacher that changed your life? **A primary role of the teacher is to help students get wisdom.** That means encouraging them to think and struggle for themselves. After all, isn't that the story of God's dealings with us all the way through the Bible? From the beginning, God gave us freedom. God created human beings not as robots but as people with choice. But God didn't just let us loose in the world. God also gave Adam and Eve instructions about how to live in the Garden of Eden, just as later on, God gave the Israelites the law. In fact, all through the Bible, God set boundaries and limits. It was we humans, who, in our freedom, chose to disobey.

The very best teachers do not insist on reproducing themselves through their students. They don't demand that their students think exactly like they do. Nor do they produce cookie cutter students who only know the party line. The most outstanding teachers see themselves simply as channels of wisdom and faith. When students of the best teachers finish their studies, they have the tools to get wisdom themselves, they have their own unique style, and they no longer need the presence of their parents or teachers to live a spiritual and faithful life.

I've always liked Proverbs 22:6, "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray." It's comforting for me and probably for you to know that even when our children go off in the wrong direction, they often come back when they are older, for they never forget the teaching of their childhood.

However, there is another dimension of this verse that I've missed in the past. The original Hebrew text of this particular verse reads very differently from the standard translation. Rather than "Train children in the right way," it really says, "Educate a child according to his or her way." Do you see the difference? Children, youth and adults are not formless clay, to be shaped entirely according to the teacher or parent's own beliefs. We need to pay attention to the unique needs of each child, youth and adult, nurture their special gifts and respect their interests. We teach the person, not just the material.<sup>1</sup>

**A second role of the teacher is to lead by example.** One time at Hebrew School, a Rabbi finished the day's lesson. Then it was time for the usual question period.

"Rabbi?" asked little Melvin, "there's something I need to know."

"What's that, my child?" asked the Rabbi.

"Well, according to the Scriptures, the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, right?"

"Right."

"And the Children of Israel beat up the Philistines, right?"

"Right."

"And the Children of Israel built the Temple, right?"

"Right."

"And the Children of Israel fought the Egyptians, and the Children of Israel fought the Romans, and the Children of Israel were always doing something important, right?"

"All that is correct," agreed the Rabbi. "So, what's your question?"

"What I need to know is this," demanded Melvin. "What were all the grown-ups doing?"

Indeed, what are all the grown-ups doing? How are you and I as adults called to help the children of our world? We simply need to model what we teach. We need to practice what we preach. We must stand in and stand up for Jesus. For our children and youth are looking at us all the time. They're watching, observing, trying to decide if we are genuine. We lead by example, whether we like it or not.

An old saying goes, "We teach what we most need to learn." The best way to lead by example is to be a life-long learner. If we want our children to be responsible, we must be responsible. If we want our children to be loving, generous and forgiving toward others, then we must be loving, generous and forgiving toward others. If we want our children to learn how to apply scripture and wisdom for daily living, then we need to let scripture guide our daily living.

Are you aware how many small groups there are in this church who are seeking wisdom by engaging in lifelong spiritual growth? Arbon Dennis, Women of the Word, Desert Sisters, Singing Bowls, Unfinished Christian Women, Tuesday Morning Men, Tuesday Morning Women's Book Study, Wednesday Night Men, Wednesday Night Young Adults, Mother's Day Out, Grip Groups, Sunday morning classes, mission groups and every one of our choirs. And

that's just a sample. Each one of the fifty plus groups we have is a catalyst for wisdom and growth. Are you teaching and leading by example?

**The last role of the teacher is to love.** You see, the wisdom that Proverbs wants us to pass on to the next generation is far more than an accumulation of knowledge. It constitutes a quality of life that is best communicated through love. God's love has always been unconditional. Even when the Hebrews strayed, God would discipline them with tough love. God tried one thing after another to bring us back to our senses. Finally, God decided to send God's very own son into the world to show us in the flesh that God is love. God's love never ceases, and God never, ever gives up on us.

Many years ago a young couple had their first child, a boy. As the boy began to grow, they noticed that he had musical talent. He could play the violin. So they began to try and find the best teacher for him that they could. They were told about an old Swiss maestro who used to teach but was now retired. They decided to try anyway and took their boy to him.

When the maestro heard the boy play, he recognized his ability and decided to teach him. The boy was just eight years old. For ten years his teacher worked with him almost every day. Then came the time for his debut. His parents booked Carnegie Hall. The press and all the important people came. The lights dimmed, and the teenager came out on stage.

From the very first note, he held the crowd mesmerized until the end. When the young man finished, the people stood on their feet and filled the hall with cheers and applause, yet he ran off the stage crying. The stage manager yelled, "Get back out there. They love you. They're all cheering and clapping." The teen replied, "There is one who is not." The manager ran out on stage and came back quickly, saying, "O.K., one old man is not applauding. So what? You can't worry about what one old man thinks when the world loves you." And the young man replied, "But you don't understand. That's my teacher, my leader." What is teaching without love?

On the day my mother died a little more than four years ago, I wept. I was so grateful to have seen her the week before at Thanksgiving. I was in a meeting with Bishop Keaton and my district superintendent colleagues at the time. I remember how I sat in a chair while everyone laid their hands on me to pray. I was so overcome that the only thing I could say was, "It was my mother who sat with us four kids in church every single Sunday because my father always sang in the choir. It was my mother who nurtured me into who I am today. But, most important, it was my mother who first taught me about the love of Jesus."

And Amy, my friend, whom I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon? A spiritual hunger was awakened in her that has never been fully satisfied, as it should be. Amy joined the church, and as soon as she made a commitment to Jesus Christ, she was inspired to learn everything she could about the Bible, about Jesus and about the Christian faith. You see, it wasn't too late. It's never too late to get wisdom and faith.

How will you encourage lifelong spiritual growth? How will you help others get wisdom so that they can find their way? How will you lead by example and share the love of Jesus?

(Video about spiritual growth for all ages at First UMC. [Click to view.](#))

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*,” Louisville KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p. 120.