



“WISE UP...ABOUT A BALANCED LIFE”

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Scripture: Proverbs 6:6-11, 25:16, 30:7-9

Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways and be wise. Without having any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior. (Proverbs 6:6-11)

If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, or else, having too much, you will vomit it. (Proverbs 25:16)

Two things I ask of you; do not deny them to me before you die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full and deny you, and say, “Who is the Lord?” I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God. (Proverbs 30:7-9)

In 1900, a survey was done among American parents. They were asked that out of the four professions of medicine, law, teaching and ministry, which one would they most want their children to pursue. The ministry was first, followed by teaching, medicine and law. In 2000, a hundred years later, another survey was done, asking parents the same question. Which profession would they most want their children to pursue? This time they chose medicine, law and teaching. And ministry? It was a distant fourth.

In my experience, pastors work very hard, but the professional ministry today does not hold the same esteem that it did a hundred years ago. In addition, the expectations of congregations today are much greater than they used to be. Pastors have to fulfill many different roles, and the assumption is that they can do it all well and are singlehandedly going to grow the church! Yet there are still people who comment from time to time, “Wow! What a great life! You only work on Sunday morning, don’t you?”

Do you remember the conversation in *Huckleberry Finn* about ministers? When asked what ministers do, Huck replies, “Oh, nothing much, loll around, pass the plate, and one thing or another. But, mainly, they don’t do nothing.” His friend, Joanna, in wide-eyed astonishment, asks, “What are they for?” And Huck says, “Why, they’re for style, don’t you know nothing?”¹ As you well know, this particular minister’s not for style and never has been.

When our children were young, I received a phone call at home from our Bishop in the Michigan Area, Don Ott. We were living and serving in Grand Rapids at the time. Because Gary and I have always spent much of our time on the phone, even at home, and because we often have extended conversations, our children learned to gently interrupt us if they needed something. As I was talking with Bishop Ott that night, one of our kids asked me a question. In response, I wrote on a piece of paper, "You'll have to wait! It's Bishop Ott." This unnamed child immediately wrote something back and gave it to me. It said, "I'm not impressed."

Sometimes even pastors get so caught up in what we're doing that we begin to think we're more important than we really are. We invest so much of ourselves in the church that we lose track of priorities. We falsely believe that our identity as a pastor is more significant than our identity as a spouse, parent or friend. We can get terribly out of balance. And if our lives are out of balance, how can we possibly help our congregations live balanced lives? One of my emphases as a bishop will be on clergy health and wellness. I will encourage my pastors to work hard, work smart and work faithfully, but also take regular time away to rest, renew themselves and regain perspective.

Our scriptures today from Proverbs are helpful in the struggle we all have to live balanced lives. When we hear the word "balance," what comes to mind? We may think of a tightrope walker or someone walking across a balance beam. Or we may think about the times when we lose our balance. We can lose our balance if we slip and fall on the ice or if there is something wrong with us physically, like an inner ear infection. But we can also lose our mental, emotional and spiritual balance as well. There are so many things continually pushing and pulling at you and me, demanding our time, energy and resources, that it's very difficult to stay balanced. That's why remaining centered in God's love is so important.

I'd like to share several things this morning that I believe make for a balanced life. **First, a balanced life implies moderation.** Proverbs 30:7-9 says, "Two things I ask of you; do not deny them to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need."

Did you know that this is the only prayer to God in the entire book of Proverbs? So these words carry a particular power. The wise one is asking God for two things. "Remove far from me falsehood and lying." This first petition underscores the caution that truthful speaking, on which Proverbs places so much emphasis, is not wholly within our control. We need God's help. The second petition is, "Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?'"

This petition reminds us that God doesn't want anyone to be poor, which might lead them to steal and thus profane the name of God. Nor does God want a person's wealth to lead them to think that they no longer need God. That part of the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," has its background right here. This petition is saying, "Lord, help us to recognize and accept sufficiency. Help us to have what we need and to be content with enough." God wills for you and me enough, not excess.

Admittedly, this is not your normal, run of the mill prayer. The writer is not asking for riches, and that's kind of refreshing! None of us want to be poor, but most of us wouldn't mind being rich. However, the writer of this proverb concludes that having too much is as bad as having too little. That's the whole philosophy behind moderation. In order to lead a balanced life, we have to walk that tightrope.

Of course, balancing wealth and poverty, how much to keep for ourselves and how much to give away, is only one aspect of balance. In order to be healthy people, we also have to learn how to balance work and play. We can't work so much that we forget how to play because then we might end up working at our play, which really isn't play.

On the other hand, like the proverb about the ants, we can't be so lazy that we avoid the hard work that must be done in the appropriate season. We have to balance taking care of others and taking care of self. When we are so busy all the time, we forget the necessity of quiet reflection and just being. We have to balance the inner spiritual disciplines of prayer, scripture reading and worship with the outward disciplines of service, mission and generosity.

We can't get so caught up in our own little world that we forget about the needs of our planet. And we have to balance church and home. It's important to use our gifts in the church, but if we're here every night of the week, it's too much. On the contrary, if we're part of this congregation but don't participate or ever help with anything, that's not enough to feed our spirit. And we need to balance the sacred and the secular. It's not possible to compartmentalize our life and leave our Christian faith at the door when step out of the church. You and I bear the name Christian wherever we are because all of life is sacred.

How do we know when we are out of balance? Often we can't put a finger on it, but we know something is not right. Many of the proverbs emphasize the importance of moderation, especially in eating and drinking. Proverbs 25:16 says, "If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, or else, having too much, you will vomit it." When we're out of balance, we may feel restless, irritable, tired, stressed or disconnected. On the other hand, when we are in balance, there is a sense of peace, joy and well-being. A balanced life implies moderation.

Second, a balanced life means enlarging our borders. Do any of you remember the prayer of Jabez, which is found in 1 Chronicles 4:10? Back in 2002 Bruce Wilkinson wrote a best-selling little book about this obscure prayer, which is found right in the middle of a long list of the descendants of Judah and Simeon. The verse says, "Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my borders, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm.'"

Now some people have taken issue with the prayer itself, saying that it's too self-centered and focuses only on Jabez and his needs. The prayer of Jabez may not be a complete, well-balanced prayer. However, the phrase, "enlarge my borders" is a wonderful expression of how you and I can live a balanced life.

"O God, enable me to do and be more than I think I can do and be. Help me to expand my horizons. Empower me to risk a little and not be so cautious all the time. Encourage me to move

beyond my comfort zone. Challenge me to embrace those who are not like me, and help me to be open to serendipity.”

Oddly enough, in order to live a balanced life, we need to embrace the gift of surprise. Think about it. Isn't the whole gospel of Jesus Christ one of unexpected surprises? Jesus says unexpected things, recruits unexpected disciples, goes to unexpected places, and dies an unexpected death. Leonard Sweet writes in his book, *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*, “Over and over again Jesus disconcerted his followers by risking the unknown, hosting new thoughts, and generally allowing the unforeseen and unpredictable entrance into his life.”ⁱⁱ He goes on to say, “Paradoxically, one of the chief ways of dealing with stress is to invite some chaos into your life.”ⁱⁱⁱ Well, that's good news for me because the unexpectedness of being elected a bishop and moving to Iowa within six weeks is both surprise and blessing.

Have you read the quote that is at the top of the bulletin? “One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.” When you and I stick close to the shore, it's safe, isn't it? We know exactly where we are and exactly where we're going. And what happens when we lose sight of the shore? We take a risk, don't we? We enlarge our borders. We invite chaos. We deliberately enter into a state of imbalance in order to force ourselves into deeper dimensions of trust. Why do we do that? Because it's the only way we discover the new lands of God's future for us.

I believe that voting to take on Troy and then Berkley is one of the boldest, most courageous and most hope-filled things First Church has ever done. We moved out on faith, didn't we? We enlarged our borders. We allowed the unexpected to enter our church community. We decided to lose sight of that safe and secure shore in order to be faithful to God's call to minister in a new way in the Detroit Metro area. We have literally invited chaos into our congregation by risking the unknown, but in the process, we're already discovering new lands. Pastor Zack is the perfect pastor for this ministry to lead the way in making new disciples in Berkley, and I can't wait to see how everything unfolds. I'll be following from afar.

But there's one more thing about balance that we must not forget. One definition of balance is “a means of judging or deciding.” You and I exhibit balance in our beliefs and practices as Christians by following the way of Jesus, which is nothing more than walking in the way of love. Every day you and I are faced with decisions about what to believe, how to treat one another and even for whom to vote. If we claim to be Christ-followers, then others will look at us and see the fruits of the Spirit at all times: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

On Friday night, just two days ago, one hundred and fifty people experienced the kingdom of God in all its fullness right here in Fellowship Hall. Members and guests of First Church and the Islamic House of Wisdom in Dearborn Heights gathered for an evening designed to build bridges by understanding the religion of Islam and Muslim culture. Iman Mohammed Elahi first gave us an overview of Islam, and then we divided into sixteen table groups for conversation.

I can't even begin to describe for you the energy, the passion, the buzz, the “aha” moments, the respect, the smiles and the love of God that was in Fellowship Hall on Friday night. I've never experienced anything quite like it. I'll write more about it in my blog tomorrow, and I hope

you'll take the time to read it. You see, our gathering was not an opportunity for debate or judgment. It was a time to lose sight of the shore and shed some of our misconceptions about Islam. It also helped us see our commonality as children of an Abrahamic faith. It was a time to listen and learn from each other, and it was a time to steady our balance in a world where the extremes of both Islamic terrorism and Islamophobia threaten our unity as children of God.

When was the last time you consented to lose sight of the shore for a very long time in order to discover new lands? When was the last time you sought to regain your balance? When was the last time you enlarged your borders? When was the last time you trusted in the Lord enough to let go of preconceived notions about someone else and engaged in honest and hopeful dialogue? May God grant to each one of us the balance and the grace to stay centered in God's love and change the world.

1. "For the Equipping of the Saints," W. Frank Harrington, Peachtree Presbyterian Church, November 13, 1994.

2. Leonard Sweet, *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 177.

3. Sweet, p. 175.