

“Seven Pillars”
Sermon on Sunday, August 15, 2021

Dear church,

Every once in a while reading the Bible is a little bit like solving a mystery or a puzzle. What does this passage mean? How does this verse fit into the overall picture? The opening statement in today’s Proverbs reading gives us something to figure out; supposedly it comes from no less a person than King Solomon. He writes: “Wisdom has built her house; she has set up its seven pillars.”

Well, what are the mysterious seven pillars of wisdom? Perhaps if we know what they are, we too may gain insight. But there is nothing in this passage that further describes their meaning, nothing that would tell us more about the pillars on which the house of wisdom rests. As always, there are any number of interpretations by intelligent scholars. Some say that the number seven is a symbol for completeness and therefore this is a reference to complete wisdom in a house that is in perfect order. Other commentators suggest the seven pillars are part of a traditional banquet pavilion. Understood this way, Wisdom’s call in verse 5 fits perfectly: “Come, eat my food / and drink the wine I have mixed.” And then there is this: a number of ancient writings described the world as resting on seven pillars. Is there a connection? Ultimately, the meaning of these seven pillars remains obscure. And I say this: maybe we are not supposed to know!

Our worship theme this morning is “Holy Wisdom” and I am as unqualified to speak about wisdom as anyone. But fool that I am, I think I know this... We don’t gain wisdom through a manual that breaks it down for us into seven easy steps. Step one, step two, step three... in the way that we like to have everything explained to us. No, we gain wisdom mostly by a relentless curiosity about life - our life and the lives of others; curiosity about our mistakes and also the true reasons of our successes; curiosity about the many contradictions we encounter. We gain wisdom by pondering and contemplating those things. And we each have a unique journey to come to terms with our own questions. Not knowing, not assuming things, is actually an excellent starting point for anyone who wants to attain wisdom. Because tell me, how much can we really know?

In my foolishness I tried to find out a little bit more about the seven pillars of wisdom and I came across some interesting places.

In the State of Indiana, some 700 miles from here, nature has carved seven beautiful pillars, rounded buttresses, into the bank of the Mississinewa River, a work of art created over many centuries as wind and water eroded the limestone. This natural sculpture is like a message from God. Anyone who takes time to pause on the other side of the river can contemplate nature's carved message. In this uncanny rock formation one aspect of true wisdom is clearly communicated: it takes time. How many winters and summers did it take Mother Nature to carve those pillars into the lime stone? How many rain showers, how many freezing nights and sun torched days? Geologists could probably make an educated guess. If attention to life is one of the seven pillars of wisdom, time may be another one. Pay attention to life and over time, it will add up to something! Maybe something as beautiful as these rock pillars! Maybe something as precious as wisdom!

Next, I came across Lawrence of Arabia, the eccentric British explorer and writer, who famously became a cultural Arab. He wrote a book called "Pillars of Wisdom," based on this very passage from Proverbs, published in 1926. Movies have been made about Lawrence of Arabia and his exploits as described in the book. It's an auto-biographical account of his role as military advisor to Bedouin forces fighting against the Ottoman Turks during WW I. Why did he call the book "Seven pillars of Wisdom?" The work is famous but no literary master piece. Maybe Lawrence just liked the title... But I would say this: as a soldier he was confronted with death and mortality. Often times, people who have experienced death, gain wisdom about life. Yes, some of the best leaders are those who value life because they have experienced loss!

I am now officially going down the rabbit hole of trying to explain the seven pillars of wisdom and making a fool of myself! I have come up with three pillars so far. Curiosity about Life; Time and persistence in observing it; Experience of Loss. The other four that I would suggest are... Number one: Fear of the Lord and awe of the universe; Number 2: appreciating contradictions and paradoxes; Number 3: humility and knowing what you don't know; Number 4: the ability to listen. But what do I know? Not nearly enough. Yet, I would like you to think about one practice that has helped you to gain insight into the secrets of life. Write it on one of the little columns that our kids are distributing... Maybe we can come up with seven solid pillars of wisdom on which our house, St. Peter's will rest and from which our house can grow. I look forward to your answers. May the Lord grant us wisdom!

Amen.