

“Wisdom & Folly in a Pandemic”
May 24, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We will hear from several texts this evening, but we will begin with Proverbs chapter one, verses one through seven.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

- ²To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,
- ³to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;
- ⁴to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth—
- ⁵Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain guidance,
- ⁶to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
- ⁷The fear of the LORD [the fear of Yahweh] is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Let’s pray ...

Tonight’s sermon is “Wisdom and Folly in a Pandemic.”

My goal tonight is to present some thoughts, rooted in the Scriptures, about the path of wisdom and the path of folly as we think about and navigate the questions and the issues before us right now.

The initial inspiration for this sermon came from an article by the British theologian Alastair Roberts, and I will be quoting and drawing from him quite a bit tonight.

This sermon is a reflection and call to wisdom for all of us together – myself included. It’s not a statement from the planning committee or the session. It is an attempt to apply the exhortations of Scriptures to us all. I have been convicted as I prepared this sermon, and I hope the words of Scripture and the reflections of Dr. Roberts and others will be helpful for you as well.

I have twelve points this evening – twelve theses we might say – on wisdom and folly for us to consider together.

But before we get to them, it might be helpful to refresh ourselves on what the Bible and what wisdom literature means by these terms.

Wisdom and folly are *not* a way of distinguishing intelligence. And that is an important starting point.

Dr. Jack Collins's simple definition of wisdom is a good place to start. He says that it is "skill in the art of godly living." Wisdom is the ability to live as God calls us to in God's world. It requires, then, a certain approach to God, to ourselves, and to this world that God has made.

Folly, on the other hand, is not just a lack of wisdom, but a resistance to it. Derek Kidner, a commentator on Proverbs and on wisdom literature, explains this by discussing the three categories of fools in the book of Proverbs. There is the simple, the fool, and then the scoffer.

The simple, Kidner writes, "is the kind of person who is easily led, gullible, silly. Mentally he is naïve [...] morally he is willful and irresponsible. [...] The simple [...] is no halfwit; he is a person whose instability could be rectified, but who prefers not to accept discipline in the school of wisdom." [Kidner, *Proverbs*, 36-37]

The fool, one step worse than the simple, is "one who is dull and obstinate." But once again "it must always be remembered that the book [of Proverbs] has in mind a man's chosen outlook, rather than his mental equipment." The fool prefers "comfortable illusions" to the truth. [Kidner, *Proverbs*, 37]

Finally, the scoffer or scorner is the worst of the three. His presence in Proverbs, Kidner writes, "makes it finally clear that mental attitude, not mental capacity, classifies the man. He shares with his fellows their strong dislike of correction [...], and it is this, not any lack of intelligence, that blocks any move he makes towards wisdom. The mischief he does is not the random mischief of the ordinary fool, but the deeper damage of the 'debunker' and deliberate trouble-maker." [Kidner, *Proverbs*, 39]

Thus we have an initial sketch of wisdom and folly.

The challenge for us is to pursue wisdom as we approach the particular challenges of this particular moment, and to avoid the path of folly.

With that said, let's consider twelve theses to that end tonight.

First: Wisdom finds security in a multitude of counsellors. Folly will only listen to some.

Consider the following from the Book of Proverbs:

- "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety." [Prov 11:14]
- "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed." [Prov 15:22]
- "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him." [Prov 18:17]
- "Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war." [Prov 20:18]
- "By wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory." [Prov 24:6]

Reflecting on this concept, Alastair Roberts writes:

“The wise surround themselves with a multitude of counsellors. By contrast, fools merely appeal to whatever ‘expert’ will confirm them in their ways, dismiss the experts as agents of a conspiracy or blind servants of an ideological agenda, or absolve themselves from the task of discernment by appeal to the fact that ‘experts disagree’. Fools generally appeal to experts to validate them in their positions, rather than genuinely familiarizing themselves with the scope and shape of the conversation between experts of varying perspectives and insights.

“The solitary counsellor is a dangerous thing, as is the clique of unanimous counsellors—whether ‘orthodox’ or contrarian [...]. True wisdom is to be found in attention to a multitude of counsellors, where the viewpoints of many informed and wise persons are constantly cross-examined, stress-tested, revised, honed, and proven through searching conversation with each other.” [Roberts, *Wisdom and Folly*]

Our first thesis is that wisdom finds security in a multitude of counsellors, while folly will only listen to some.

We have there the concept of number and variety of counselors. But in our next two theses we need to consider more specifically how we listen and who we listen to.

Which leads us to our second thesis: Wisdom loves reproof and the increase in wisdom it leads to. Folly thinks it already knows, and takes refuge in scorn and scoffing.

In Proverbs we read the following:

- “Wisdom cries out: ‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?’” [Prov. 1:22]
- “Be not wise in your own eyes;” [Prov 3:7a]
- “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.” [Prov. 12:1]
- “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” [Prov 12:15]
- “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” [Prov 14:12 & 16:25]
- “The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.” [Prov 15:31]
- “A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.” [Prov 17:10]
- “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.” [Prov 18:10]
- “Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” [Prov 26:12]

And then Ecclesiastes adds:

- “Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.” [Eccl. 4:13]

Alastair Roberts writes:

“The fool will not carefully consider opposing positions to discover what element of wisdom might lie within them, but will leap at whatever excuse he can find—the tone, the political alignment, or the personality of the speaker, etc., etc.—to dismiss and ignore them. Ultimately, whether he realizes it or not, he hates wisdom, as the task of wisdom is discomfiting for him and

he will avoid it at all costs. By contrast, the wise will endure considerable discomfort to seek wisdom wherever it is to be found. He will willingly expose himself to scathing rebuke, to embarrassing correction, to social alienation, or to the loss of pride entailed in learning from his sharpest critics or opponents or climbing down from former stances, if only he can grow in wisdom.

[...]

“When a fool is faced with an unwelcome viewpoint, his characteristic response is scoffing, ridicule, or dismissal, rather than careful and thoughtful engagement. Levity and scorn are a refuge against correction” [Roberts, *Wisdom and Folly*]

Now, most of us hear that and we have immediately thought of someone we know who it applies to.

But my bet is that in most cases, the person we are thinking of is not ourselves ... but someone else.

And so already, tonight, we need to turn our gaze back to ourselves.

And maybe a good place to start is by asking: Where have you seen yourself scoffing the past few weeks? Who have you scoffed at over either their concern or their lack of concern about the current situation? Who have you dismissed with a roll of the eyes – whether externally or internally? Who have you failed to listen to ... maybe at least in part because the idea of them being right was uncomfortable for you?

A key theme in wisdom literature is that unless we are willing to receive challenge and correction, we cannot grow in wisdom. We can listen to all the counselors in the world, but if we dismiss half of them with a roll of the eyes and a wave of the hand, we will gain nothing. We need to consider this point, and then look at ourselves honestly. We need to seek to be people who will receive ... who even come to love ... reproof and correction, because we love growing in wisdom just that much.

So second, we see that wisdom loves reproof and the increase in wisdom it leads to, while folly thinks it already knows, and takes refuge in scorn and scoffing.

Our third thesis is: Wisdom recognizes that wisdom and truth may come from unexpected sources. Folly refuses to consider that some sources may have wisdom it needs.

I spoke of this back in September, but it’s worth considering again this evening.

The book of Proverbs is a book of Biblical wisdom, largely composed and compiled by King Solomon, who was especially gifted with wisdom by God.

Which is why it is interesting to note that a chapter and a half of the book of Proverbs is taken from the sayings of non-Israelites – from people outside the covenant community of God.

Chapter thirty says that it contains the words of Agur. Commentators point out that the information we are given seems to indicate that this chapter comes from a non-Israelite – perhaps an Ishmaelite. [Kidner, *Proverbs*, 24-25, 171-172]

And then, right after that, the first portion of chapter thirty-one comes from, we are told, the mother of King Lemuel. There was no king Lemuel in Israel ... and there is no indication that Lemuel or

his mother were from Israel. [Kidner, *Proverbs*, 24-25, 176] Instead, this passage resembles examples we have of Egyptian wisdom literature. [Kidner, *Wisdom*, 35] Some commentators have argued that there is evidence that it may even come from a Canaanite source [Clifford, 270].

Solomon, we are told in the Bible, was, in his lifetime, the wisest man on the earth. Why, then, would he draw on material from the wisdom literature of non-believers? Well, Solomon was "wiser than all other men" (1 Kings 4:29-34), but as Derek Kidner points out, Solomon's wisdom "surpassed rather than by-passed" the wisdom of the cultures around him. [Kidner, *Wisdom*, 15]

Solomon, because he was wise, saw wisdom as it came from outside of Israel. Folly refuses to see wisdom from those different from us.

It is inconceivable to many that their political opponents, or their spiritual opponents, or their cultural opponents, may possess wisdom they lack. But that disbelief is a symptom of folly – not wisdom.

Of course we must always be on guard when considering insights from those who disagree with us on key spiritual matters. But being on guard is different from stopping up our ears. As others have said, all truth is God's truth. We do not act wisely when we refuse to hear it simply because we don't like the person telling it to us. [Roberts, *Wisdom and Folly*]

So third: Wisdom recognizes that wisdom and truth may come from unexpected sources, while folly refuses to consider that some sources may have wisdom they need.

Fourth: Wisdom is on guard against the flatterer. Folly is drawn to flattery.

From the Book of Proverbs we read:

- "A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin." [Prov 26:28]
- "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy." [Prov 27:6]
- "A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet." [Prov 29:5]

The wise know that flattery is a serious danger to sound judgment. But the fool is drawn to flattery.

And there are two forms of flattery we need to be aware of: flattery that flatters by confirming what we already believe, and flattery that flatters by telling us that we can see what no one else can see.

The first form is simple enough. We give favor to those who affirm what we already think and believe because it makes us feel good about ourselves – it assures us that we are right. [Roberts, *Wisdom and Folly*]

But we must be aware of the second form as well. *The Gospel Coalition* recently ran an article attributing the following to Carl Trueman – Truman writes:

"Conspiracy theories have an aesthetic appeal: they make us feel more important in the grand scheme of things than we are. If someone is going to all this trouble to con us into believing in something, then we have to be worth conning; and the impotence we all feel in the face of massive impersonal [problems] is not really the result of our intrinsic smallness and insignificance so much [as] our potential power which needs to be smothered [by others]. Such views play to our vanity."

Flattery can come in many forms. How are you most prone to it? Where do you see it calling to you in your thinking about the current situation? Where do you need to beware of it?

So fourth: Wisdom is on guard against the flatterer, while folly is drawn to flattery.

That brings us to our fifth thesis: Wisdom knows it must struggle and learn how to think. Folly wants to be handed an easy answer.

The fool wants a quick fix – the sort of thing he can buy, as Proverbs 17:16 seems to allude to. And when someone tries to teach him wisdom, he quickly loses interest, as is described in Proverbs 17:24.

And so the fool looks for a quick solution.

The way this often plays out is that we can be tempted to speak of “wisdom” but actually mean an ideology, or a doctrinal system, or a set of moral laws. But that is not wisdom. ““Wisdom””, Alastair Roberts points out, “can be presented to people as if it were a complete pre-packaged system of what to think, rather than as a lifelong formation in disciplined and responsible thought and the art of living well. A certain ideological position can be identified with ‘wisdom’, while actually functioning to do people’s thinking for them. We can be trained in a complete system that is to be brought to reality, without obliging us to assume the responsibility of the [wisdom] task of relating deep and principled reflection with empirical attention to the world.” [Roberts, *Wisdom and Folly*]

This expands the scope of what we need. And if we take this seriously, we begin to see that we have a lot further to go than we thought. We do not need to memorize a set of facts or master a course on worldview. We need to learn a skill that will take a lifetime of dedication to develop. But we cannot start on that path until we see it as it is.

So fifth: Wisdom knows it must struggle and learn how to think. Folly wants to be handed an answer.

Sixth, when judging a matter, wisdom knows it must make decisions in the midst of uncertainty. Folly expects to make decisions with certainty.

We read in Ecclesiastes: “When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, [...] then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.” [Eccl 8:16-17]

One of the major themes of the Book of Ecclesiastes as a whole, is that as we live in God’s world, there is much that we do not know and do not understand, and the challenge of wisdom is not just sorting through all the data we have – it is deciding how to act when there is just so much that we don’t know. And so, wisdom knows it must make decisions in the midst of uncertainty. But folly expects to make decisions with certainty.

And those who seem closest to the current situation seem to agree that right now we face a situation with a lot of uncertainty.

Consider the following from an ICU doctor writing for *The Federalist* – he writes:

“Everyone seems to be talking about intensive care units (ICUs) and COVID-19 patients. As someone who has been dealing with these things every day, I am qualified to share some rarely discussed aspects.

“Firstly, ICU doctors look for patterns. We like putting patients into logical categories to help organize our assessments and plans. [...]

“The numbers we see on the screen of a patient’s chart give us tremendous insight into what the expected pattern of behavior a disease process will take in the ICU. With COVID-19, it is like that clichéd scene in the movies where the scientist looks up from the microscope and says, ‘This doesn’t seem to behave like anything I’ve ever seen before.’”

The doctor goes on to discuss the unusual way this virus often spreads, the severe way it will affect some people who are otherwise healthy, the mysterious role fat plays for some, the ways that treatments don’t seem to help in some cases, and the extended length of recovery in other cases.

The uncomfortable truth, he concludes, is that there is much we don’t know right now, and much we can’t control. [Hakim]

Or consider the following from a journalist who has been interviewing a range of people on the current crisis – he writes:

“The odd thing about reporting on the coronavirus is that the nonexperts are supremely confident in their predictions, while epidemiologists keep telling me that they don’t really know much at all.

“‘This is a novel virus, new to humanity, and nobody knows what will happen,’ said Anne Rimoin, a professor of epidemiology at U.C.L.A.

“Some of that epidemiological humility should seep into public discourse.

“Some conservatives scoffed that the coronavirus was like the flu, which was utterly wrong. Some liberals foresaw a disastrous outbreak when Jerry Falwell Jr. kept Liberty University open this spring, and that never happened. Viruses are complicated.

[...]

After listing other data that seem confusing or even contradictory, the journalist turns to another expert who says that these results are not at all surprising,

“because we still haven’t figured out the 1918 pandemic. ‘In 1918, why did the spring wave go away, and then why did it come back in the fall?’ Osterholm asked. ‘We don’t know.’

Epidemiology is full of puzzles. In 2003, the World Health Organization feared that SARS would return in a devastating wave that fall, but instead it was extinguished. In 2009, experts worried that the H1N1 flu would be a lion, but it turned out to be a kitten. Random luck shapes outcomes along with biology; some officials took reckless risks this year and got away with them, but that doesn’t make the actions prudent.

“‘You’ve got to have a lot of humility with these viruses,’ Professor Osterholm said. ‘I know less about viruses than I did 10 years ago.’” [Kristoff]

I have had similar experiences as that journalist describes – hearing the confidence of those who have studied epidemiology on the internet for the last few weeks as opposed to the uncertainty of those who have a far better grasp on how these things work.

False confidence is a comfort – it makes us feel better about things. But it is not the way of wisdom – it is the path of fools.

So, sixth, wisdom knows it must make decisions in the midst of uncertainty. Folly expects to make decisions with certainty.

Seventh, wisdom recognizes the complexity of competing values. Folly insists that complex decisions are black and white.

Keeping with our third thesis, this is a point that was really driven home to me from a secular source – from the writing of Ron Heifetz. Heifetz points out that the most challenging decisions that individuals and institutions often face are not black-and-white choices, but choices in which there are competing values. It's not where we must decide between something good and something bad, but when two important values we hold seem to be in competition with each other. We don't like the uncertainty that brings, though, and so we often try to reduce such dilemmas to simple black-and-white problems.

And in fact, one reason why God gave wisdom literature to his people was to deal with this very thing. From the very beginning, but especially in the period of the kings, God's people needed wisdom to apply the laws he had given them. Sometimes it was straightforward, but sometimes it was complicated, and the values God had given his people seemed to be in competition. Wisdom literature was given to equip God's people to navigate such situations.

And so with our current situation. God calls us to love our neighbors – to protect their lives. As we heard from Luther in an evening sermon weeks ago, if we are careless, we are morally responsible not just for infecting ourselves during an epidemic, but we are especially guilty if we become vectors of the disease to others through carelessness. We need to take this command to love our neighbors and preserve their lives seriously.

At the same time, God calls his people to gather for worship. He calls us to partake of the word and the sacraments.

These two commands – these two values seem to be in competition. And navigating what we should do is difficult. Wisdom acknowledges this difficulty. Wisdom wrestles with both commands and approaches the questions ahead with both values held on to firmly.

Folly tries to dismiss or eliminate one of them, and proclaims that the situation is simple. And simple situations feel a lot more comfortable. We can feel self-righteous towards those who don't agree with us, and tell ourselves that we are simply more bold or more intelligent than others are. But this is the way of folly, because it refuses to see the situation as it is – whether it ignores the command to worship or it ignores the command to protect our neighbor's life.

So seventh, wisdom recognizes the complexity of competing values, while folly insists that complex decisions are black and white.

Eighth, wisdom weighs the costs and probabilities of being wrong. Folly insists that it must be right.

This thesis grows out of what we have said before. If we are dealing with competing goods, rather than good versus evil, and if we are dealing with uncertainties about the facts on the ground, then we need to take seriously the possibility that our assessment of things could be wrong, and make decisions in light of that.

Folly wants to ignore that possibility. It is either certain that it cannot be wrong, or it dismisses the possible costs of being wrong.

But we if we take what we have said so far seriously, we cannot do that.

So we need to ask: If we delay meeting in person longer than we need to, what might be lost? What losses can be mitigated through the blessings we have of technology? What losses cannot be made up? What will the costs be to us as individuals, and as a congregation, and in our witness before the world, if we err on the side of being overly cautious?

We also need to ask, if we meet too soon, then what may be the costs of that? What losses can be mitigated and what losses will be out of our control? What will be the costs to us as individuals, and as a congregation, and in our witness before the world if we err on the side of not being cautious enough?

Those questions need to be considered along with the question of how likely it is that we may be wrong in either direction.

Taken together, none of these questions are simple, and all require wisdom.

So eighth: Wisdom weighs the costs and probabilities of being wrong, while folly insists that it must be right.

Which brings us to our ninth thesis: Wisdom examines the matter and is willing to stand alone. Folly does not contradict its peers.

We all tend to think of ourselves as independent thinkers because we all can identify some tribe we disagree with.

But much of the time, we merely adopt the position of our tribe. Much of the time we merely go with our chosen herd. And while of course we will be drawn to likeminded people, and while hearing their counsel will be part of the path to wisdom, to take the opinions of our tribe as determinative of wisdom is folly, and may also be cowardice.

The wise are willing to examine a matter and to seek the truth, even if their conclusion sets them against those whose opinion they value – those who are part of their tribe, whether ideological allies, friends, or even family.

In Proverbs 24:10 we read, “If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.”

That is true of a range of types of conflict, but it is especially true in matters of what is true and what is right.

Robert F. Kennedy put it like this – he wrote: “Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change the world which yields most painfully to change.” [Kennedy]

So ninth: Wisdom examines the matter and is willing to stand alone, while folly does not contradict its peers.

Tenth: Wisdom seeks peace with others. Folly seeks to provoke others.

In the Book of Proverbs we read:

- “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” [Prov. 12:18]
- “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” [Prov 15:1]
- “A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.” [Prov 18:6]
- “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.” [Prov 20:3]
- “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” [Prov 29:20]

In these proverbs we see a helpful addition to the above point. There are those who love the approval of others more than the truth, and they need to consider the call to examine a matter, to seek the truth, and to practice moral courage.

But at the same time, there are also those who love conflict with their adversaries more than they love the truth. And so they are always looking to provoke those they disagree with. They are not seeking the truth, but they are seeking to boast in their own opinions and to provoke those they disagree with.

The wise, as we have seen, do not shy away from disagreement. After all, one cannot be corrected and reproved except in the context of disagreement. But they disagree in a way that seeks peace and interaction – that is humble and willing to learn if they are mistaken.

Folly, by contrast, takes delight in strife and conflict, more than in growth, understanding, or peace. And such an approach blocks the true way to wisdom.

So, tenth: Wisdom seeks peace with others, while folly seeks to provoke others.

Eleventh: Wisdom honors and submits to authorities. Folly does what is right in its own eyes.

Proverbs 17:11 tells us that an evil man seeks only rebellion.

We considered this theme somewhat this morning, so I won't dwell on it for a long time tonight. But Alastair Roberts is helpful once again.

He writes:

“Fools [...] hate to submit to authorities over them. They are proud and insubordinate and only appreciate authorities when they support them in their ways. They will leap to disobedience, resistance, and opposition to authorities, as they instinctively reject that the authorities might know a great deal better than them.

[...]

“[On the other hand,] even when faced with deeply imperfect authorities, the wise recognize the importance of submission. Such submission need not require agreement or unquestioning compliance. There are submissive ways to raise questions and concerns, to appeal to authorities, or to negotiate with them. [...] The wise desire to understand the reasons for the obligations laid upon them by authority, but they are humble enough not to require such reasons for recognizing the legitimacy of the authority and their need to submit to it. The loss of authority over us, and the rise of a situation where everyone does what is right in their own eyes, is ripe for folly.” [Roberts, *Wisdom and Folly*]

So eleventh: Wisdom honors and submits to authorities, while folly does what is right in its own eyes.

Which brings us to our twelfth and final thesis: Wisdom is prudent and prepares for what may come. Folly is reckless, lacking rational fear, and will not prepare for what may be ahead.

We read in the Book of Proverbs:

- “The wisdom of the prudent is to discern his way, but the folly of fools is deceiving.” [Prov 14:8]
- “One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless.” [Prov 14:16]
- “The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.” [Prov 22:3 & 27:12]

Alastair Roberts writes:

“The fool is marked by his dismissal of rational concern about the dangers of his way and by his reckless overconfidence [...]. The fool is a gambler and a compulsive risk-taker. He rejects warnings about future dangers, blithely convinced that all will continue as it has to this point, that his careless actions will yield no harvest of consequences.”

[...]

“One of the chief characteristics of fools in the teaching of Jesus—the fool who built on the sand, the fool who sought to build bigger barns, the foolish virgins—is the fact that they are unprepared. Their fixation on the present and the continuation of its conditions, their resistance to correction, their laziness and lack of appetite for the pursuit of wisdom, and their stubborn delight in their own way leads to their being taken by surprise by foreseeable disaster. Their folly can be made openly manifest by their unreadiness for the disasters that hit them. The fool, however, will often mock the wise in their calm preparations — ‘Why panic!?’ Yet, when disaster strikes, they are generally the ones flailing and not knowing what to do.” [Roberts, *Wisdom and Folly*]

So twelfth and finally: Wisdom is prudent and prepares for what may come, while folly is reckless, lacking rational fear, and will not prepare for what may be ahead.

So there, for your consideration, are twelve theses on wisdom and folly in a pandemic.

No doubt I’ve missed many things that could be said. No doubt my own biases have played into what I have presented here – even in what I noticed and what I did not notice as I read through the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes this week.

Still, we have covered twelve points tonight and some of you may be thinking “Ok. Fine. Good. We should be wise. Got it. Now what is the conclusion? What is the plan of action we land on from all this?” And the answer is: Right now, I don’t know. I have thoughts, of course – as we all do – but not a final answer.

Our committee and our session are working on it from one month to the next.

The point of this sermon, really, is not to get us to a set answer. The point is to help us get on the right road towards a right answer – to direct us to the path of wisdom rather than the path of folly.

And even in that, this sermon does not present a comprehensive road map. If anything, it looks more like the Book of Proverbs itself: a set of statements and observations, rather than a smooth system or a flow chart. Maybe that's a good thing. Or maybe it's not. I don't know.

Of course there are those in this congregation who far exceed me in wisdom, and this sermon may all be obvious review for you.

But for those of you, who like me, still have a ways to grow in discerning the path of wisdom, maybe the next step for us is not so much to solve the problem of what to do next in this pandemic ... maybe it's not so much to discover right away the final answer ... maybe it's instead to take these twelve points – and others that I have missed – and sit down with them this week, and really examine the pattern of our hearts and minds, and ask how we need to grow in wisdom. Maybe the next step is to slowly read through the Book of Proverbs in the days ahead and reflect on where we need to grow in wisdom, and how we see the ways of folly in ourselves. Maybe the first step is to ask God to give us wisdom, and to take advantage of the tools he has given us. Maybe the first step is to recognize that we are not as wise as we tend to think we are, and to start to hold our opinions with a new humility.

When we think of pursuing wisdom, we are often more anxious to get an answer than to get wisdom itself.

Maybe we need to begin by considering Solomon's words in Proverbs 4:7: "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom."

Maybe that is where we start.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Disclaimer: My citation of the following resources is not a statement that I agree with their overall point, or (even if I do agree with their overall point) that I agree with every statement they make. These are simply some of the resources I have drawn from in preparing this sermon.

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