

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10)

Be Wise!

When I was just about the age of our confirmands, my family went to the beach with another family. They had a son who was my age. When we first got there and we were putting out blankets and picnic baskets, he did something dumb. I don't remember what it was, but I remember his dad yelling at him: "Jim! Think a little!" His dad wasn't talking about getting good grades. He wanted Jim to use common sense. Sometimes in business companies will call in consultants to evaluate the way their offices or factories work. Sometimes those consultants tell employees that they need to work smarter, not harder. Both of these examples illustrate the value of wisdom. Wisdom is not the same as being smart. It's not knowledge. That's an important thing, too. I'm glad there are people out there who know about science and technology and can apply it to things that make my life easier and more comfortable. And quite frankly, it's hard to be wise when you're ignorant. But wisdom is about making good decisions. It's about understanding how the world works. Sadly, lots of smart, knowledgeable people make boneheaded decisions. Sometimes, even wise people have blind spots – they have areas in their lives where it's hard for them to be wise. Today, we are confirming eleven young people. It is a gift of God to hear them confess their faith and vow to be faithful to their Lord. But King Solomon knew that we all need to be wise. And not just in the things of this life. The greatest wisdom of all is spiritual wisdom. And Solomon tells us the secret to getting true, spiritual wisdom: the fear of the Lord. So, my young friends, after all the time we've spent together and all that we've studied and learned, there is one critical piece of advice I want to give you: **be wise!**

I.

King Solomon said, "**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**" The Old Testament says "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" at least three other times. But it speaks of fearing the Lord many more times than that. Our confirmands have all memorized the explanations to the commandments from Luther's small catechism. Again and again, they learned, "We should fear and love God" that we do or don't do something. Luther was clearly thinking of all these Old Testament verses when he wrote that. It reminds us of Solomon's advice for us today: **Be wise! Fear the Lord!**

But what does it mean to fear God? Does God really want us to be afraid of him? Sometimes, he does. When his people were rebelling against him and ignoring his calls to repent, he did at times tell them to be afraid because judgment was coming. He even says that occasionally in the New Testament, when people refuse to turn from their sin. God is totally serious about judgment. One of the things we do at the beginning of every year in catechism class is talk about what God is like. I often ask the kids to tell me what they would say if one of the kindergarteners or preschoolers asked them what God is like. Thankfully, those older kids almost always say that he's loving and forgiving and things like that. But eventually, we get around to this point: God is just and holy. *Holy* means that God has no sin about him at all. Everything that he does is good and right. In fact, if we want to be good and right and holy, we need to be like him. *Just* means that he always judges correctly. He never looks the other way. If he sees our sin, he will condemn us. He will send us to hell. Now, he doesn't really want to do that. But he must be true to himself. God hates sin and sinners and if we turn our backs on him and ignore all that he says, we absolutely should be afraid.

But that's not what King Solomon meant when he wrote "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. What Solomon called "fear" we might call reverence or awe. God is the best friend we could ever have, but he's not our buddy. He is our God. We come into his presence recognizing that he is holy and the maker of the universe. But even more, we recognize that he is so consumed by love that he had to move heaven and earth to save us. The Apostle John wrote, "God is love." What is more worthy of respect and awe than love? This world worships power. We Americans maintain the most powerful military on earth. We have the ability to project force to any part of the globe. We maintain an arsenal of nuclear weapons that could be used in an instant. The goal is to make anyone think twice about attacking us. But does it always work? Terrorists

don't seem to be too intimidated. Sure, they run and hide after they get some deluded person to do their dirty work. But they keep trying to hit us. Power only creates so much awe.

But God's love is greater. It is truly the most powerful force in the universe. The love of God controlled all of history so that Jesus would be born and rescue all of us from death and hell. The love of God drove the God the Son to take on human flesh and die and pay for all our sins. The love of God pulled his Son out of the grave and accepted his payment. The love of God claimed us sinners in our baptisms and covered us with Jesus' perfect life, so that God doesn't our sin anymore. The love of God changed our hard and sinful hearts and made us believers. The love of God comforts us when life hurts, it strengthens when we're afraid, it rules all things to bring us home to heaven. The love of God is truly worthy of our awe and respect.

Yet, awe still sounds too much like fear to completely convey the idea. In the Old Testament, fearing God meant looking at God kind of like you looked at a parent. In the ancient world, parents were both stricter than we are today and they had more authority over their children. Yet, just like today, they loved those children and they worked all their lives to provide the best they could for those kids. So, when Solomon says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," his talking about seeing God as a loving Father who would spend every dime he has to save us, who would give his most precious treasure to give us life. Of course, God the Father has done exactly that. He sent Jesus to rescue us. We are now forgiven. He sent the Holy Spirit and gave us faith. We are not part of his family.

In the end, the fear of the Lord was the Old Testament way of talking about faith. When God called us to fear him, he was calling us to see him as our Father in heaven. Luther captured the idea well when he taught us "we should fear and love God" that we do not sin. We don't obey God to avoid punishment. We obey him because we love and trust him and we know that all he commands us really is for our good. That single insight is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom is knowing how to live. Here at Peace we've established a Lutheran elementary school to prepare our children for life in 21st century America. Part of that is teaching them to study so they do well in high school and college. Part of that is teaching them to treat other people with love and respect and letting them know that we love and respect them. But the greatest tool they need to face life today is faith in Christ. When you start there at trust in Jesus, you are beginning to understand how to live.

II.

Of course, we're not done teaching them how to live yet. One of the greatest frustrations for pastors and Lutheran elementary school teachers – indeed for Christians who take their faith seriously – is the horrible number of confirmands that we lose. It's disturbing to see how many young people stand up here and make the promise these young people will make, and then break it before they graduate from high school. Sometimes, it feels like confirmation day was the last time they were in church. I hope and pray this year's class bucks that trend. But what can I do as their pastor to help with that? What can we do as a congregation? There is one simple thing: teach them to know the Lord. That's what Solomon says: **Be wise! Understand God's love.**

In the second half of this year's confirmation verse, Solomon wrote, "**Knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**" What did he mean by that? Understanding means being able to look at life and grasp what it all means and where we're going. That's only possible for us if we know God. Not just meet him and be introduced to him, but truly know him, like you young people know your parents. You have a deep and enduring relationship with them. You understand them and can come to them. That's what you need to have with God to navigate life in a sinful world. So today is not graduation day for you young people. We'll do that in a couple of weeks. Today is, in some ways, the first day of school for you. For the rest of your life, God will reach out to you through the same things he uses to reach out to your parents: church, Bible class, communion, home Bible study and the ministry of other Christians. Through those efforts, God wants to grow your faith. He wants to make you wise. He wants to give you the understanding you need to make it through the next six to eight decades of life on this earth.

Being wise and having understanding comes from knowing the Lord, from having a living and enduring relationship with the God who loves you. So, you need to know God's love in Christ. That's how he picks us up when life hurts. That's how he gets us through tough days when only bad news comes. That's how he renews us when our own stupidity and hard-headedness get us into trouble. Jesus comes to you in the gospel and he lives in your heart. He works in you as you pay attention in church and as you read and study your Bible

at home. Today, for the first time, you will receive his body and blood in, with and under the bread and wine of communion. Jesus will come to you in that sacrament to prepare to go out there and live for him.

In love, Jesus will continue to proclaim the law to you. He will continue to warn you when you sin so that you repent and hear and believe the good news of his salvation. A few years ago, one of our former members went whale watching on vacation. They took a boat out into the ocean. What would happen if someone did that and got so excited that they leaned way over the rail and fell into the water? Right away, the crew of the boat would throw out life rings out to save them. But what if that person was convinced that he or she could swim all the way back to shore? They might ignore every effort to rescue them – and drown before they made it back. You and I need to hear God's law to remind us that we are sinners and we deserve God's punishment in hell. But then we need to hear the good news that Jesus saved us.

So, the law shows us God's love by driving us back to Jesus. It shows God's love in another way, too. When God tells us how to live, he isn't doing that because he likes making up rules or he enjoys making our lives hard. Every command he gives us is for our good. Part of wisdom is understanding that living the life God calls us to live is a blessing. For that reason, resisting sin and seeking God's strength in the gospel is something that all of us need to do every day of our lives. My young friends, it's easy to sin. It's hard to live for Jesus. But sinning always hurts you in the end, even if you think you got away with it. God loves us, so he shows us how to live, now that we belong to Christ. Living that life will always be a blessing for you.

God promises that he will be with you as you strive to live for him. You have never been alone. Jesus has watched over your every step and he has brought you here, to this church, on this day, so you can confess your faith in him. And he will never leave you or forsake you. Telling you that is why we're here. Helping you to trust all God's promises is what the church is for. You are a part of that church. You get to help the rest of us remember that. God calls all of us to spend the rest of our days helping each other know Jesus better, because there is no more practical piece of wisdom, nothing that can serve you better as you strive to live your life on this earth. **Be wise! Fear the Lord! Understand his love!** Amen.