

The Path of Wisdom

Proverbs 4:5-12

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

August 17, 2025/Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Well, this Sunday feels a bit strange. I haven't done this for a while. ☺

It is nice to see your faces. And it's good to be back. I hope that the last few months have been good ones for you.

This will not be a typical sermon. I'll have a few comments about our passage from Proverbs toward the end, but I hope you're ok if I mostly offer some personal reflections on my sabbatical.

But before I do that, a few thank-yous.

First and foremost, I want to thank you for giving me the gift of this sabbatical. Thank you for the love and the care that allowing me to take this time symbolizes. Thank you for your prayers for me and my family. I do not take any of this lightly.

I want to specifically thank those in church leadership who have carried more of the load than usual in my absence.

And I want to thank Zachary for stepping into the role of part-time pastoral intern! This was a first for our church and obviously a first for Zachary, but I'm very grateful for all he did to keep the ship steered in the right direction for a few months.

We have two remaining Sundays in August before the September long weekend where we will not have a service. After that, it's back to the familiar rhythms and routines of the fall season.

For these two sermons in August, I want to reflect on the theme of wisdom. I think all of us would say that we *want* to live wisely.

But what is wisdom? How do we get it, pursue it, love it, walk in it?

As you likely know, for a few weeks at the end of May I went on a 300 km walk from central Portugal to northern Spain.

The Camino de Santiago is a popular pilgrimage that draws people from all over the world, to walk a bunch of different routes (some much longer than the one I did), all leading to the same place: the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, believed to be the burial site of St. James the Apostle.

When you go on a long walk, you have a lot of time to think. As I set out, I had concluded fourteen years of ministry here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church. I was approaching my fiftieth birthday. Later this year, Naomi and I will celebrate our thirtieth wedding anniversary (Lord willing!).

Round numbers seem to be good occasions for reflection. So, what did I think about as I walked? Well, many things, obviously. But perhaps chief among them was this theme of wisdom.

I asked myself some hard questions: Am I a wise person? Am I wiser at fifty than I was at forty, or thirty? Am I becoming wiser?

Would people look at me and think of me as a potential source of wisdom, whether as a pastor or a father or a friend? If yes, why? If no, why not?

For the remainder of my time this morning, I want to anchor my reflections around some pictures that I took while walking the Camino de Santiago.

I'll try to pull a few nuggets of wisdom out of each image. None will be exhaustive. Much more could be said about each one. There is far more to say about wisdom than I can possibly address this morning or in the next two Sundays.

These are not unique discoveries of mine. But this is some of what I learned or was reminded of along the way. I hope these will resonate with you, connect with your experience, or perhaps even offer a word of challenge and/or encouragement.

1. This first image was taken less than an hour into our pilgrimage in the city of Porto. We had visited the cathedral, got our stamp in our Camino passports (we had to get regular stamps along the way to prove that we had walked where we said we did, if we hoped to get our certificate at the end). And we had begun a long day of walking through the city of Porto out to the coast.

(Claire helped me make this display which shows each page of my passport along with the certificate I got at the end. The certificate in Latin, so it's obviously much more impressive ☺).

Every journey begins with a single step. So the saying goes. And so it is with our lives. We must embark upon the journey, take the gift of life that we have been given, and start walking.

So many people today simply fail to engage with life. There are all kind of ways to hide from reality, to try to avoid the path we have been placed on. Some hide online, others in addictions of all kinds, still others in never venturing beyond what is safe and comfortable.

Wisdom means taking a step, even if it's in the wrong direction. It means starting the journey. It means making mistakes, discovering, learning, and growing.

We cannot make any progress on the journey of life unless we are prepared to step out and see where God will lead.

2. The second image reminds me of a simple thing that I learned on my pilgrimage walk. We can do hard things.

I chose this image because I'm still wearing a black strap that I bought before I left to protect my IT band while I walked. I've been operating with a partially torn ACL for around eight years now, and I was worried about how my knee would respond to walking long distances and different elevations every day.

To make a long story short, I stopped wearing this brace after around three days. I discovered that the more I walked the better my knee felt (Elaine, you were right!). By the end of the journey, I was barely even thinking about it.

We are often capable of more than we think we are.

I think our culture discourages resilience and encourages fragility in many ways. We are incentivized to focus on what we lack or what we have suffered rather than what we have been given and what we *can* do.

Each one of us has been gifted and called by God to do hard things. It won't look the same in every story, but these are often precisely the means by which we grow into the fullness of who God has created us to be.

To live wisely is to push ourselves beyond what is comfortable, manageable, predictable, to believe that we may be stronger than we think we are, that God will equip us for what God has called us to do.

3. Speaking of hard things, and building on the previous point, to live wisely is to *expect* trials and to prepare to face them well.

I chose this image basically because I look tired. In general, our pilgrimage was not too demanding elevation-wise. We were mostly on the coast, and the weather was mostly perfect (low twenties, often a bit cloudy).

But there were some hot afternoons and some big hills to climb. There were a few blisters to contend with. There were days when the backpack felt heavier than others.

There were some days where we arrived in a city around 3:00 in the afternoon and discovered that we had another hour of hot urban concrete walking to endure before we arrived at our hostel or our Airbnb.

I definitely remember thinking on a few occasions, I don't really want to walk any more today.

This, too, is obviously like the journey of life. Sometimes, we won't want to walk anymore. How will we face trouble when it comes? To live wisely is to expect it and to prepare to meet it with courage and with faith, hope, and love.

4. You can probably guess what this next image is meant to convey. On the journey of life, we often don't know what is around the next corner.

We do not and cannot see what the road ahead will hold. This is probably a good thing—if we could, we might be tempted to stop walking.

To live wisely is to trust God for the next stretch of the road we can see in front of us.

And it is to believe that whatever lies around the bend—be it a stunning oceanside vista or a rough path in a dense forest—God will not abandon us, that God will be faithful.

5. And it is to trust that God will show us the way, even when it's not clear.

Throughout our Camino, we followed a red line on a map where you could see where you were in real time. This came via an app called, hilariously, the Camino Ninja!

If we were ever evaluating the merits of a particular restaurant or pub or coffee shop as our next stopping point, the first question we asked was, “How far off the red line will this take us??” We didn't want to waste steps!

But before there were apps on phones, there were simple markers on the *actual* way. These took the form of yellow arrows. Sometimes they would be on the side of buildings, sometimes they would be on the pavement, sometimes they would be on a tree.

They weren't always easy to see. Sometimes you had to look hard to find out which way to go.

Here, too, the metaphor isn't hard to figure out. On the journey of life, it isn't always obvious which way God would have us go. Sometimes, the markers seem absent or impossible to find.

But God has not left us without clues. Sometimes the little yellow arrow will come in the form of Scripture. Other times it may come via a word from a trusted friend. Still other times, God may speak to us via our conscience or an inner voice.

The way will not always be obvious. Living wisely means living in trust, believing that God wants to help us along the way, that God will provide markers when the way seems unclear, and that the search is part of the way.

6. These next two images are two of hundreds I could have picked. They remind me that to live wisely is to live with eyes open to the beauty and grandeur of what God has made, and to give thanks to our Creator for his gifts.

This first one was taken after a particularly gruelling day (I think it was the second full day). We had walked over thirty kilometres, and we were tired. We had found somewhere unimpressive to grab a quick supper and then retreated to our various rooms to catch up on messages, etc.

I decided to walk across the courtyard of where we were staying and climb the stairs to see where they led. They led to this rooftop patio where I sat and watched this sunset.

It was utterly magnificent. I sat there as the sun set, spent some time journalling, remembering to say thank you to the One who had made all this.

7. And the second one is just one of many beautiful scenes we witnessed while walking along the coast of Portugal and Spain. Throughout the Camino, I regularly found myself thinking of the line from the song “This is My Father’s World”:

*This is my Father’s world
He shines in all that’s fair
In the rustling grass I hear him pass
He speaks to me everywhere.*

8. To live wisely is also to remember that we do not walk alone and we were not meant to walk alone.

God has made us for each other, to live in community, to cultivate bonds of friendship, trust, and mutuality.

I was blessed to walk with two friends and a stranger who became a friend. I walked with Rev. Steve Bateman, rector at St. Augustine’s Anglican Church, Ian Lawson, former senior pastor at the Evangelical Free Church, and Ian’s brother Andrew, a lawyer from Edmonton.

I had great conversations with all three of them along the way. They were great co-pilgrims.

9. This second image comes with a story.

After one day near Pontevedra in Spain, we met two women from Estonia on a patio.

During a long and wide-ranging conversation, it came out that they had some blisters and one of them had some shoulder/neck pain (they were knocking off 30+km/day).

We gave them some ointments and bandages. They were as grateful for the assistance as they were incredulous that they were encountering religious professionals out in the wild (they sort of had a category for the word “priest,” but weren’t quite sure about “pastor”).

Two days later, at 6 am we found ourselves on a ferry with the same two women. The conversation picked up right where it left off a few days earlier.

They still seemed curiously bewildered that they were talking to a real live priest (and a pastor). *How did you become one of those? Why? What’s the point? Do you get paid?*

Eventually, the talk turned to confession. *I don’t understand the logic. So, I tell the priest my sins and he forgives me and then I just go do the same sins again? But nothing changes.*

Steve patiently explained that it’s not the priest who forgives but God. He compared it to an ill-fitting or overburdened backpack. Sometimes we must let go of some things or admit that we can’t carry them (or that we were never meant to).

Confession can be like unburdening ourselves of the sins that weigh us down. This obviously resonated with the women who had been struggling mightily with her backpack, so this metaphor seemed to connect, for obvious reasons.

As we drew nearer to our destination I said to her, “When we dock, my friend will have a look at your backpack. He knows how these things are supposed to fit, maybe he can adjust something to make things easier for you.” I did this without asking Steve, naturally.

He took it all in stride. “Well, I can’t promise anything, but I can have a look.” And so, he did. He tightened this strap, adjusted that one, etc.

And by the time he was done, the woman could hardly believe how it felt. I thought she was going to break down in tears she was so happy. She had been carrying the weight almost exclusively on her shoulders instead of her hips. She practically had tears in her eyes as she bounded off like a gazelle!

Again, the lesson is a simple one: To live wisely is to recognize that we are called to care for one another. It is to recognize that we are called to move *beyond ourselves*, to bear one another's burdens, that God has entrusted us to one another.

10. This final image is me at the culmination of our pilgrimage in the cathedral square of Santiago. We arrived around 11 am on a Thursday morning, if memory serves.

This is the most touristy picture of the bunch, but it still speaks to me of a sense of completion, of a significant accomplishment, of relief, of doing what we set out to do.

It's a picture that makes me smile. In the cathedral square, we came across people we had met along the journey. There were hugs and smiles, sometimes even a few tears.

For almost an hour, I just sat on the ground in the cathedral square, enjoying the sun, watching the people, imagining all the different human stories represented in this one slice of space and time.

To live wisely is to recognize that our journey has a fixed destination.

For us, the destination was Santiago and the cathedral square where all the pilgrims ended up, whether they're coming from Portugal or southern France or various starting points throughout Spain.

On the journey of life, our destination is the new heaven and the new earth, the kingdom of peace where God welcomes his children home.

The Christian life is one where we are always pulled ahead by the destination, by the hope which God has put in our hearts of a world where every tear is wiped away, where every wound is healed, every sin forgiven, every pain redeemed, everything partial and undone made whole.

If we don't have this destination firmly in mind, we will be easily blown around by whatever visions of the good life happen to be fashionable, or whatever our peers are doing, or whatever the media or the entertainment industry puts before us.

We need to keep our true destination ever before us, to refuse to settle for smaller stories and more destructive ends, if we are to walk wisely.

In closing, I want to reread a portion of our passage this morning:

Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;
love her, and she will watch over you.

⁷The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom.

Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

⁸Cherish her, and she will exalt you;
embrace her, and she will honor you.

Wisdom is not an optional extra for life. It's not an optimization technique to devote some attention to when you have your financial ducks in a row or when your kids are raised or when your relationships are harmonious or when you have a bunch of free time.

The urgency in these verses is hard to overstate. *Though it cost all you have...*

To live wisely is of vital importance.

Our world needs the people of God to be those who are devoted to living well, who, however imperfectly, are seeking to pattern their lives after the only One who ever truly embodied the wisdom of God, Jesus Christ.

Next week, I'll continue reflecting on wisdom. I'll do so through the lens of some of my experiences and reflections on Anabaptism at 500 experiences in Zurich and the Mennonite Church Canada Gathering which I attended in Kitchener/Waterloo earlier this summer.

But I've gone on long enough.

My prayer for us is that whatever the journey that God has called us to walk might look like, that he would help us to be those who seek wisdom along the way. That we would pursue it, embrace it, and never forsake it.

Amen

