

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Proverbs: Plans
Proverbs 16:1-3**

Good morning, everybody! I'm Brooke Toftoy, and for the last nine years I've worked here at CPC as one of the directors of High School Ministries. Just recently, when Cory Gregory left, I took on a new role as director of College Ministries. As you can see, in October I'm taking on the biggest role yet as a new mom, which will be fun. It's been a great summer, spending the whole summer in Proverbs. I know for me, this series has really made me wrestle with Scripture, not because it's confusing but because it's so incredibly clear. I've sat in the pew feeling convicted about the way that my faith and my life should be intersecting and more specifically, how they're *not* intersecting. But I've also left here feeling hopeful and motivated to make changes. As John Crosby said when he kicked off this series, wisdom is not information, it's application. It's taking what we know is true and actually living it. That is how we become wise. That is wisdom.

This week we are talking about making wise plans. It's clear we need guidance in our decision making, but where does that come from? We can't just open our Bibles and see whether we should go to college, if we should take this job, if it's time to retire, should I keep dating this person, is this the person I'm supposed to marry? When we're making plans and looking toward the future, what derails us from making wise choices along the way? And what do we do about it?

Back when I was in college (I went to Colorado University in Boulder), I was loving life. It's beautiful there. I had great friends, and I was plugged into a church. I got to enjoy running and hiking in the gorgeous foothills. There was so much to do there, and I had big plans for my future. I was spending my summers at CPC as an intern in High School Ministries and planning on working here when I graduated. That was my big dream.

From the outside, things seemed ideal. It seemed like things were going really well. But on the inside, I was dealing with some body image issues. In my freshman year, like a lot of people in transition, I had gained a bunch of weight and was struggling with self-confidence. So I made a decision to start exercising more and eat a little differently to try to get healthier. My body began to change and at first, it was great. I felt better about myself and enjoyed the compliments and attention I got. But slowly my motivation began to shift from being healthy and strong to how good it felt in the moment to be noticed, to be in control, to see the number change on the scale. Slowly my mind became consumed by food and exercise. If you would have asked me during that time what my priorities were, I would have said God, family, friendships, learning, but that's not what you would have seen reflected in my life. There was a disconnect. Every choice I made was impacted by this obsession I had. It affected the way I structured my days. It created distance in all my relationships as I hid what was going on. It made school difficult as my brain was so preoccupied with eating and exercising. I felt anxious and lonely. What was going on

inside of me was beginning to make its way into the rest of my life. I had great plans for my future, but I was getting derailed by the choices I was making day by day.

You may not have had an eating disorder, but we all struggle in different ways at different times in our lives. What is it that has you disconnected from God? Or from the relationships in your lives? Even from yourself and your hopes for the future? For some of us, it's getting ahead at work. For some of us, it's spending too much time online, on Facebook or Twitter or blogs. It could be a fear of being alone or of failing. Maybe it's an unhealthy relationship or an addiction of some kind: drugs, alcohol, food, or porn. Or maybe it's just being busy. Let's look at Proverbs 16:1-3 together and see what the author has to say about our choices and our plans. If you're using the pew Bible, it's page 967, but I'm also going to bring it up on the screen because I'd like us to read this aloud together. Please join me in reading along from the slide.

1 The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD. **2** All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit. **3** Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.

Notice that in verses 1 and 2, there is a *but* in the middle of the sentences and in verse 3, there is an *and*. The first two verses make observations about our human tendencies with the Lord's response to them, while the third verse offers a remedy. Let's focus first on verses 1 and 2. These verses address who we are on the inside and outside as humans. Verse 1 focuses on our inner selves. Last week Lee Hanssen talked about the Hebrew word for heart, *leb*, which is the word we find here. This word for heart encompasses not just our desires and emotions as we might imagine, but also our minds and understanding, our wills and our decision making, our consciences and morality, and our spirits. It is the center of a person, like the heart that beats in our chests and keeps us alive, and it directly impacts everything that we do.

Verse 2 addresses our actions or habits, specifically the disconnect we experience between our hearts and our actions. Unfortunately our culture tells us a lie, that what is going on inside us doesn't affect the things we do and that the things we do don't affect who we are on the inside. Media encourages us to make decisions based on our fleeting hungers and feelings in the moment that don't take into account potential consequences. For instance, who hasn't given or received the advice *follow your heart* at some point when you are trying to make a decision? It's been drilled into our heads since we saw our first romantic comedy or heard our first love song. It sounds good, doesn't it? It might even sound Biblical. Who can argue with that? I think God can.

So when we are making plans, why shouldn't we follow our hearts? Are our hearts not trustworthy? What's the problem? I think these first two verses make a contrast between the way we see our own hearts and actions and the way that God sees them. Depending on the moment, the words *I'm just following my heart* could mean, I'm just doing what's best for me, I'm doing what I feel like, or I'm doing it because I want it. Our hearts, the center of who we are, are shaped by our lives. We humans are made up of a collection of our experiences, choices, habits, and relationships, for better or for worse. I think this quote captures it quite well.

We are all on a path. Everyone is going somewhere. When we feel stuck, even when we feel trapped, the truth is, we are still in motion. Life is a journey and the end of it all is not just a place but also a condition. We are becoming the end of our journey, wise or foolish,

and every moment takes us closer there [*Proverbs: Wisdom That Works* by Raymond C. Ortlund Jr.].

Who we become tomorrow is shaped by everything that happened today. Because the world is broken and full of sin, our hearts can get really beat up and calloused. Think about a callous. Friction that is repeated over a period of time at first causes pain, then becomes hardened, and eventually the pain dissipates. This can happen with our hearts as Jesus says in Matthew 13:15.

15 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.

This Scripture speaks of how the calloused heart affects all the ways we engage with the world and with God, physically, intellectually, and emotionally. This sheds some light on why verse 2 in our text today says, "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes . . ." When our hearts have been hurt and are hardened, we are disengaged from God and the world, and we don't have a reference point beyond our own opinions and thoughts. This is not how we were made to function. Our hearts were made to be engaged with God. A Christian philosopher, Blaise Pascal, said this.

What else does this craving and this helplessness proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace. This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him . . . though none can help since this infinite abyss can be filled only . . . by God Himself.

Our problem is that our hearts wander toward things other than God that won't satisfy, at least not for long. Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:21,

21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Whatever it is that we are filling our hearts with will guide and shape all the decisions that we make. It could be success, pleasure, popularity, material things, being healthy, beauty, finding love, having children. But these things don't make good leaders of our lives. I once heard a pastor say that the Biblical translation of *follow your heart* would be something like *follow your deceitful desires*. And who would give that advice?

When I was in the midst of an eating disorder, my whole life was committed to it and every choice I made prioritized food and exercise. If I had taken the advice to *follow your heart* during that time, I never would have recovered because my heart had wandered from God. To make wise decisions, we need something besides our hearts to follow. Don't hear me say that our hearts are bad because that's not true. We *need* to look closely at our hearts and our actions and see where they are headed, but we need something more because we are broken and our hearts are calloused.

To get to know our hearts better, we can ask ourselves: where am I broken and what is my heart following? But we can't ask questions in isolation. We need God's help and the help of people we really trust to be in that with us to help us figure it out. Scripture does *not* tell us to follow our hearts but to follow God with our whole hearts, our whole selves, the center of who

we are. Though we can't always trust our hearts, we can always trust God with our hearts. Let's move on to the final verse here because it brings us to the remedy.

3 Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.

What I want this verse to say is different from what it really says. What I want it to say is, commit your plans to the Lord and they will be established. Like, I'll make my plans and get God's stamp of approval. Awesome! Sounds easy! We do this all the time in big and little ways. Back in college, I prayed to God about my plan to work at CPC when I graduated. I had an interview and then, I didn't get the job. I was like, God, I gave you my plans. Why didn't You establish them? Let's go through this one more time.

3 Commit your *work* to the LORD, and your plans will be established.

The word *work* in verse 3 can also be translated as deeds, actions, labor, undertakings, achievements. What the passage is really saying is that, if we want our plans to be established, everything that we think, say, or do along the way needs to be committed to God. Our hearts and our habits, our insides and our outsides. It is easy to get wrapped more in *what* our plans are than in *how* we get there.

In college I had great plans to come to work here at CPC, but what was going on inside me was not loving toward myself and it wasn't loving toward God or the people around me. God had work for me to do. Work that involved a lot of prayer and hard conversations with loved ones and professionals, and in creating new boundaries for myself. As I made new choices that put God first, I began to experience healing and wholeness, both in my heart and in my body. God has since used the struggles I went through, and continue to go through at times, to minister to others in ways I never could have planned for. Those of you who know me know how passionate I am about helping people worship God with their physical bodies as well as their minds and hearts through a ministry called Holy Yoga, and helping people learn to eat whole, real foods. I just think it is amazing that God doesn't waste anything that we go through. We can have worthy plans, but if we are not loving God and our neighbor and ourselves along the way, it's not the way God would have us do it. Jesus said that our most important job, the Greatest Commandment, is to love. Look at those first two verses again.

1 The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD. **2** All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirit.

God sees our motivations and already knows how our plans will unfold, but God wants to show *us* these things so we can love like Christ. When we truly commit our actions to God, we become more aligned with God. And when we are aligned with God, our plans and our motivations point to God.

I started out asking how we can make wise decisions about college, careers, marriage, and families since there aren't always clear answers in the Bible. This is our answer. Yes, let's make plans and work toward them, but let's not lose sight of God in the process. God cares about the inside because what is inside will come out eventually. Our choices form us. As we begin to live in a different way, we experience God in a different way and we can be transformed.

Being pregnant has actually taught me a lot about this. One of the struggles that we all experience in following God is that we can't always feel God. It's hard to follow something that we can't feel or touch or see. I think that's why a lot of us don't follow the things that we know God is asking of us. When I was first pregnant, I didn't show until I was about five months along so aside from feeling a little sick, I didn't feel pregnant or look pregnant, even though I knew I was pregnant. It might seem strange, but sometimes I even had trouble believing it was true.

When I looked toward the months ahead, it was overwhelming to realize the hard choices and sacrifices I would need to make to put the baby's needs before my own. I truly had to focus on just doing the next right thing, moment by moment. No more morning espresso, no more backbends in yoga, no more sleeping on my stomach, making myself eat vegetables and take vitamins even though they grossed me out for awhile. With my history of body image issues, I even felt the sacrifice on a very physical and emotional level as I began to anticipate and even fear how my body would change. I knew I needed to tune in and care for my body in ways I had never done before. But these little choices allowed life to grow in me. For months I made choices, day by day, based on a truth that I couldn't feel, see, touch. I just made them on faith.

Can you see how this connects to what the author of Proverbs is saying? Have you ever felt like you know *about* God but don't really *know* God? Or because you can't feel or touch or see God that it is impossible to follow God? Or that you know God's Word is true but have trouble believing it or choosing to follow it sometimes? Committing to put God first when we make choices involves sacrifice but it grows life in us. It doesn't make our lives easier or more comfortable, but it will make them full and whole.

My husband and I may have chosen to have a baby, but there is something happening inside me that we have nothing to do with. I just opened myself up to it and did what I could do, but God has done something incredible, miraculous even. As we give over more and more of our lives to God, we become capable of doing so much more than we could do on our own.

Now it is obvious that I'm pregnant. This life has grown enough in me that I can feel it and I can even see it moving all the time. I can give it a nudge, and it will move in response. It responds when I push on it. I'm saying *it* because I don't know if it is a boy or girl. Other people are in on this news. They encourage me and give me advice. I'm not alone in this. It is so much easier to put the baby first now because it is not just a knowledge thing. It has become a body thing, a heart thing, a soul thing.

It is hard to choose to follow God with our hearts and lives when we don't feel like it, when God's desire for us is in conflict with our desires, when it goes against what culture and the world is telling us. There is no immediate gratification. It involves sacrifice. There is no way around it. But when we examine Jesus' life, we see that sacrifice brings about life. God is gracious. He is with us and He is in us. My coworkers roll their eyes when I say this, but really, we are all pregnant with God! Yes, all of you!

We can put God first, choice by choice, moment by moment. Since college, one of my favorite verses that I think really describes all that I have been talking about is Romans 12:1-2. I'm going to ask you to close your eyes while I read it and just receive it.

1 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as

an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. **2** Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

You may open your eyes. God shows us how to follow Him when we read Scripture and actually do what it says, when we spend time listening to God and praying, and when we spend time with other believers who can call us out. We can't do it alone. We need God *and* other people. Day by day, God will show us new ways, new opportunities, to bring our thoughts and our words and our actions more into line with what He desires for our lives. Richard Rohr says this.

God comes to you disguised as your life. Why didn't someone tell me that earlier, that this life is the raw material I need to take seriously! Every day, what's right in front of me is the agenda . . . and it's always messy, always muddy, always mundane, always ordinary, and all around me.

Committing to God choice by choice might change our plans, and it almost certainly will transform our hearts. This is not an easy process, but it is a good one because God cares about who we are becoming and has a plan for us that is better than what we could ever dream up.

I want to leave you today with a tool, a way to take small portions of Scripture and let them change the way you live. We can look at Scripture like a recipe or like a meal. A recipe is instructions that can collect dust on a shelf if we don't use it but a meal is a communal experience that engages every part of us. I've experienced the Proverbs this summer like an elaborately prepared meal that allows me to savor the words along with my community, hearing stories and laughing as we share the meal, feeling nourished and cared for even when it's not the easiest to digest. I'm left feeling full and energized to make changes. A favorite author of mine says, "Eating a book takes it all in, assimilating it into the tissues of our lives" [*Eat This Book* by Eugene Peterson]. Ask any child and they will tell you, we are what we eat. We intuitively know this to be true yet sometimes live like it isn't. But just as our physical body is made up of the foods we consume, who we are is determined by what surrounds us in our environments, the people in our lives, the things we do. So let's learn to eat Scripture.

There is an ancient Benedictine practice called *Lectio Divina* that is really helping me sit with Scripture and eat Scripture. On your way out, you will all get a little card that has instructions on how to do this, but let me walk you through these four steps. It's really easy.

So when we eat a meal, what do we do? We take a **bite**. We **chew**. We **swallow**, and we **digest**. We do it over and over again. To take a bite of Scripture, you just hear or listen to a portion of it like the little chunk that we talked about today. We chew it, which is meditating on it, ruminating, repeating it, or pondering it, maybe even memorizing it. Then we swallow it. That would be a time that we pray to internalize what the Scripture says and ask God to reveal something in our own lives. Then finally we digest it. That's when we contemplate this Word and live it out so that it becomes part of us, so it becomes a habit. We take the Scripture with us into our days.

We cycle through this over and over again like we do in a meal, and that's how we are nourished by it. Learning to eat Scripture means living in such a way that we don't just read for knowledge or to say that we read it, but we rely on it to be nourished and sustained and changed inside and out. And that, my friends, is wisdom.

In conclusion, what do we **know**? We know that God does not call us to make decisions based solely on the desires of our hearts. And what do we **do** with that? I think we commit our whole selves to God and make choices that reflect that commitment, moment by moment.

I would like to challenge this community to spend time with this passage of Scripture this week and use these four little steps to examine your hearts and your plans and the choices you are making in that time with God. Let's not just be people who follow our hearts, but people who follow God with our whole lives. Would you pray with me?

We are grateful, God, that though we have wandered far away, you see us and know us inside and out and still love us. Holy Spirit, help us receive whatever it is You have for us today. Show us how we can choose to be more like Christ today in our words and our thoughts and our actions. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.