

**The Rev. Mieke Vandersall**  
**Rutgers Presbyterian Church**  
**August 20, 2006**  
**The Instruction Book**  
**Proverbs 9:1-6**  
**Ephesians 5:15-20**

It was always during the late summers, the dog days of August with 100% humidity in the midwest. It was hot, wicked hot, before global warming began kicking in with such strong force like it is now making August feel like the fall. I can't remember what my exact age was, probably before I was old enough to begin watching my brother those summer days. And I would find myself hidden in the spacious and exposed back yard sequestered in the brush of the bushes, sometimes with a dear friend whom I had been convinced that our project together would turn out to be a lucrative engagement, sometimes alone. I would find myself a big old pot and start filling with sand and cat poop from our geriatric cat who thought the sandbox was a more appropriate litter box than his own. We would continue with some dirt that should have been protecting my father's tomato plants, some bright green leaves from the trees covering us in the shade. And water from the hose. And I would mix it all together in one big concoction, witches brew I imagined, my lips tight and my eyes squinting, sweat coming down my forehead due to my utter concentration and seriousness with which I took this task. And we would mix it all together, our witch's brew, and then at the very end would add poisonous red berries from some unknown bush that was most likely thought of as a weed. The berries would perk up my witches brew, give it a little color with the green of the leaves. Thus began my obsession with food and presentation. I was very focused about my stew, the proportions, the time needed to mix before the berries entered the concoction, and then dishing it out into pie plates, dressed with a few more berries and leaves on top. Only when I had a friend with me, would we take it out to the street and try and sell pie plates of brew. They were so beautiful I knew! But I hadn't thought about the lovely smell due to the cat's feces mixed in. It was a turn-off for many. Still, I didn't understand why people wouldn't want to purchase this gift we had to offer?

This memory consistently was raised for me all week as I have been reflecting on our readings for the morning. I worked hard, at least in my own pretend world, to set my table for others to partake, mixing together common backyard ingredients to prepare a luscious treat for anyone whose imagination matched my own. I found myself trying to create a world where I had more power, where sometimes I could set the rules myself, rather than the world all children are forced to live in where we stumble through learning right and wrong, and the ways to get what we want, where the instructions are confusing and contradictory

We are taught:

Be independent, but don't go away without telling me where you are going.

Be yourself, but for goodness sakes, keep your room a little neater because guests are coming over.

Be nice to people who are different than you, especially if they have a different skin color, but under no circumstances go play at their house because they don't live in a safe neighborhood.

And so, making my witches brew in the steamy hot back yard, creating my own feast and table, mixing my own wine, just for a moment I could live in a world that was outside the world of dos and don'ts and rights and wrongs, no teachers, no parents, no adults, no contradictory messages.

This learning of how we are to guide our way through life is not just a journey of childhood. We are constantly in new situations and environments that take learning new rules and ways of being. Immigrants into any kinds of cultures that are unfamiliar to them have a high learning curve, let it be newcomers to church who are trying to follow along with a bulletin or understand the unspoken rules of coffee hour, or newcomers to a particular country who are learning new languages and the nuances of dominant cultures, or students who are beginning graduate school for the first time and feel lost in the rhetoric and culture of their field. If we are expanding our knowledge of the world, we are forced to learn how to make our way through the world around us. There is no One Instruction Book to tell us how we are to raise children or be a good daughter or son, nothing that will tell us how to pass all our classes or be successful in our jobs, nothing magical that will give us the answers on how we are to live long and healthy lives, lacking conflict and grief and loss. It just doesn't exist.

Regularly I find myself in conversation with non-church going people who let me know that they have no need to go to church because they do their best to be good people, because they get their refreshment and rejuvenation out of softball on Sunday mornings, because they are self-reflective and kind to others and work for charities and give their money away and are a good friend and goodness knows they have no desire to go to church and be told that the Bible has all the answers and they aren't good enough or are sinful and need to repent. And I agree.

I agree with much of this argument, the Bible doesn't have all the answers as a stand-alone document, at least not in the form of "do this" and "don't do that," there isn't much clear cut about it. Church is not a place where we should leave feeling worse than when we came in, although it is a place where we should be honest about the fullness of who we are, that which we are proud of and which we are not so proud of.

But I have a hard time when I am in conversation with people who think those of us who are here on Sunday mornings really are wasting our time by being here, because our points of reference are really not the same. Church is not a time for the clergy to judge the journey of the lay person. Church is not a time for us to stand here and tell you what you have done wrong or right, especially without looking ourselves in the mirror first. Church is not a time for us to use the Bible as some simplistic Instruction Book. Life is much more complicated than that and so is God and so is Church and so is the Bible.

Theologian Marcus Borg writes in his book: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* about two types of wisdom, or knowledge or instruction. One is Conventional, which is the mainstream or dominant "voice" of a culture and the other is Subversive, which is from a different path outside of the mainstream. Conventional wisdom provides guidance on "how to live." This includes everything from etiquette to central values and images of "the good life." It is based upon a system of rewards and punishments, made clear by sayings such as, you reap what you sow, everything happens for a reason, and living well is the best revenge.

Conventional wisdom creates the world in which we live, and that can be a grim

world, quite often. The God of Conventional wisdom is the source and enforcer of the religious form of this. For Christians this kind of instruction can lead to a world of “measuring up,” a life of requirements. We aren’t justified by our faith because faith becomes a work, a “belief” to subscribe to, a new “requirement” for salvation.

I have heard Christians describe the religion of our Jewish neighbors as conventional wisdom and of Christians as subversive wisdom, but indeed there are both in both faiths, it is pervasive in cultures and religions throughout the globe.

Our texts this morning lead us toward a deeper understanding of wisdom, an alternative and subversive vision, a more complicated way of understanding good from bad, right from wrong, holy from profane. They blur these strict lines.

Borg talks about Subversive Wisdom as a world of Paradox and Reversal. For instance, what kind of world is it in which a Samaritan, an outcast, can be “good” and the “hero” of the story? In which a Pharisee, a setter and keeper of conventional wisdom can be pronounced unrighteous, in which riding a donkey can be a sign of kingship? What kind of world is it in which the kingdom is intended for children, “nobodies” in the ancient world? In what kind of world is wealth not a blessing but a distraction, a source of idolatry? It is only in a subversive world, where dying on a cross was reversed from the lowest and most humiliating form of torture and death in Jesus’ historical context to a sign of God’s love and favor, it is only in a subversive world where we still follow that one who reversed our understanding of life, up until the moment of death and beyond.

In Proverbs, Lady Wisdom, gathers together her flock as a Hen gathers her Chicks under her wing. Lady Wisdom, Gathering God, brings us together for a full banquet, with a set table and mixed wine. Listen to this subversive instruction: You who are immature, come eat a feast! You who need some help, drink of my wine! You, without much sense, turn in with me tonight! Come and let us eat together and drink deeply of the spirit, and be foolish together, and learn how to make the most of life and learn how to walk in the way of insight. It sounds more like a joyous journey than an arduous list of rules to follow.

And, Ephesians, this little book, was most likely written in the midst of great societal pressures and very troubled times, probably not unlike the times we are in now of great war, instability, environmental crises, financial and political irresponsibility. And this community, or communities was told, reminded, to live wisely, making the most of every opportunity, in the face of fear and grief. We are warned to do this in the midst of governments and peoples and churches that waste opportunities to do things differently, especially in the midst of crises and loss, which may be the best times to change our habits and our perceptions. We are warned, our core comes not from material goods, not from the wine itself, but from the Spirit, our center comes from our worshipping and our prayer life, not from conventional wisdom, not from trite and so-called truthful sayings that seep deep in our consciousness, even with our attempts to wipe them out.

Sr. Joan Chitister, a Benedictine nun, activist, traveler, follower, she describes the Rule that her order follows. In Latin, the world Rule, or regula, she describes as a guide to live by, like a hand railing that assists one up and down a flight of stairs. A railing is a guide, but one has to move their feet, their legs up and down, one has to do the actual work to get to the top or the bottom.

To live by a Rule, for us as a Rule that is instigated and inspired by subversive wisdom, is to live into the complexities of steps it takes to move our feet. The brain sends

signals through our nerves to our legs, to our feet and we move them, up and down. We learn, somehow, through feeling, when our feet have touched the stair and it is time for our brain to guide the next leg. We learn, somehow, when we are at the top of the stairs and we must begin going down. Such a movement that we may consider to be so simple and we take for granted so often, is learned, and with the guide of the railing to help us walk, we learn to be sensitive and responsive to God's grace.

Our readings from the great Instruction Book this morning point us in this direction, of complexity of decision-making and life conduct and maturity. We need a guide to live by. As Reformed people we have the guide of the Scriptures, not a simplistic and conclusive concordance of rule-setting but a contradictory and complex commentary on our values and our actions and inactions. The first shall be last. Children are the preferred to enter heaven! The kingdom is like a weed, a mustard seed! What is required in this lifetime? To do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly. What are the two great commandments? To love our neighbors as ourselves and to love the Lord our God with our hearts and our minds and our souls.

And as Reformed people we have the guide of the community, which, like Scripture, is complex and contradictory. Community, which is imperfect and makes mistakes. But as a community we together can accomplish more than we can alone, together we have a voice as God's people that is weaker when one voice is lost. As a community we are able to care for each other when we get stuck in following conventional wisdom, pulling us back to serving and seeking our subversive God.

And so together, we are gathered by our God who clucks her chicks together close under her breast, telling stories and struggling with us so that we may fly on our own, knowing always that our Mother is there to catch us. Thank God she is there to catch us because we have not chosen the easier way. We must try again and again. And we are to act foolishly like children, envisioning a world which may not yet exist outside of us but needs desperately to be presented as an alternative. And we are to study together, and to follow the Rule of Subversive Wisdom, which is confusing and complicated, which presents challenges and no easy answers, but is the source of joy and is the Rule we are called to follow.

Amen.