

Measure Twice, Cut Once
Rev. James Van Schaick
Pound Ridge Community Church
Sixth Sunday of Easter
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Proverbs 8:1-17

Those of you who have been in my office may have seen a coffee mug that I keep on my shelf. The mug was created by the people who produce the television show called “This Old House,” about some craftsmen who renovate old houses while we watch. The mug was a gift from a lovely gentleman who was a friend in Baldwin. He was a craftsman and jack-of-all-trades who died eight years ago at the age of 94.

Now, I’m positive that even those of you who have never done any carpentry in your lives will have no trouble understanding this little bit of wisdom. I have found out myself, the hard way, what “measure twice, cut once” means, and have often recited it to myself on my unnecessary trips to back to the Home Depot after having cut my last piece of quarter-round molding a half-inch too short.

Making a badly-measured cut in a cheap and readily available piece of lumber is one thing, but “measuring twice and cutting once” takes on additional meaning when ignoring it results in a mistake that can’t be fixed. I offer as proof a certain cherry wood bookcase with a permanent leftward tilt that earned me a “D” in ninth-grade shop.

I’ve saved this mug for two reasons. It reminds me of my friend, Alan Chester. And it reminds me of some important advice for living my life. I think about the times in my own life when I have wished I had measured again before going to work with the saw. Not a few times, I have acted impulsively, blurted out something I immediately wanted to take back, or have blithely pursued a course of action without thinking through all the consequences. Measuring twice before cutting in those situations might have saved me from some mistakes that were not so easily repaired. Maybe you’ve had the same experience in your life. This morning, I want to explore this metaphor a bit with you. In our lives, just how can we measure before we cut?

There’s one object lesson I’ve done in every confirmation class I’ve ever taught. I have a vague recollection of having done this as a children’s sermon here, but I don’t write them down, and I can’t remember. What I do is place a small figurine on the table in the center of the group and ask what its size is. As you might guess, the answers were all over the map. “Seven inches!” “As big as my hand!” “As big as this pile of books!” The guessing continues for some time, with me agreeing that each and every answer was absolutely correct. Eventually, it occurs

to someone to say, “All the answers can’t be right. How can we tell what the real answer is if we don’t know what we’re supposed to use to measure it?”

Whoever the person is who says that has it exactly right. And, of course, that was my point. We can’t know the size of anything without a ruler – without some standard that we’ve agreed is the right one to use to measure something called “size.” And in the same way, we can never judge what is right or wrong, or assess the content of our lives, without something to measure it against. It’s not that it’s difficult to get an answer without a standard. The real problem is that without a standard, all answers are equally right. And that doesn’t work in life any better than it works in carpentry.

We seem to live in a society today that is badly in need of a ruler with which to measure our lives. Over the past several decades we have sought to become an open and accepting society, which is a worthwhile goal. But in our pursuit of tolerance we seem to have arrived at a place where, like our children’s sermon example, all answers are equally “correct.”

We try to demand accountability in our schools, in our corporations, in our government, and then condemn as “narrow-minded” all efforts to define what desirable behavior looks like. If you listen to our political leaders you will come to the inescapable conclusion that as a nation we are in the logically and morally untenable position of supporting *values*, all the while insisting that we avoid anything that smacks of a *value judgment*. In a world of relative morality, where any standard is considered just as good as any other, nearly anything can be justified. So, just where do we turn when we are in need of a yardstick?

I believe that God gave us the perfect yardstick, the Bible. The Bible teaches us what we need to take the measure of a purposeful life. We find what we need in the example of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and in countless stories of people of faith. In the Holy Scriptures we can learn not only from people who got it right, but perhaps equally important, from people who got it hopelessly wrong.

In the aviation industry where I last worked, the pilots have a saying. “Learn from the mistakes of others. You won’t live long enough to make them all yourself.” This might be something that particularly resonates with pilots, but there are doubtless similar expressions shared among those in other lines of work. A carpenter (one from Galilee, perhaps?) might say the same thing a little differently: “Measure twice, cut once.”

The reading we heard from Proverbs today is part of a Biblical genre known as Wisdom Literature. Most biblical wisdom is concerned with right living, and urges us to please God by respecting the divine order that God has put into the world. Wisdom literature represents short ideas about life founded on long experience. Many of us (and almost all of us below a certain age) think of wisdom as the

sanctimonious sayings of old folk. But that misses the point. True wisdom is the informed, inspired, yet humble movement of God's Spirit in our hearts and minds.

The verses from Proverbs present a wonderful personification of wisdom. Wisdom stands at the crossroads and shouts to passersby. Not everyone stops to listen. But to those who do, she offers counsel, and sound judgment. The most wonderful thing about the wisdom of God is found in these words from the very end of today's reading: "... those who seek me find me." (Proverbs 8:17)

Wisdom is there for those who care to seek her out. Getting it has nothing at all to do with your IQ, or your SAT scores, or even how long you've been on the planet. Whatever our age, if we are truly resolved to walk closely with our God, wisdom will follow. It is not wisdom of the intellect, but perfect insight that leads us into relationships with God, with others, and even with ourselves that are just, and loving, and fulfilling. Wisdom is the knowledge of the Truth that enables and empowers us to live the lives that God intended.

In carpentry, the goal is not a single perfectly cut board. Whether you are building a bookcase or a house, the end we seek is a whole in which all the pieces fit perfectly. The goal is a completed work where each component piece has been deliberately chosen and carefully shaped and fitted, and there is nothing present that doesn't belong there; nothing that detracts from the beauty and usefulness of the creation. The goal is exactly the same in building our lives.

If we were talking about carpentry, we might refer to this desired objective as "quality." But applied to our lives, we have a particular name for it. We call it "integrity." And Christ calls us to nothing less.

Remember that wisdom is not an end, either. Wisdom is a tool. Wisdom is food for our life journeys.

So, choose your yardstick carefully. And always remember to measure twice, and cut once. That's how we can build lives, and homes, and a church, where God will be proud to live.