

“Helpful or Unhelpful”
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First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Proverbs 1:1-7, 29-33

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.
For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

My friend Sandy likes to jump in and help, even when it's not needed or asked for. She wrote this last month when I sent out my FB request about what are your hardest things to deal with in life. Sandy is a lady who dresses to the nines and lives life as fully as she possibly can. When we first met she told me about her initial experience as a lay speaker. Both pastors at this large church were moving to new appointments and she filled in one of the Sunday before the new pastors arrived. She talked as if it went well but that it was a bit nerve-wracking.

She and her husband now live in Rhode Island where she has begun the process to serve in a chaplain. Because she's such a go-getter I can well imagine that not offering unsolicited help – to her kids or grandkids, or her friends – might be a challenge for her.

Angie was already a pastor when I met her. You might even know her; she used to serve in Merrill. Angie's challenge is similar to Sandy's: “I too jump in where not asked ... I struggle with ... thinking about what someone might want before listening to their actual request ...”

I love both of these women dearly. And while you may not have ever been faced with giving unwanted advice or unrequested help, I chose this as today's topic. I've struggled with giving unwanted or unneeded suggestions for a long time. As an example, recently a person walked into my office carrying a load of stress. I could tell she just needed to talk so I listened. Then without asking if I could offer a suggestion – which I try to do whenever someone comes into my office – I suggested she try meditation. No, I think I said she needed to practice meditation!

This is our second week in a series about some of the hardest things in life. Trying to find relevant scripture lessons for this topic was tricky. There's this verse in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount just before (*sing*) “Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and it shall be given and the love come a tumblin' down,” and just after: take the log out of your eye before you try to take the splinter out of someone else's. In between these two lessons, Jesus says, “Don't give holy things to dogs, and don't throw your pearls in front of pigs. They will stomp on the pearls, then turn around and attack you” (7:6). I mean, really?! And yet, this actually fits our topic. There are people who never want help, no matter how dire the situation. Yet maybe that bit about taking the log from our own eye has as much relevance. There are times when people need our help, but there are probably more times when our supposed help is just a nuisance.

I found a lot of sayings online about unsolicited advice. One made me both smile and grimace. The picture showed a clean-cut, oh-so-sincere looking man in a suit, standing before one of those old, large microphones and it reads, “Unsolicited advice is like someone singing out of tune. Nobody wants to hear it.”

In these next few minutes, I thought we could think about a couple of the problems of giving help when it’s not asked for. After that, we will look at what might be God’s intention for us all.

First, a question. Why do we offer advice? An obvious reason is that we know better the right way to do things. Sometimes we do and it would be great if people would accept what we said. Yet, often what we offer is personal opinion – our viewpoint on what’s wrong with this choice or right with that one. Unless someone specifically asks us, who needs that?

Another answer to the “why we do it” question is that we want to help. We feel uncomfortable, useless, doing nothing. While wanting to help is admirable, again, waiting for an invitation is probably the better choice. And ‘though we don’t often recognize the value of simply being present and listening, I have heard again and again how much this means to someone who was going through a difficult time.

A third possibility for why we speak is that the other person is talking about something that we are dealing with in our own life. Maybe we get caught up in a “group-think” mentality without ever realizing that their eyes have glazed over. We hear them talk and instinctively hope that if we work together, we will come to a solution. Maybe that’s what Violet was trying to do when she gave Rose the name of a counsellor who works with troubled teens. We don’t know; maybe Violet’s daughter had been having problems at school as well and she just hadn’t been ready to bring it up with friends.

No doubt there are other reasons for giving unwanted help. When we notice that the words are about to come out of our mouth, or when someone tells us they already have, it could be helpful to ask ourselves, “What is our motive?”

Do we want to help? Are we having trouble facing our own story? Are we uncomfortable and our talk is meant to make the situation go away? Are we trying to prevent someone from making a mistake?

Allowing people to make their own mistakes is a hard thing. I heard Stephen Glenn present at a workshop. I’ve used one of his ideas many times many times since then – with students and with my own family. He said, “Mistakes are great learning opportunities.” How often do we try to shield people from learning through their mistakes? Few mistakes are life-threatening. Most of them help us to grow, even if we feel sheepish at first.

Instead of trying to protect them, ask yourself, what does this person need? Many times I just want someone to listen and truly hear me. Sometimes voicing concerns out loud helps us to see them differently. Without anyone else saying a word, our confusion clears and we know what we need to do.

Even when you know the right answer, often the best choice is to say nothing, even when it means the situation goes unresolved.

Think for a moment... how well do you accept unsolicited advice? How do you feel? Do you sometimes think – as the person jumps in. “Just because you have an opinion doesn’t mean I want to hear it?”

And yet ... living in community, sharing our burdens, and learning from the wisdom of others – these are part of God’s hope for us. I would’ve perceived some past challenges differently if I had solicited the help of people I trust. They could have helped me notice options I missed on my own. I never “hated knowledge” as our scripture text mentioned, but there were times when my path was not God’s path. If I’d had mentors to guide me, I would have done some things differently.

Sharing burdens is not easy in a culture that espouses independence. Still, God made humankind for community. Which way shall we choose?

The Amish are not the only ones to have done it, but I think of the old-time barn raising. A young family starts anew or lightning strikes a farmstead. And families come from all around to erect a new structure. Everyone participates. And at the end of the day, the barn is up and community has been strengthened.

At First Church, we're good at community. Many of us are good at simply listening when a person needs to talk. We try to ask if it's okay before we offer advice that might not be wanted or needed. We practice listening closely so that we can sometimes tell without needing to ask. And we practice presence.

In the end, it's about accepting and respecting each other. The speaker trusts us enough to confide. If we listen well, that trust is strengthened. The listener values the speaker enough to trust that if they need help, they will ask for it. And if we have a suspicion that they can't ask, we check in with them. And we respect their response.

All of this builds us up individually and as community, strengthening the bonds of affection and caring and leading us to be more fully into the persons God knows we can be.

Amen.