

Learning Objectives

Proverbs 1:1-7 ~ June 7, 2026
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Happy June! Happy Summer – almost. Happy PRIDE month! Happy graduation and scholarship season! Happy endings and beginnings season! The month of June is all of those things and how blessed are we to be able to have them, to experience them, to celebrate them, and in some cases to take note of the endings that lead to the new beginnings. All this was jarringly evident to me yesterday as I had one of those whiplash days that sometimes happen in ministry. That’s a day where you go from one extreme emotion to another all within the scope of a few hours. For me yesterday it was going from a graveside service for a young husband and father to the over the top joy and exuberant irreverence that is a PRIDE celebration.

All graveside services are sad on some level because we are there to mark the end of someone’s life. A loved one is gone and the space that person used to occupy in your life is now an empty hole, gaping and raw. This is why graveside services of some sort are so important. They provide a pathway for the bereaved through the loss to what now waits on the other side of it. Sometimes graveside services are very small. Other times they can be quite large with family and friends spilling out on the driveways of the cemetery. Sometimes the grief is muted, especially if it’s an elderly person who has lived a long life. But when it is a young person, like the committal service I did yesterday, the grief is raw and almost palpable. 39 years old, dead in a year from a rare cancer leaving behind his beloved wife and two beautiful little boys plus a large extended family many of whom hadn’t seen each other since the wedding of the young couple several years before. There is a special kind of pain in these moments. I was so honored to be there with them in that moment, guiding them through and beyond this impossible goodbye. I stayed for a bit after the service, greeting the family and a few people who came up to me.

But I could not stay long because I literally had to race (within the speed limit of course) back to the church so I could change from my

“minister” clothes (dress with black blazer) to my working the PRIDE table clothes – sneakers, shorts and a PRIDE t-shirt. Plus, I had to find and pull out all of our PRIDE supplies and flags and get everything packed up in time to get back to Wilcox Park to set up our table for Westerly PRIDE in the Park. Yikes! I made it to the park on time with two huge canvas bags filled with PRIDE stuff plus Jesus. I got our table set up, all our giveaways out and by then my helpers – Joan McCarthy, Lynn Murray, and Lou Allyn began to arrive. If you have never been to any sort of PRIDE event, it is difficult to describe what it’s like. The best word I would use to describe it is JOY! Unrestrained, unrestricted, and totally overflowing joy. Music is playing in the background. Booths offering all kinds of information and giveaways are decorated with the rainbow flag colors. Some of the tables have activities for kids. Some have books to peruse. All are staffed with folks like our folks from UCC Westerly, just there to let the LGBTQ+ community know that we love them – that God loves them – just as they are. This message is always greeted with gratitude as well as more than a little surprise that it is a church offering them such love when so many other churches only condemn them with a “love the sinner hate the sin” rationale.

One of the most surprising things about PRIDE is how many families and children attend. Straight families, gay families, families with special needs kids, families just so happy to have this marvelous, happy and safe event to attend in our beautiful Wilcox Park. Trust me when I tell you, that sitting there at PRIDE and visiting with the folks of all ages who stopped by our table was one of the best moments I’ve had in a while. Being surrounded by such joy and hope and light and positivity is truly healing for anyone’s soul. I think it would literally be impossible to be there and not smile. As we were sitting at our table near the fountain, we watched one young family as their little ones ran circles around the fountain. The little girl had blond ringlets and a rainbow dress and all the mothers at our table were watching her and fretting about her bare feet but she was the image of pure joy. She and her family are what PRIDE is all about. Scratch that. They are what life is all about and with so much feeling wrong in our country right now, what a powerful healing whoosh of hope this little family – mom, dad, little boy,

little girl – left in their wake. Honestly, if you have never been to PRIDE, it is so worth your time and effort.

But, as much as it might seem like it at this moment, this is not a PRIDE sermon because this is not PRIDE Sunday. That comes on the last Sunday in June! No, this first Sunday in June is traditionally Scholarship Sunday in our little church. It has been for decades following the legacy scholarship fund established in memory of one of our members, Barbara J. Murano. One was established in our church and in the Westerly (?) school district where she taught until cancer took her life far too soon. That scholarship fund is long gone, the moneys all spent. But ours remains because it has been carefully stewarded as part of our endowment and because we have frequently done additional fund raising to cover the costs of the scholarships awarded for many years. In fact, at one point scholarship recipients were asked to help with the fundraising as we used to do routinely before Covid to keep as much of the principal of the original scholarship fund intact. We would usually host a themed supper of some sort at church to solicit donations and the kids receiving scholarships would have to “work” the dinner. Despite the grumbling by the kids, everyone always had a good time.

The Barbara Murano Scholarship Fund has indeed been a vital part of our church for decades but, like all things, it too finds itself changing whether it wants to or not. The fund was originally established to provide scholarships to students who had been confirmed in our church, having attended Sunday School here as well and perhaps even youth group or scouts or both. But this year, as our congregation’s demographics have shifted along with so many other churches, we find ourselves for the first time with no applicants for scholarships. This could be seen as a sad, painful truth but I would argue that it is nothing of the sort.

But first, let’s pause for a minute to consider the Scripture text I chose for today from Proverbs, the very first chapter starting at the very first verse. This is where we learn that all the proverbs contained in this book were written by Solomon, the king who asked God for wisdom when he became king following the death of his father David. Solomon is a fascinating

character and he did accomplish many things, some good. Others not so much. But, it is unlikely he wrote all the Proverbs contained in this chunk of what is known as Wisdom Literature. Some of them, maybe. But not all of them. Most likely, a scribe or scribes wrote them and used Solomon's name to give the work more credence – a common practice in those days. In any event, Proverbs is a delightful collection of pithy sayings, often in a seemingly random order. One exception to this randomness though is this first section of the entire book where the writer is telling us why learning is so very important for everyone. In fact, verses 2-6 can be understood as the learning objectives the writer of Proverbs is attempting to address with this entire book which is the importance of continual learning in our lives, as beloved children of God. In these verses, the writer encourages:

Learning about wisdom and instruction

Understanding words of insight

Gaining instruction in wise dealing, [done with] righteousness, justice and equity

Teaching shrewdness to the simple [those easily taken advantage of]

Teaching knowledge and prudence to the young.

Interestingly, though, the writer here does not limit learning to the narrow audience of youth. He continues on, “The wise can also gain in learning and the discerning can acquire skill.” And what might these skills be for older folks to learn? The ability to “understand a proverb and a figure, to [discern] the words of the wise and their riddles.” Thus, clearly the writer right here at the beginning of Proverbs is telling us that acquiring wisdom should never end, that everyone no matter their age or their ability level should never stop learning. Even more important, they should never stop wanting to learn.

And this, dear ones, is where the Barbara J. Murano Scholarship Fund might find new life if we are willing to take these verses from Proverbs to heart in new ways. Why do I say that? Isn't the obvious answer to our dearth of applicants just to “find” more young people to come into the church so we can go back to awarding the scholarships like we used to? Well, it may be the obvious answer but it is neither the right one nor the realistic one as explained in a recent article in *The Atlantic*:

“The “demographic cliff” is upon us. The number of teenagers graduating from American high schools peaked last year. It will begin declining this spring and

keep falling steadily through at least 2041. The trend is more of a downward slope than an abrupt falloff, but the gradient is steep and represents a crisis to colleges dependent on filling classroom seats and dorm beds. The United States currently has about 4,000 colleges. According to a [recent study](#) from the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, about 60 are closing on average each year; that number could double in any given year if the bottom falls out of enrollment.”¹

Anyone who knows anything about the schools in our area knows that our schools are seeing the same drop off in enrollments. This means there are just not as many children and youth around as there were 20 or 30 years ago so the need for a scholarship fund that benefits only our own kids just doesn't exist anymore.

But here's the thing. The need for scholarships is as strong as it ever was. It's just not restricted to kids needing money for a four year college degree anymore. It's not even restricted to kids anymore. We see plenty of adults needing scholarship assistance as they need to retrain for jobs in the tech economy. We're also seeing a real return of folks into the trades which also requires training and education all of which still costs money. In other words, the need for scholarship money is still there. It just looks different because the world we are living in is so very different. The economy is changing daily and the need for specially skilled workers is changing right along with it. Scholarships are needed now more than ever, but for different things than we are used to considering, for different kinds of applicants than we might ever have thought about before.

So, dear ones, this is why I am indeed excited that we are not awarding scholarships this year because it provides us with an opportunity to do something very new and different and you can be a part of it if you would like. The Barbara Murano Scholarship Fund has always been under the purview of the Deacons and that will continue. But, over the next several months, we will be pulling together a scholarship team to join in conversation and visioning about what new ways we can support our church and our community through a new Barbara J. Murano Scholarship *program*. There is so much to consider when it comes to what the scholarships could be awarded for, who might receive one, and how it might

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/04/college-enrollment-demographic-cliff/686750/>

be used. Do we present one or two big scholarships each year or multiple little ones? And how can we go about returning to the practice of fundraising for the scholarship fund so this important legacy lives on? Really, the sky is the limit as we directly engage in planning for the future, not only for our church but indeed for the entire community. I'm excited about this and hope you are too. Please speak with me during Fellowship today and we'll see about pulling some folks together to at least have this conversation. Most likely this will be a group meeting monthly after worship. Whether or not more structure for this work will be needed as our process unfolds will be determined as we go along.

In closing, dear ones, today we are reminded most powerfully that life is indeed a journey, and one on which we are hopefully always learning. We learn from each other and from our friends and family. We learn here in the church about God, what it means to be in a relationship with God and why it matters. We learn too how to work together to accomplish God's work in the world. How wonderful will it be for us to expand our love of learning to make a real difference in our community! With God all things are possible. So, what do YOU think? Now's your chance to be part of one such new thing. God bless all of this year's graduates, and all to come in the future. Amen.