

“Wisdom Quest”

Ephesians 5: 15-20, I Kings 2: 10-12, 3: 3-14

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Soon after the death of the greatest rabbi in the region, a traveler said to one of his disciples, “Your rabbi was renowned for his wisdom. What did he give greatest attention to in life?”

The disciple thought a minute and said: “To whatever he happened to be doing at the moment.”

We think of wisdom in such lofty terms. Many of us may believe wisdom is something we do not yet possess but aspire to. Is there someone that comes to mind when you hear the word wisdom or wise one? Perhaps you recall a special teacher or relative or neighbor. Whenever someone brings a child to be baptized it is our profound hope that both that child’s parents and godparents will become the embodiment of wisdom for that child. This may not seem possible on that baptismal day, however, as we grow in love, faith and maturity wisdom becomes more and more obvious. We also trust that as our relationships deepen within our faith community, someone may emerge that will share not only knowledge with our child, but something deeper we understand as wisdom.

The theologian Joan Chittister says, “Wisdom, in others words, is the gift of living in the present to the utmost and learning from the now whatever we will need to respond with integrity to whatever our future brings. Wisdom is not a passive virtue; it is not something we simply soak up if we live long enough not to be able to avoid it. We have to work at getting wisdom and then we have to work to embody that wisdom in our own lives.” We are on a lifelong wisdom quest always open to the ways in which God is revealing God self to us, always seeking to live faithfully in light of these revelations.

The theme of wisdom is woven strongly and clearly throughout the lectionary texts for this morning. The story from the Hebrew text teaches us about one of our ancestors in the faith who asked God for something special. Solomon, son of David, has just ascended to the throne. He was a young man, inexperienced and likely a bit apprehensive about this new role and responsibility he has received. God comes to him in a dream and tells him he can have anything he asks for. In his position Solomon might likely ask for wealth or power or people to protect him as he seeks to live out God’s call. He asks for none of these things. Instead he says, “Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil...” I am moved by the humility of his request. His decision might indicate that he was already wise beyond his years. In this moment, Solomon may have sought wisdom, but throughout his reign, he often governed in more oppressive than wise ways. Therefore, it is not enough to ask to be wise or to have the ability to discern the will of God. One must continually seek to follow God’s will and live in ways that are pleasing to God. Such powers of discernment are most tested in the more difficult times of our lives. Wisdom is not something we can possess,

something we can display like a trophy on a shelf. Wisdom affects and infects us in very deep ways. You can tell a wise person by the way he or she lives their life, day by day.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he also talks about wisdom. He warns them "be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise." He advises them not to be foolish, but to discern the will of God. He tells them to avoid getting drunk, in other words, do not allow earthly temptations to separate you from the life that God intends for you to lead. Instead be filled with the Holy Spirit. In order to live a life of faith one must create a space in one's life for the Holy Spirit to dwell. Then filled with the Holy Spirit you will do the right thing, you will know the difference between good and evil and live from this place of certainty and wisdom.

A wise person is one who is reflective of one's life, one who looks back on how you have lived and learns from this experience. Joan Chittister says, "wisdom is life peeled and cored, it is attention and consciousness lived to the hilt... Wisdom is clearly not apathy masquerading as patience. On the contrary, with wisdom comes the obligation to deal with life head on, head up, with open eyes and honest heart and courageous conviction. Clearly," she says, "wisdom is not a gift; wisdom is a task; wisdom costs. Wisdom calls us, the Scripture says, to know ourselves, to squeeze out of every moment in life whatever lessons it holds for us, whatever responses it demands at that time." With wisdom, therefore, comes a profound sense of responsibility. I suspect Solomon understood this, even at a young age. I believe Paul understood this as well.

Wisdom does not leave us alone. In Scripture wisdom is portrayed in feminine terms. She is always seeking our attention as we slip further away from the will of God. She knocks at the back door of our conscience reminding us how to behave. She moves us beyond our self-loathing and proclaims our belovedness. Wisdom comes to us in the form of dreams. Dreams are the Holy Spirit's way of getting our attention and helping us to see those things our conscious mind is reluctant to recognize. God speaks to us offering wisdom and guidance even while we are still asleep.

We have a lot to learn from Solomon. Someone might have said to this young king, "be careful what you wish for." He made the right choice in humbly asking for a discerning heart as he began his rule. However, somewhere along the way, he did not honor this gift that had been given to him. We learn that possessing a discerning heart and living from the fruits of this gift are two very different things. Perhaps he did not understand, as we do not always understand, that wisdom is not a gift but a task. With wisdom comes a profound responsibility to live differently, to allow this gift to shape our lives. It is difficult to live wisely, to always do the things that God expects of us. God does not expect us to be perfect. It is God's desire, however, that we live in partnership with God, seeking God's wisdom and guidance in all that we do. It is also God's desire that we accept the gift of forgiveness, freely shared from a graciously forgiving God.

I think of how difficult it is to raise children. It can become a constant battle of establishing rules and then watching our children test the boundaries of those rules. When they are very young the rules keep them safe. Do not run out into traffic. Do not

touch a hot stove. Our response to rule breaking is swift and decisive under these circumstances. As they get older, maintaining our hold on the rules becomes more challenging. It is within our human nature to want to test the boundaries of such things. So what will really happen if I break this rule my parents have set for me, our children may wonder? If I break curfew I may not be in physical danger, but have I put myself in danger in other ways? When my father meets me at the door it may become clearer what that danger may be. In that moment we can see nothing good from the two week grounding we have just received. We can not understand that our parents have not established rules just to make our lives miserable. They are wiser than we, having gone down this road before us, and understand the benefits of being safely home at a reasonable hour. They do this out of profound love for us.

This is the same point Paul is making to the early church. He shares with them his advice, his wisdom, as they seek to create life giving and life affirming community with each other. Do these things and you will reap the benefits, he advises them. Do not do this simply because I say so, but because this is the way God calls us to live. He prays that they will benefit from his wisdom, but understands they must live into this wisdom to have it become their own. The same may be true between parents and children. Do these things, not because I want you to, but because behaving this way is what will be pleasing to God.

It is a shame when we ignore wisdom. It is a shame when we repeat painful mistakes because we are too arrogant or afraid to change. It is a shame when we get stuck in our own pride and do not accept the new way wisdom would have us go. When we ignore wisdom we are bound to repeat the mistakes of our past. If we do not face our past openly and lovingly, trusting in the healing power of forgiveness, then it will continue to have a grip on our future. We are on a wisdom quest. It is a daily journey of self reflection and giving thanks. Wisdom invites us to be attentive to the Holy Spirit and open to God leading us in ways that are good and just and life giving. We can welcome wisdom or we can dismiss her.

We become spiritually prepared to face the future as we let go of the past. Until then, the wisdom we receive is just talk, just fancy words that mean little if they can not take root in our lives. My daughter keeps a journal in which she records quotes that speak to her heart. For now much of what she collects are just words that other wise people have spoken. They will become true wisdom for her when they bear fruit in her life, when others can see how those words make a difference in the way she lives her life. That is when wisdom makes a difference for all of us; when it moves from something meaningful to ponder to the source of our living. She is on a wisdom quest. I pray she and all of us may find faithful and humble companions for the journey. I know that is how it has been for me. May it be so! Amen

Source: Joan Chittister, "Wisdom: A Gift or a Task?" sermon from November 23, 1996