

Sermon 8 17 & 18 18 Wisdom

Oh to be wise! “Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” I’m pretty sure that’s not true – just someone’s wishful thinking. I know a lot of people who get up very early and they don’t seem to be any wiser than anybody else. I say, if you can, go for the extra sleep!

Or, for those of us who are awaiting wisdom as we age, Oscar Wilde has these words, “With age comes wisdom, but sometimes age comes alone.”

Wisdom. Ironically, it’s usually something we end up wishing for in *hindsight*. “I wish I knew then what I know now,” or “Why didn’t I *think!*” Wisdom. What a big full word. It means so much. Consider the irony – Solomon had the wisdom to ask God for wisdom. Maybe he was wise all along?!

Wisdom. “The understanding to discern what is right,” that’s according to God in First Kings. Do you need to be brilliant, a brainiac, to be wise? I don’t think so. Wisdom isn’t about being smart. It seems to me that wisdom is about being understanding, observant, being good at listening, at discerning. It’s about thinking for ourselves with God’s help.

Because Solomon was wise enough to ask for wisdom, God gave him all the things he didn’t ask for – riches and honor, the success of his country against all encroachers, and a long life.

What would we ask for if God offered us anything we wanted? Money? Prestige? Wisdom is a pretty smart request. Because it can lead to everything else, as it did for Solomon. “The understanding to discern what is right.” Wisdom.

Our psalm for today, Psalm 111, verse 10 says “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This doesn’t mean “fear” as in fear of ghosts or wild animals. The word “fear” is often used differently in the Bible. Here “fear” means *awe*. To be in awe of something means something considerably different than to be afraid of it. God doesn’t want us to be afraid of him (or her!) Awe is a feeling of reverent respect mixed with wonder. So it’s actually “Awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” That could involve some fear, but not when we think of our loving God. God is awesome! Perhaps with awe our pride won’t get in the way of our respect for God. That would be wise.

We have a book in the Apochrypha portion of our Bible titled The Wisdom of

Solomon. First, what is the Apochrypha? We have the Old Testament and the New Testament and we have some other books that we believe are important, but not everybody believes they're important enough to be included in the Bible, so they're grouped together in a section called the Apochrypha or "hidden" because their value was previously hidden. The Wisdom of Solomon is a collection of wise sayings attributed to him. The first verse is "Love righteousness, you rulers of the earth, think of the Lord with uprightness, and seek him with sincerity of heart." The book of Wisdom is beautifully written.

Well, this is all great, but what are we supposed to do with it? We may want to live wisely (I hope we do!), but how do we know what's wise?

All three of our readings seem to stress staying close to God -- always keeping in relationship with God through worship and prayer, song and celebration. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul encouraged them to stay in relationship with God "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." How do we do that? We pray. We ask God for insight and we trust that God will give us that insight. Trusting God strengthens our relationship.

Charles Dickens once wrote that "There is a wisdom of the head, and... there is a wisdom of the heart." How true! There are things we know in our heads with evidence and logic, but there are also things we know in our hearts, that are more a matter of God-given insight – the insight of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we need to trust in the answer we have prayed for.

And if that answer has come to us through our relationship with God, what better advisor could we have?

You see, as he got older, Solomon fell out of relationship with God. Solomon found himself under the influence of all of his wives and their diplomatic retinues (supposedly 700 wives!). These were mainly arranged marriages for diplomatic reasons, but it was still a situation that could NOT have gone well. Solomon found himself honoring their gods and building temples for them. He lost his focus, his center. His kingdom was tearing apart. God told him that he would not punish him in his lifetime. But when he died, the ten northern tribes split from the south and became the kingdom of Israel, ruled by Jeroboam and the remaining two tribes of the south became the kingdom of Judah ruled by Solomon's

son, Rehoboam. Solomon fell out of touch with God.

Worship helps us to keep in touch. God is always near, but we're not always aware of God. If we maintain our awareness of God, we maintain that sense of wonder, of awe in God's presence. An old Greek proverb says that "Wonder is the beginning of wisdom."

Wisdom is not only for exalted times. Wisdom is also for everyday. If we maintain our closeness to God we can experience God's gift of wisdom every day, all the time. (Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that "Common sense is genius dressed in its working clothes.") You may be getting wisdom from your car mechanic, or your nextdoor neighbor, over the back fence. Or your kids! There are things we have heard that come back to us later, and the wisdom shines even brighter with the passage of time once we've had the chance to digest those things.

I can just imagine the Ephesians and the Romans and the Philippians, all of those new little Christian communities Paul wrote to... They didn't just read his letters and throw them out. No! Those letters were probably read aloud to the whole congregation as soon as they were received. Then they were kept, saved like treasure. Reading and writing was done by only a very few, so they had to be read aloud. And the members probably took them out and read them again periodically. And different instructions and ideas probably rang true in different ways, just like different readings of the Bible at different times. That is the gift of the written word. You can always read it again! Think how the words inspired them, as they inspire us. These are words that speak to us and tell us how to cultivate joy in our hearts and how to be open to the wisdom of God.

And then, not only the repeated recitation of the words, but also the repetition of actions... That, as much as anything, is what receiving the Eucharist, again and again does for us. It may seem repetitive, but each time we receive we get something, something new out of it. We may not even be aware of it at the time – it might occur to us sometime later, but it happens.

Back when I was acting people often asked me, "How do you remember all those lines?" The answer is, you don't! Not really. You remember the actions you are doing at the same time and the muscle memory helps you remember what to say. And most important, you have, underneath it all, the thought of what it means, what does what you are saying mean?

It's not about what we say – it's about why we say it. That is why I will never rattle through the Eucharistic Prayer. Those words mean something – possible something different every time.

That is why we pray, and that is why we repeat our prayers.

And that is why God prays that after all, we listen.