

The Gift of Wisdom

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1 Kings 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-20

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.”
—Ephesians 5:15

A great American died last Tuesday, and we know she was great by how unifying her death was.

In these divided times, Dolly Parton was admired, respected, and loved by millions of people from vastly diverse backgrounds. Her immense talent, of course, formed the foundation of her fan base, but her humanitarianism, philanthropy, and honoring of the lives of ordinary Americans landed her in the hearts of many of us. Her Imagination Library alone has given away more than 300 million books to children across five countries. For a person of the Book like me, that fact alone makes her one of my heroes.

And she is one of the few country singers who’s found her way regularly into my sermons.

My favorite Dollyism is her statement: “It takes a lot of money to look this cheap.”

It reveals not only a sharp wit and an easy self-deprecating humor, but something else: **perspective**. Dolly Parton knew who she was, knew how other people saw her, and knew not to take herself too seriously. That kind of perspective is one of the marks of wisdom.

Ideas, facts, information, knowledge, and wisdom—all related, all different, and all essential to human thought, discourse, the good life, and the good life together.

Wisdom takes up a lot of the Bible’s bandwidth. Whole books of the Bible—Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes—are devoted to it, and two books in the Apocrypha—the Wisdom of Solomon and the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach—include wisdom in their titles.

So the authors of our Bible considered wisdom important.

Solomon prayed for it. Paul urged the Ephesians to cultivate it, and the book of Wisdom says that “the multitude of the wise is the welfare of the world” (Wisd. 6:24a).

So wisdom is a big deal, which is probably the reason so many commencement speakers feel obliged to offer up some of it to people on the cusp of adulthood, when they can go out into the world and do some real good or some real damage.

Wisdom is one of God’s gifts to us, and like all of God’s gifts, it merits some serious attention and respect, so we’re going to give it some this morning.

Let’s start with Solomon, famed for his wisdom and in today’s first reading functioning at his best.

At the start of his reign, Solomon asked God for just one thing: wisdom. And just after this morning’s reading comes the proof that God does answer prayer, the story of Solomon’s celebrated decision concerning two women arguing over a child. Solomon proposes that the baby be cut in half and each woman receive a piece.

One woman agrees.

The other says no—give the whole child to her.

And Solomon knows immediately who the real mother is.

Understanding that basic fact of human nature is wisdom. Solomon prayed for wisdom, received it, and knew how to use it.

But he did not use it consistently.

And that was the tragedy of Solomon’s reign and, ultimately, of Israel’s golden age.

Solomon was wise enough to govern, negotiate, build, and prosper. He was wise enough to make Israel a significant power in the ancient Near East, at least for a moment.

But he was not wise enough to recognize the difference between greatness and faithfulness.

God answered Solomon’s prayer not only with wisdom but also with those material blessings that Solomon had not asked for. And that should have been more than enough.

But enough is rarely enough, and even Solomon’s wisdom could not protect him from that temptation.

Solomon’s court went from impressive to extravagant. His building projects depended on forced labor. His appetite for wealth and power grew. His political alliances brought with them religious compromises. His many marriages were not simply matters of romance but instruments of political power.

Solomon's political astuteness made him a player on the region's stage, and he kept an open mind when it came to his options – so open he forgot whose king he was and which king he served.

Solomon had wisdom, but wisdom was not enough.

He needed the wisdom to use his wisdom wisely.

That is one of the Bible's great ironies.

A person can be intelligent and still be foolish.

A nation can be powerful and still be unwise.

And a church can be successful and still lose its way. . . .

Solomon received the gift of wisdom, but he did not always recognize what wisdom was for.

He wanted Israel to be like the nations around it—to possess their power, their wealth, their influence, their security, and worst of all, their way of doing things.

But Israel had not been called to be like the nations.

Israel had been called to be different.

It had been called to be holy, set apart, and a blessing to the world.

That distinctiveness requires a certain resistance to conformity, because conformity can be a wisdom killer.

And that brings us to Paul.

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.”

Paul is not talking about intelligence. He is not telling the Ephesians to become better educated or more sophisticated. He is talking about the wisdom to recognize what kind of life is worth living – a life set apart by God for God.

“Be careful how you live.”

Pay attention.

Look around.

Discern what is happening.

Do not absorb the assumptions or the assertions of the culture around you.

Do not confuse what is popular with what is true.

Do not confuse what is profitable with what is good.

And do not confuse what is powerful with what is right.

We carry in our pockets access to more information than any human generation in history. We can find an answer to almost any factual question in seconds.

But the abundance of information can sometimes make wisdom harder.

We can know what happened five minutes ago on the other side of the world and still have no idea what to do about the person sitting next to us.

Knowledge tells us what is happening.

Wisdom asks what it means.

Knowledge tells us what we can do.

Wisdom asks what we should do.

Knowledge gives us information.

Wisdom gives us insight.

That's what Solomon had when each woman claimed to be the mother of the living child.

And biblical wisdom is more than good judgment. It is the capacity to see our lives in relation to that ultimate reality we call God.

Wisdom is not simply knowing what **works**. It is knowing what **matters**.

That is why Paul can say, "Be careful how you live."

Christian wisdom begins with the recognition that our lives are not finally about us.

There is a larger horizon.

There is a larger story.

There is a God whose purposes are larger than our preferences, whose love is larger than our fears, and whose vision is larger than the immediate circumstances in which we find ourselves.

That's why Paul goes on to speak of gratitude, worship, and the Spirit—realities that are both mundane and transcendent, and both of which lay claim to us when we are fully alive.

"Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God."

It is easy to overlook the connection.

But perhaps Paul is telling us something important: wisdom is not simply a matter of thinking correctly. Wisdom is a way of inhabiting the world.

And gratitude is one of its marks.

Wise people know that they are not self-created, self-sufficient, or self-sustaining.

Wise people know that life is gift.

Wise people know that they stand within a story they did not write.

Wise people know that other people are not merely obstacles, competitors, consumers, voters, customers, enemies, or strangers, but fellow human beings made in the image of God.

Wise people know that not every battle is worth fighting, not every insult requires an answer, not every opportunity should be seized, not every desire should be satisfied, and not every cultural current should carry us along with it.

Wisdom often looks like knowing what to say yes to. But it also looks like knowing what to say no to.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor devotes a chapter to Sabbath entitled, “The Practice of Saying No.” Taylor describes Sabbath rest as a holy and necessary resistance to the relentless demands of productivity. And now AI threatens to make our machines even more firmly our masters.

That is why Paul tells us not to live as unwise people.

And so that leaves the church with a question.

Are we learning the wisdom of God, or are we merely absorbing the opinions of the world?

Are we becoming more faithful, or merely more entrenched?

Are we becoming people who can recognize what matters, or people who are increasingly distracted by everything that does not?

And are we living with our eyes fixed on a horizon larger than ourselves?

Those are not questions only for the world. They are questions for the church. They are questions for us.

And if we take those questions seriously, Christian wisdom eventually takes us somewhere the world does not expect us to go.

It takes us to the cross.

The cross and the empty tomb are, after all, the two sides of the great Christian paradox—that we find our lives by losing them in the service of God.

The world looks at the cross and empty tomb and sees failure, weakness, humiliation, foolishness, a fanciful tale.

The Christian tradition looks at the cross and empty tomb and sees the wisdom of God, the same wisdom the prophet Isaiah spoke of when he warned his contemporaries, “Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd by their own lights.”

The world says, “Save yourself.” The cross says, “Give yourself.”

The world says, “Protect your interests.” The cross says, “Love God and your neighbor.”

The world says, “Win!” The cross asks, “What kind of game are you playing and what kind of person are you becoming?”

The world says, “Conform.” The gospel says, “Be transformed.”

That is wisdom of a very different sort.

I spoke last week about the yoke Jesus offers us, symbolized for ministers by the stoles we wear. As we do our jobs for all of you, our visible bosses, these lengths of cloth draped over our shoulders remind us of our invisible boss, the one to whom we ultimately answer in this world and in the world to come.

And so I want to close today by offering you one small way in which I try, every day, to remember whose wisdom I crave and whose wisdom I try to embody.

This is my study Bible. I use it every day. On the inside cover of my Bible I have taped a little story; it’s been attributed to Hugh Latimer.

Latimer was an English bishop who was burned at the stake in 1555 for refusing to renounce his Protestant understanding of the gospel. At the height of his career, he had enjoyed the favor of the king, the admiration of his peers, and the respect of those who heard him preach.

A man in his position needed wisdom—and a great deal of it—not to lose sight of the real task to which he had been called as one of God’s ministers.

One day, Latimer was summoned to preach before Henry VIII. As he walked toward the royal chapel, he heard a voice inside him say:

“Latimer, Latimer! Take heed to what you say, for you are to preach this day before the King of England.”

And then, just as quickly, another voice said:

“Latimer, Latimer! Take heed to what you say, for you are this day to preach before the King of Kings.”

That is wisdom.

- Not simply knowing what to say but knowing **before whom we stand**.
- Not simply knowing what is **currently** true but knowing **what is ultimately true**.

- Not simply knowing what the world expects of us but knowing **whose expectations finally matter**.

That is wisdom, friends, and it is a gift.

So let us pray for that gift. And, having received it, let us pray for one thing more: the wisdom to use wisdom wisely—for the sake of God, for the sake of our neighbors, and for the sake of the world God loves.

We continue our worship by singing hymn number 273, “He Is King of Kings.”