

13th Pentecost
August 19, 2018
Church of the Advent

Wisdom

What comes to mind when you hear the word, *wisdom*? Perhaps a particular person—a grandparent or favorite person in your life who always seemed to say or do the right thing at the right time, a teacher or mentor who was able to point the way to a road ahead that would lead towards a moral high ground or place where your best gifts would be tested? Defined by Webster’s Dictionary, wisdom is the quality of *having experience, knowledge and good judgement*, or *soundness of action* based on those same qualities, or a body of knowledge particular to a place or time that can be applied with sound common sense when called for. We have in our culture a collection of fictional characters as practitioners and teachers of wisdom:

- Winnie the Pooh (*You’re braver than you believe and stronger and smarter than you think.*),
- Yoda (*No! Try not! Do or do not; there is no try.*)
- Mary Poppins (*A spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down.*)
- Forrest Gump (*Stupid is as stupid does. And of course: Life is a box of chocolates, Forrest; you never know what you’re gonna get*)
- Charlie Brown (*In the book of life, the answers aren’t in the back.*)

What they have in common is the perspective that comes from being outside the mainstream, surviving challenges, and being gifted with the compassion to pass on their learning to others. But how did they get there? Are they smarter, or stubbornner than the rest of the world? What inner voice did they listen to? And what sets them apart from others who never seem to hear that voice—continuing to do the same things over and over expecting different results, or making decisions that are not in anyone’s best interests?

Our readings this morning seem to be offering us lessons on wisdom, a significant challenge, since—especially in our time—wisdom, much less its partner truth,

seems to rest in the eye of the beholder. One of those slippery little devils, wisdom is something we think we know when we encounter it—like in cultural icons—yet still we have a hard time claiming it for ourselves. We believe we *want and need* wisdom—or at least should *desire* it—yet we don't always know how to seek and find it.

The quest for wisdom is as old as the written word, mentioned over 200 times in the Old Testament alone. Several scriptures are actually called Wisdom literature: *Job, the Psalms, Ecclesiasticus, Proverbs, and Song of Songs*—the last two thought to be authored by the wise King Solomon. There is an extra-biblical text tucked into the the Apocrypha of Anglican scriptures called the *Book of Wisdom* that has also been attributed to Solomon, though biblical scholars think it was written long after his time, and influenced by Greek philosophers who followed a tradition which personified wisdom as a woman called Sophia. Here is how the Book of Wisdom describes her:



Wisdom is radiant and unfading, and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her. She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found sitting at the gate. To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding, and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care, because she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to them in their paths, and meets them in every thought. (*Book of Wisdom 6:12-16*)

Radiant and unfading, easily discerned, and in a later chapter described as a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all.

(*Book of Wisdom 7:22-27*)

Representing Wisdom itself, the mythical Sophia had a load to carry through the ages, as if she could bridge the gap between humanity and divinity—as if we could too, if only we could emulate her perfection.

In our second reading today, the author of the letter to the Ephesians appeals to ancient ideals of wisdom in the new context of the Church founded to follow Jesus Christ. Drawing on the psalmist's words that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* that we sang this morning (*Ps 11:10*), the letter claims that the source of true wisdom is found in the mystery of salvation through the work of Jesus Christ, first revealed to the Apostles, but meant to be available to all—Jews and Gentiles alike. This mystery is meant for the whole Church as the body of Christ, who *by the power at work within can accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.* (3:20) The appeal to the Church in Ephesus was to come together, to love one another, and to open themselves up to the wisdom as a gift from God, though the appeal came with a warning label:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. (*Ephesians 5:15-17*)

There is much description preceding and following this passage of what should be considered foolishness to Christians in Ephesus—much of it about drunkenness and debauchery and wives disobeying husbands—God forbid. Reducing wisdom to a set of rules in a particular time makes it just as hard to wrap our heads around and to live into as defining it by descriptions of the impossible virtue of Holy Sophia.

So, with all these lessons through the ages at our disposal, and with all the wisdom of our own iconic cultural sages brought to us in literature, poetry, film and art, how do we find and practice wisdom? How do we become wise in the ways of God's will in our lives? It can't just be the reward for hard knocks, or the whole world would be full of wise people exercising good judgment and doing sound and virtuous things to build up the body of Christ, not to mention saving the planet and securing lasting peace in the

world. Even 2000 years ago, Paul understood that *the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God. (1 Corinth 3:19)* The wisdom of the world offers lessons only about those things which would give us advantage, build up our earthly treasures, maintain our position and enhance our privilege at the expense of others.

The wisdom of God is different. It shines light on our purpose and calling to love, humility, generosity, and compassion. It is a gift of the Spirit, and like all gifts, we need to open it when it is offered to us. To do this first we must first see that it does not come all at once like a waterfall, or packaged cleverly like a Facebook meme. Opening the gift of God's wisdom is a process—one that requires our participation in practices of worship, blessing, prayer, learning, sharing and participating in Christian community. Sometimes it requires repentance—a turning around—when we have taken a wrong turn or listened to the wrong voices. It requires us to eat the living bread come down from heaven for the life of the world. It requires a long view, where we are in this not just for today—or for wisdom to be discerned about our most recent human folly—but for all eternity.

God's wisdom does not render us perfect, like Sophia, or practitioners of judgement upon others who are not acting wisely. Nor does it make us as famous as Solomon, who ironically in spite of God's pleasure in his good intentions and in spite of being blessed with wisdom and riches, later fell into the spell of the wisdom of the world, casting God's gift into his gold-lined closet. God's wisdom cracks us open—to see the world as God sees it, and to see what other gifts we have been given to do the Lord's will. It makes us run to our God as the only possible sustenance—hungry for the living bread—the only salvation in a world whose days can be evil. And God's wisdom calls us to be *stronger and smarter than we thought we were*, and to do more for God's world than we thought we could, because *there is no try, and the answers in the book of life are not in the back*. AMEN