

Practicing Wisdom
1 Kings 2:10 – 12, 3:3 – 14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15 – 20
Sunday, August 19, 2018

When I was in seminary, I worked in the library. I was down in the basement, where we received donations. If a pastor retired or died and donated their books to the seminary, we would receive them and process them, decide which ones to keep and which ones to get rid of. So I was down in this room every day surrounded by thousands of books on theology and biblical studies and ministry, with notes written in them by pastors who had been in ministry for 50 years.

I worked down there with a woman named Aisha. It was just me and her, day after day, processing these books. We would talk for hours about scripture, theology, what we had learned in class that day, life, politics, everything. We had some really deep, amazing conversations and got to know each other really well. But the one conversation that sticks out in my mind was this one day when, out of nowhere, she asked me, “Patrick, what is *wisdom*?” I sat there thinking about it for a while, but all I could say was, “Aisha, I don’t know how to answer that.” It was one of those things where you know it when you see it, but I couldn’t *define* it. I mean, I was 23 years old, what did I know about *wisdom*?

The dictionary defines *wisdom* as “the accumulation of scholarly knowledge or learning about what is true or right.” But is that all wisdom is – accumulating knowledge and information? Because I’ve met people who didn’t graduate from high school, but you sit and talk with them, and there is *wisdom* there. And I’ve met PhDs who are the exact *opposite*. So what does it mean to have *wisdom*?

If I asked you who the wisest person in the history of the world was – not the *smartest* but the *wisest* – a lot of people would say King Solomon. He is someone that we associate with wisdom.

The book of Proverbs is attributed to him, this great collection of wisdom. There is the famous story right after what we read this morning where two women come to him, and one of them says, “This baby is *mine!* She stole it from me,” and the other woman says, “No, the baby is *mine!*” Solomon says, “Bring me a sword! I will cut the baby in two and give each of you a half.” One of the women cries out to the king, “No, she can have it! Just let the baby live!” And Solomon says, “This woman’s love proves her to be the true mother.” That story is always held up as an example of Solomon’s wisdom. It says a little later, “God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else [and] people came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon.”

But, the very first thing we read about Solomon here is that “Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statues of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.” Worshipping at “the high places,” these hilltop shrines, was one of the most egregious religious sins in Judaism. It was the equivalent of worshipping idols. Now, the text tries to justify Solomon’s actions by saying that this was okay since no temple had been built for the Lord yet. But the book of Deuteronomy clearly forbids worship at the high places, and God commands the people of Israel to destroy them when they first come into the promised land.

Solomon also marries a foreign woman who was not Jewish, also a big no-no forbidden by Jewish law. In addition to *that* wife, scripture tells us that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. It says, “He loved many foreign women...from the nations concerning which the Lord said, ‘You shall not enter into marriage with them...for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods.’” And sure enough, it says, “His wives turned away his heart...Solomon

did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not completely follow the Lord, as his father David had done.” Even there, scripture tries to justify Solomon by placing the blame on his wives. “His *wives* turned away his heart....” But if you’re the wisest man in the world, surely you bear responsibility for your own actions.

In my Bible there are headings up at the top of each page, so that you can get a quick glimpse of what is happening on that page. And if you flip through Solomon’s story in 1 Kings, you see things like, “Solomon uses forced labor,” “Solomon’s errors,” and “The dark side of Solomon’s reign.” One commentary that I was reading on this story said that Solomon was known “for the harshness of his rule and for his disregard for the traditions of Israel and the well-being of the people.”¹ He was “tyrannical to the point of grinding under the basic rights of Israel’s people”² and “so oppresses his people that many of them rebel immediately following his death.”³ “So foolish was Solomon’s rule that the first recorded political event after his death was the secession of the northern tribes.”⁴ Half the kingdom just breaks away from Israel.

So I think we have to ask again, “What does it mean to have wisdom?” Solomon (widely reputed to be the wisest man in history) prays to God, asking for wisdom to lead the people in the way of the Lord, and God *grants* his prayer, giving him wisdom, but his life does not always *show it*.

It helps to understand exactly what Solomon is *asking* God for in this prayer. Solomon asks God for “an understanding mind to govern your people.” Some translations say, “an understanding

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, James Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*. Pg. 468.

² Ibid. Pg. 467.

³ Ibid. Pg. 465.

⁴ Ibid. Pg. 467.

heart.” That word that gets translated as “heart” or “mind” is the Hebrew word *leb*, and it’s not just talking about his actual heart or brain. It’s referring more to the seat of one’s being; what makes you *you*. And that word *understanding* doesn’t just have to do with *knowledge*. It’s the Hebrew word *shama*. This is one of the most critically important words in all of Hebrew scripture. It’s a word that God uses over and over again when talking to the people of Israel. God says, “*Shema Israel*,” and it gets translated as, “Hear, Israel....” But it doesn’t just mean *hear*. And it doesn’t just mean *understanding*. It means *hear* and *obey*. It’s to *hear* something and *do* it. It’s about being *obedient*. Solomon is saying to God, “Make me the kind of person who *hears* and *does* your will; who is obedient to you in leading the people.”

If you look at the end of Psalm 111 that we used as our Call to Worship today, it says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, *and those who practice it* have a good understanding.” Those who *practice* it. Wisdom is not just the accumulation of knowledge; learning more and more. It is about what we *do* with what we *know*; how we *use* and *practice* what we have learned. It is about *knowing* what is good and right, and *doing* it. If I had to answer Aisha’s question today, that’s what I would say.

But there’s one more thing. Solomon asks for an understanding mind “able to discern between good and evil.” That phrase, “discern between good and evil” should make us think of something *else* in Hebrew scripture. It takes us back to the Garden of Eden, where God says to Adam and Eve, “You may eat freely of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” What’s the tree that they eat of that results in their fall and expulsion from the garden? The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God says, “See, they have become like us, knowing good and evil.”

The sin of Adam and Eve is not just disobedience. It is also that they take for themselves the ability to determine what is good and what is evil. They think *they* can understand that as well as *God* can. And so many of our problems today stem from the fact that *we* think we know the difference, too. We think *we* can determine that for ourselves. But so often we label something as *good* or *evil* based on *our* understanding or self-interest or cultural norms (what the *world* tells us is good or evil) *rather* than basing it on God's wisdom as given by God's Spirit. Are we truly discerning the will of God?

Paul says to the Ephesians, "Be careful then how you live, not as *unwise* people but as *wise*...do not be *foolish*, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Paul is setting up these contrasts here. He is saying, "Don't be *unwise*, but *wise*. Don't be *foolish*, but *understand*. Don't get drunk with *wine*, but be filled with God's *Spirit*." A lot of times we hear that as a moral prohibition of alcohol, but Paul is actually referring to something specific here. Some religious traditions at that time thought that alcohol helped bring the believer into an ecstatic experience. That if you drank enough alcohol you could have some sort of experience of the divine or a revelation of wisdom. So Paul is saying here, "Don't get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit." Only *God's Spirit* produces real ecstasy and wisdom.

Think back to the story of Pentecost. The disciples were all together in one place, when they started speaking in tongues, and all the people there heard them and understood. But some people sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." Because that's how they understood that to work. But Peter stands up and says, "No, we're not filled with *wine*. We're filled with God's Spirit."

This is what Paul is picking up on. True wisdom, understanding, insight, knowledge of good and evil, comes only from God. And it stands in *contrast* to the wisdom and understanding that is practiced by the dominant culture. The dominant culture views God's wisdom as *foolishness*. Love your enemies? Forgive those who hurt you? Give what you have to those who are in need? The last shall be first? The wisdom of the *world* is that peace comes through *strength*, and those who have the *most* are the *strongest*. Do you see our blurred understandings of good and evil as practiced daily in our culture? Paul is saying, "You want to be wise? You want to understand good and evil? Don't look to the world around you. Look to God."

Solomon asked God for wisdom, but his actions were often a reflection of the world around him. As followers of Christ, we are called to wise living as guided by the Spirit of God, often standing in *contrast* to the world around us. How do we do that? How do we obtain that kind of wisdom?

There is one more scripture reading that we *didn't* read this morning. When I was looking at the lectionary – the calendar of prescribed scripture readings for today – there were four or five readings that I was like, "These all work together. How do I choose between them?! Do we just have four scripture readings?" So we used one as the Call to Worship, we read two, and now I want to share the last one with you.

It's from chapter 6 in John's gospel, where Jesus is talking about himself as "the living bread that came down from heaven." He says over and over again, "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have *life*. They will abide in me, and in will abide in them." The Jewish religious leaders around him say, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" It's like in the early church, people thought Christians were *cannibals* because they heard them talking about eating Christ's body and drinking his blood. (The wisdom of God looks like foolishness to the world.)

But Jesus says, “Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.” We hear that and think of communion. And that’s part of it. But Jesus is talking about so much *more* here. He is saying, “Those who *partake* in me will *live* in me, and I will live in them.” We are guided by the Spirit of God into wisdom by partaking in Christ, abiding with Christ, dwelling with Christ, through communion, but also through prayer and reading scripture and service to the poor and practicing forgiveness. The more we practice these things, the more we abide with Christ and Christ abides with us and we begin to understand what God *wants* and what God *doesn’t* want for *us* and for this *world*. If we want wisdom, we have to look to its source.

Solomon sought wisdom. Sometimes he “got it” and sometimes he didn’t. As Christians, we are called to wise living – discerning between good and evil, as guided by God’s Spirit – and that is only possible for us when we partake in Christ in such a way that we abide with him and he abides with us.