

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza

September 16, 2018

Proper 19; Proverbs 1:20-33

The other day, I read this quote¹: “The situation today is: Lots of knowledge, but little understanding; lots of means, but little meaning; lots of know-how, but little know-why; lots of sight, but little insight.” The author seems to be telling us that what is lacking is *not* smarts or knowledge or wherewithal, but wisdom.

Wisdom is a complicated word isn't it? Wisdom is not merely about being educated and having smart ideas, but also includes a deeper understanding of these ideas; how they came about, what may result from them, and how they might interrelate with each other. Wisdom is more than the recognition of what needs to be done in the world, but also encompasses the ability to look deeply within ourselves to take into account our own motivations in discerning the right course of action.

In the Hebrew scriptures, “wisdom” is understood to be something that is God-given. Throughout the Old Testament, there are many references to the wisdom of the Lord. Moses, Joshua, David, and especially Solomon, all possessed this wisdom. It was given to them because they were faithful in their relationship with God and followed God’s commandments (at least much of the time). And in the New Testament, it is Jesus who most fully embodied the wisdom of God – who is Wisdom incarnate.

In the Book of Proverbs, Holy Wisdom is metaphorically personified as a woman and she is one of God’s first creations. “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,” she says in the eighth chapter. She was there when God made the heaven, the sea, the earth. Wisdom says, “I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,” (Proverbs 8:30) as if her presence and joy had been essential for God’s good work of creation and that by creating Wisdom first, the rest of God’s creatures thereafter have been infused with her very essence.

But in our lesson from this morning, Wisdom speaks more like a prophet and we hear Wisdom’s lament of God’s people and her insistent call to listen. Once again, we, the hard-hearted, have turned a deaf ear to the holy wisdom calling to us from within our hearts and in the midst of our busy lives. In our lesson today, we hear these despairing words, “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?’” (Proverbs 1:20-22)

Many believe that Wisdom as presented in Proverbs represents the ever searching, ever calling, ever challenging Spirit of God. In our lesson this morning, the holy wisdom of God is imploring God’s beloved creatures to open our ears and listen; open our minds and receive new understanding; open our hearts and be transformed. Wisdom, in our scriptures, is something we receive, not something we achieve.

A couple of weeks ago, we heard a perfect example of this from the first Book of Kings. In that lesson, we read of an exchange between King Solomon and God in which the much-praised wisdom of Solomon was conferred by God. King Solomon, who is described as one who “loved the LORD” and followed God’s statutes, went to Gibeon to worship the Lord at the altar there. While there, God came to him in a dream and asked him a simple but dangerously tempting question, “Ask what I should give you.” (1 Kings 3:5) Can you imagine being asked such a question by God? How many times have you been asked the genie-in-a-bottle question by

children, “if you could ask for anything, what would you ask for?” What answers have you given? A million dollars? To live forever? Undying love? A Tesla Model S? Or, maybe you felt more magnanimous that day and answered “world peace” or “an end to hunger.” These responses either tend to be selfish and all about immediate gratification, or so broad and vague to be almost meaningless. And I know... because I have asked for all these things.

But Solomon, he did something remarkable – something totally different. He managed to ask for something that was both concrete as well as in service to God and others. He asked not for personal gain or even some squishy utopian goal. Rather Solomon identified himself as a servant king, in service to God and God’s people. And he asked that God give him an “understanding mind,” ... so that he may govern God’s people and “discern between good and evil.” (1 Kings 3:9) Solomon asked for the ability and desire to listen for God’s will, and to enact this will for the sake of God’s people. Solomon asked for wisdom – and wisdom that is in harmony with the Wisdom of God.

God responds to this request with great joy, saying “since you have asked not for yourself great riches or long life, but have asked for what is in accord with My will, I will give to you a ‘wise and discerning’ mind.” God’s pleasure in the righteousness of Solomon’s request is clear. God seems to delight in giving not only what Solomon requests, but also giving the riches and honor that he doesn’t ask for.

Through this passage and our lesson this morning from Proverbs, we are shown that true wisdom, holy wisdom, is something we receive when we have an understanding mind that listens for and works in accord with God’s wisdom. And when I speak of an understanding mind, this means not merely our brain but also our heart, because it includes the qualities of compassion, perspective, discernment and understanding that is more than just reason or thinking. When our hearts and minds are attuned to the heart of God, our human wisdom may be attuned to the Wisdom of God... and becomes holy wisdom.

But what is it that prevents us from receiving this gift of an understanding mind? What gets in our way so that we close ourselves off to the grace that allows us to hear God’s will and have holy wisdom? ... In a word, I would say it is pride. Pride cuts us off from connection with God. Pride throws a veil over us so that we don’t see much beyond ourselves. Pride stoppers our ears and turns our thinking in on ourselves.

Some time back, I read a wonderful essayⁱⁱ in which the author writes about what he calls, “escaping the universe of pride.” In it, Paul Wadell writes this, “Pride is a subtle, sneaky vice, and it lured me into its world even though I had no idea that that was where I was living...” He goes on to say, “I continued along pride’s way unaware of how in the dark I really was. I could not see how sterile and suffocating the world of pride is. I could never admit that our greatest human need is not for admiration and praise, but to be known and loved and accepted by others, because that could never happen while I stayed safely turned in on myself. Contrary to what I thought, instead of building me up, pride was killing me because it cut me off from the love and goodness and mercy that bring us to life. Indeed, the greatest irony was that I thought I was prospering, but I was shut tight in a tomb, gladly refusing to be resurrected.”

Pride prevents us from opening ourselves to the wisdom and love of God, and isolates us in our own world. Pride cuts us off from the source of life, and turns us inward upon ourselves. When we live in the universe of pride, we pay attention to the voices in our own mind, rather than listening deeply to hear the mind of God. Pride isolates us from holy wisdom, and yet is so deceptive that we don’t even realize it. I think we all have had some experience of this. I know I have. I may think I am smart, wise in the ways of the world, and may be too knowledgeable for

my own good. But without grounding myself in God, without glimpses of God’s perspective, without an understanding mind, I do not have holy wisdom. There is no living bread to be found in the universe of pride, for what is required is *resurrection* – a radical turning away from self.

To embody holy wisdom, to be attuned to the heart of God, means, by its very nature that we cannot be turned in on ourselves. We receive holy wisdom when we live a life grounded in God; a life lived from within the Body of Christ. When we open outward from within the Body of Christ, rather than close in on ourselves, we break free from the universe of pride and are able to hear the heart of God.

The Church helps us to practice this way of living through the spiritual practices of prayer, scripture study, worship, contemplation, fellowship, and community. This is how we develop a listening heart – one that is open and receptive to the wisdom that flows from the heartbeat of God. This is how we may receive an understanding mind and holy wisdom. And as is always true with God’s grace, the Good News is that God is ever extending this invitation. All we must do is prepare ourselves to receive.

Amen

ⁱ Robert Short, minister and author

ⁱⁱ Paul J. Wadell, “Humbled: Escaping the Universe of Pride”. *The Christian Century*, July 19, 2012