

***A sermon preached on August 19, 2018 based upon Proverbs 9:5-6; Psalm 111:10; Ephesians 5:15 and 1Kings 3:5-12 entitled, “The Gift of Wisdom.”***

The lectionary readings for this morning revolve around the concept of “wisdom” -- a word that occurs 222 times in Old Testament.

In the book of Proverbs wisdom is personified as, interestingly, a woman who has been in the presence of God since before creation. She calls aloud on the streets in an attempt to capture the attention of people: Thus, here in Proverbs 9, we hear the voice of wisdom crying out:

***“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”***

In the 9<sup>th</sup> psalm we read,

***“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.”***

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians the apostle counsels us to

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

And finally we have a story from the book of First Kings that comes at the outset of the reign of King Solomon, the man most famously associated with “wisdom” and by tradition if not in fact associated with the “wisdom” books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

The story you are about to hear portrays Solomon in the very best of light. And yet the rest of the story describes the reign of Solomon as including a great deal of sinister darkness.

In the two chapters that immediately precede our passage a story is told that could come right out of a Godfather movie. With the death of his father King David Solomon systematically goes about orchestrating a bloodbath of hits on his enemies – in particular, on his half-brothers and their associates who had had aspirations to the position he now holds as King.

The back story of our passage also includes the fact that although Solomon’s father was considered the greatest of all Israel’s kings, Second Samuel includes in vivid detail the story of how Solomon’s parents got together – the sordid tale of how David lusted after Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of the King’s devoted generals while Uriah was out fighting the King’s battles. Bathsheba became pregnant by David and to cover her pregnancy the king had Uriah secretly murdered – a sin called out by the prophet Nathan.

So, now that you know something of -- as Paul Harvey used to put it -- “the rest of the story” hear now -- perhaps with a grain of salt -- the story recorded in the third chapter with the fifth verse.

And listen beyond the words for the Word of God.

***At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.”<sup>6</sup> And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.***

***<sup>7</sup>And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. <sup>8</sup>And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they***

*cannot be numbered or counted. <sup>9</sup>Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"*

*<sup>10</sup>It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. <sup>11</sup>God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, <sup>12</sup>I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.*

Thus ends the reading; may God bless our hearing of the Word.

So the passage we just heard reads a little like one of those short films they show at political conventions in which the candidate nominated to run for president is portrayed in the very best possible light as someone who from their earliest days wanted only what was best for the country, leaving out the invariably sordid details of ambition-driven deceptions and betrayals typically committed by political figures who rise to the highest heights of power.

Although Solomon describes himself as a mere child he had already engaged in some shockingly aggressive cruelty in an effort to consolidate his power. Solomon is remembered as the King who built the Lord's Temple in Jerusalem but the story that follows our reading includes his worship of other gods, including the god of wealth and his ongoing vanity and conspicuous consumption that lead to policies of forced labor and massive taxation that oppress the poor in service of his personal ambitions.

Nonetheless, we have this story of a dream Solomon has in which God visits him at the outset of his reign and although it probably involves an editorial re-write of history with an eye to cleaning up Solomon's legacy, the story also calls us to ponder the mystery of dreams and the deep place within us beyond our conscious thought processes from which truth sometimes arises.

Solomon's dream expresses a longing for the mystery we call "wisdom", and leads me to reflect upon what we mean when we speak of such.

Obviously, wisdom is distinct from knowledge. We all know that a person can be filled with encyclopedic knowledge and yet be a fool. They are foolish because of two things:

First, wisdom requires a humility that recognizes that what we don't know always far outweighs what we do know. The person who has acquired great amounts of knowledge is easily tempted towards a conceit that overlooks this fact. When he had this dream, Solomon was a grown man with the best education money could buy in those days but in the presence of God he recognizes he is but "*a little child... (who knows not) how to go out or come in.*"

*"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom"* says the psalm, which is to affirm that "*God is God and I am not.*" To arrogantly claim to have a breadth of knowledge that only God can possess is to set ourselves up for a great humbling. As another wisdom proverb puts it, "*Pride goeth before a fall.*"

There is a second reason why there are plenty of smart fools around which is that it is quite possible to know a whole bunch of stuff but lack the wisdom to distinguish between what truly matters and what doesn't. Jesus alluded to this truth when he told the parable of the farmer who has been blessed with good land and the brain power to bring forth abundant harvests allowing

him to reach a level of success in which his barns are filled with grain. He has the good fortune of having all his real material needs provided for.

*What shall I do now?* the man asked.

If he possessed wisdom, his reflections would have led him to ask, *now that I don't have to focus on survival, what should I focus my attention on?* He would have realized that the time had come to focus on making a positive difference in his community – to recognize all the poor, hungry folks who haven't been as fortunate and do what he can to help them.

But the man is a fool. He decides to press on with building bigger barns, much like Solomon ended up focusing his energies on multiplying his personal wealth. He's like the man who lives by the creed, *"the man with the most toys when he dies wins."*

*"Fool!"* says Jesus. *"This night you will die, and what good will the piles of money you hoarded be then?"*

So wisdom involves the capacity to distinguish between what truly matters and what doesn't and as both Jesus and the wisdom book of Ecclesiastes suggest wisdom is also related to taking seriously the fact that one day we will die. That our days here on earth don't go on forever -- that life is precious and not to be wasted on unworthy concerns. On their death beds, no one ever said, *"I wish I had been able to impress more people with how much money I made."*

Wisdom tends to come with time and experience, but not always. Some people over time get stuck in a rigidity of thought and a hardness of heart that is the very opposite of wisdom while some young people can possess a wisdom beyond their years. Such is the case of our own Erika Gripp who is studying in college to be an on site manager of construction projects. Following a summer internship, Erika posted the following which reflects remarkable wisdom:

*"I learned that success in the construction industry grows with connections, humility, and respect... I will never know as much about a specific trade as the tradesman does and will continue to learn something new every day. Respect goes hand in hand with humility because in order to gain the respect required as a manager, I need to first show respect towards the tradesmen for the work they are doing."*

Sarah and I heard this lecture at Chautauqua by a professor regarding the state of our higher education system. She pointed out that with the rate at which change takes place these days a college education that is focused strictly on obtaining knowledge will fail the student. Today's knowledge base will quickly be outdated, and then what?

Students need to develop qualities related to wisdom: They need to learn *how* to learn, how to adapt, how to distinguish between which data matters and which doesn't. She said focus needs to go towards developing the capacities that robots will never be able to replace -- things like empathy, an ability to work cooperatively with others, and the capacity to think creatively outside the box.

The wise sage Yogi Berra once said, *"When you come to the fork in the road, take it"* – the point being life perpetually confronts us with new experiences that require choices and wisdom involves the capacity to mindfully recognize the forks in the road and make the right choice. The choice made at the previous fork won't necessarily be the right at the next fork.

Another well known sage was getting at similar idea when he wrote in a song, *"You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em."* (Kenny Rogers.)

I'm also reminded of the serenity prayer: *“God grant me the serenity to accept that which I cannot change, the courage to change what which I can change, and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

It the capacity to discern between the times when the right thing to do is to tighten your belt buckle and stand up straight and claim the powers God has given you to handle the problems at hand and those in which you've reached your limits and need to ask for help. Some people get stuck in one choice and don't know when to make the other choice.

Sometimes the right path to take will be determined by the mind – by logical, rational thought and sometimes it will be determined by the heart – by the faculty known as intuition – a capacity more frequently associated with women. It's interesting, is it not, that wisdom in the Hebrew scriptures is personified as a woman?

As the story of Solomon's dream expressed, wisdom is ultimately a gift from God. It involves a capacity to step back and see the big picture, and it is God who gives us the grace see where once we were blind.

There is a story in Genesis about how Abraham and Sarah have embarked on this long journey into the unknown, trusting the promise of God will bless them -- that Sarah will give birth to a child who will not only bless them but be a blessing to the whole world. And as is always the case in life they encounter set backs. They are tempted to give up hope, to shut down both mind and heart.

So one night God takes Abraham out under the clear night sky full of sparkling stars and tells him to count the stars if you can, for his descendants will be more numerous than the stars.

Wisdom trusts that there are lessons to be learned at every setback, that despair is a form a pride that assumes to know what the future will hold.

I once heard a story in which both the son and the husband of a certain woman ended up one night in the same hospital. The son had been in a serious car accident and left badly injured. Upon receiving word of the son's accident the husband suffered a heart attack. In the middle of the night their pastor found the woman in the darkened hallway going between the rooms of her beloved. To the pastor's surprise though shaken the woman seemed remarkably calm. *“I'm not going to come to any judgments about what this all means? Who knows what God will bring forth from this?”*

God had given her the wisdom to realize that although life can seem utterly bleak in the present moment in the larger picture God often works wonders of grace through our most difficult of experiences. Wisdom led her to trust that if she could simply put one foot in front of another she would begin to see the stars shining – the blessings brought through the darkest of hours.