

A Heart Full of Wisdom

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 29, 2019
Text: Proverbs 2:1-15

So, let's begin with a simple question this morning. How would you define "wisdom?" (*pause for responses*) Can you think of people from history whom you would consider to possess wisdom, perhaps even personify it? (*pause for responses*) Okay, maybe this one will be a bit tougher, but maybe not. Here goes. Who in your life would you name as someone who possesses wisdom? (*pause for responses*) What makes this person wise? (*pause for responses*)

That bastion of online knowledge known as *Wikipedia* defines wisdom as "*the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight.*" So far, so good. Thinking, taking into account knowledge, our experience and the understanding that comes with it must be the underpinnings of wisdom, along with common sense and insight. Yep, that sounds right. But, *Wikipedia* continues to add a little more clarification of the context within which wisdom operates. It says: "*Wisdom is associated with attributes such as unbiased judgment, compassion, experiential self-knowledge, self-transcendence, non-attachment and virtues such as ethics and benevolence.*" So, this definition of

wisdom articulates some pre-requisites for wisdom before it can actually be called wisdom. It must be unbiased – not taking sides when there are variety of opinions on something to be taken into account. It must embody compassion, so a person cannot exhibit wisdom and be mean or unkind. It must rely on one's own experience, meaning you can't make claims to wisdom in areas you have never personally experienced. But, the one claiming wisdom must also be capable of self-transcendence and non-attachment, meaning that even that personal experience must be recognized as limited in scope and therefore not the final determinant in a situation where wisdom is being sought. Finally, wisdom must be ethical and benevolent. In other words, wisdom must be righteous and kind when applied to people and situations.

Wow. That's a lot. No wonder wisdom has been such a focal point of human experience for as long as there have been humans on earth. The search for wisdom, the recognition of the importance of wisdom in the human experience, can be seen in all the many ancient civilizations even though the way they thought about it, imagined its existence and celebrated its acquisition differed greatly. Wisdom, and the search for it, is quintessential to what it means to be human. So, we should not be at all surprised to realize its many faceted presence in the Bible, in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. King Solomon, King

David's son and the builder of the original magnificent temple in Jerusalem, is probably the biblical character most associated with wisdom. There is Solomon's famous prayer for wisdom at the moment he becomes king of Israel. Then, there is the story told as proof of his great wisdom. You know it! Two women are arguing over a baby, each claiming the baby is hers. Solomon's solution as he expressed it to them was to cut the baby in half. One woman is fine with that while the other shrieks in dismay, wanting the baby to live even if it was with the wrong woman. Solomon, in his great wisdom the bible explains, knew then that the second woman was the true mother. So, he gives her the baby and the matter is settled. Yikes! So many ways in which this story is upsetting, but its intent was to show that Solomon used all the means at his disposal to figure out who was the real mother. That, the text says, is proof of his wisdom. Well, maybe. Or maybe not. But, that's a sermon for another day.

I brought up Solomon because tradition considers him to be the author of most of the Proverbs just as it considers David to have written most of the Psalms. Biblical scholars have proven that neither of these traditions is correct. Both Proverbs and Psalms were written not by these historical personages, but instead by scribes in the temple over a time span of centuries. Part oral tradition, part original work on the part of unknown writers, both the Psalms and Proverbs capture the beautiful

essence of what it means to ground one's existence – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual – in a relationship with God. Psalms were originally ancient hymns, sung in worship in the temple. Proverbs has always been a collection of sayings and observations, a sort of anthology of poems and prayers mixed in amongst pithy one-liners. For that reason, we have a tendency to give it short-shrift, thumbing past Proverbs' pages to get to the other books in the Bible. And that's too bad because Proverbs offers some incredibly thought-provoking insights into human life and behavior. The text we read this morning is an excellent example of this.

Proverbs 2:1-15 is beautiful yet simple articulation of wisdom – what it is, how one acquires it and why it's important to do so. Presented in the form of a conditional sentence, this text first spells out the pre-conditions which must be present in one desiring wisdom. You must accept God's teachings. You must treasure God's commandments. You must listen to wisdom meaning that you will never find it if you're not predisposed to listen to it once you find it. You must be willing to incline your heart to understanding. In other words, you can't have any preconceived ideas of what wisdom is. Your mind and your heart – which are the same thing in Hebrew tradition – must be open to what it is wisdom has to offer. You have to have a pre-set willingness, a genuineness openness, to understand what wisdom

offers. Continuing on, you must be willing to cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding. In other words, you must be willing to put your all into crying out to God to give you this wisdom you are pleading for. You cannot stand idly by and just expect God to hand it over. This is in spite of the fact that wisdom is a gift of God. You cannot find it on your own. You can't purchase it from Amazon. You can't manufacture it for yourself out of whole cloth. Wisdom – true wisdom that is kind and benevolent, self-transcending and self-aware – only comes to you as a gift from God, but it is a gift that requires effort to find, to receive and to incorporate into your life. Wisdom, therefore, is always dynamic – always generating action and requiring action. It is never just passive acquisition of knowledge or facts. What matters with wisdom is how the knowledge and facts are put to good use for the betterment of human kind and the whole world.

The writer of Proverbs, having laid out the pre-conditions for receiving wisdom, then assures the person what will happen when the wisdom sought is finally received. The person will find “fear of the Lord” as well as the knowledge of God. Well, the knowledge of God part we get. That seems straight forward enough. But what's all this about the fear of the Lord. Does God really expect us to be afraid of God? In a word, no. What the phrase “fear of the Lord” really refers to is recognizing God's awesomeness. In other words, it means fully comprehending that God is God and

that God is truly awesome and more, much, much more, than any mere human being could ever comprehend. And because God is so awesome, we must always hold God in reverence. Put another way, fear of the Lord means recognizing that God is God, and we are not and never can be God. Sounds simple enough, but really difficult to do. Just think about all the people you know who are intrigued by the fact that you go to church and yet they are sort of put off in some way by the whole “God thing.” These folks do not possess the fear of the Lord. They are reluctant and perhaps even unwilling to accept the awesomeness of God, that God is God and humans are not. They sense there is something to this “God thing” but they can’t make that final step to open their minds and hearts to the reality of God. They cannot let go of their own self-serving wisdom enough to be open to the reality of God. In a way, then, this text in Proverbs is making clear that receiving wisdom from God means that finally you “get” God. Isn’t *that* something?

The next few verses in the text explain what happens once you have received this gift of wisdom from God. God walks with you acting as a shield and guarding and preserving your journey along the paths of justice. Once you have wisdom, you will be able to discern righteousness, justice and equity because God’s wisdom will fill your heart. Knowledge will fill your soul and life will be pleasant as a result. “Prudence will watch over you and

understanding will guard you.” Admit it – that’s a pretty amazing promise...

And now we come to the flip side of wisdom and the answer as to why this pursuit of wisdom from God is so important. It matters because having this wisdom from God will “save you from the way of evil.” Wow! That would be really helpful, wouldn’t it? So often we don’t recognize the evil creeping up on us until it’s already ensnared us. How will wisdom do this? By helping you to figure out who is speaking perversely – lying and who is forsaking the paths of righteousness preferring instead to follow the paths of their own selfish desires. Wisdom will also help you recognize the people who actually rejoice in doing evil; who get a rush of excitement by being intentionally perverse and deceitful. Wisdom will enable you to see the truth of those people who seem to be one type person but in reality are something quite different, pretending to have right on their side when really it is only their own selfish desires that govern everything they do.

This is the significance of the search for true wisdom received as a gift from God which the writer of Proverbs is spelling out in no uncertain terms for us in this text. Simply put, wisdom brings us closer to God and empowers us to be a part of God’s plan to bring shalom – peace, justice and prosperity – to God’s people and to the world. Wisdom is restricted by selfishness, by unkindness, by guile and deceit undertaken to circumvent justice.

But, wisdom can never be destroyed by human action because it comes from God, is bestowed by God and is guarded over by God even through the darkest moments of humankind. Wisdom will always triumph, as long as the people of God pursue it with all their hearts. This is our challenge and also our triumph.

In closing, I want you to know that when I chose this text for this morning's worship and sermon, I had no idea what the events of the week leading up to this Sunday would hold. I had no idea that a search for wisdom – true wisdom in the biblical sense – would be the focal point of our Congress as it has come to be this past week. And, no matter your political persuasion regarding the events of this past week and the impeachment inquiry into the actions of the President announced, surely you must acknowledge that the search for knowledge in the God sense is the quest which we must all hope and pray underlies all of this mess. I do not envy the work that lies ahead for everyone touched by this sad and sorry state of affairs. My heart aches for the innocent, career government folks whose life work threatens to crumble under the weight of it. My prayers are with all who will have to sort through this mountain of information to try to discern the true path of justice, and of righteousness. This beautiful text we read from Proverbs, if nothing else, spells out just what's at stake in this moment in the history of our country. Dear friends, it is nothing less than the very soul of our country and who we consider

ourselves to be as a nation and as a people. That's gotten pretty murky lately because of the ceaseless partisan rhetoric on both sides. But now that has to stop. The time has come, and in fact is long past, to begin the quest for true wisdom about how the country is to proceed from here. I pray that the clarity of wisdom as a gift of God enables our leaders to discern good from evil, fact from deceit, justice from self-serving decision making. I pray that once more our country can become the leader of the world in its ceaseless search for the paths of justice and righteousness for all and not just for some. This is my prayer for my country in this moment. I hope it is yours too. Amen.