

True Wisdom, True Humility

1 Kings 3:3-14

Ephesians 5: 8-20

If ever there was a commodity of value, it is wisdom. It would seem to preface every other benefit of life. Wisdom has been the pursuit of sages and seers, prophets and princes, moguls and magistrates. Each one knows that a dose of wisdom could improve their success and bring them what they truly desire.

Now, try to impart wisdom to others and you'll generally find few willing listeners. That's a problem for most of us because we have so *much* wisdom to impart and so few people who really care for it. The best thing to do is to become a minister where you can preach at people once a week as if you had wisdom that they wanted, when you know they only come to church to visit with God or eat at the potluck. That you happen to be preaching is just one of those things you have to put up with.

So, how does wisdom work?

Once an old man was on his deathbed and his three sons surrounded him. He looked them over and knew they were the laziest parasites he'd ever seen. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Maybe it was his own fault, but he'd soon be gone and they'd be on their own. He wanted to share some final wisdom with them, but really, why bother? They hadn't listened for all these years; it wouldn't be any different now.

He beckoned to his useless sons to come closer. He lifted his head slightly and said in a weak voice, "I have a treasure for each of you ... to share equally among yourselves." They clamored now, "Yes, Father, tell us about the treasure. Tell us!" His head fell back on the pillow. The old man said, "It's buried ... it's buried ... in the ... [choke] ... in the field." With a groan, he closed his eyes and died. The sons shouted, "Which field? Where?" But it was too late.

"Father had a dozen fields he worked," said the eldest. "Well, we better start digging then," they all realized. With amazing energy and determination, they dug up field after field, finding no treasure. When they realized that the fields were all dug up, they figured they may as well plant some seed which they did.

The next season, they resumed the search for the treasure, digging up every single field. Still, no treasure. So they planted seed again. After a few years, the sons realized that their father's treasure was buried in the field, only not in the way they'd imagined.

The story illustrates how wisdom is shown **not** in uttering some imagined form of wisdom, no matter how sweet you sound to your own ears, but in the kinds of decisions and choices one makes. That involves a certain amount of thought, thinking often in uncommon ways – anticipating the way other people will act or react, and creating a new situation that reaches and fulfills a goal. The dying old man knew that his useless sons would never listen to him about the beauty, wonder and necessity of growing crops

in the fields. The treasure hunt was a clever ruse, but it got them doing what they needed to do.

Both scriptures today focus on wisdom. We start with Solomon, son of David, who succeeds his father on the throne. It starts with the words:

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; except that he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. [“High places” refer to typically elevated locations unsurprisingly. They had been there for centuries before the Hebrews came to possess the land, having been ancient worship sites for the native Canaanites. They were for gods of fertility with both male (massebah) and female (asherah) imagery on display.] The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt-offerings on that altar.

In this story, we hear how Yahweh comes to Solomon in a dream at night **at Gibeon**, “the principal high place.” Yahweh told the young king that he could receive whatever he wanted – a coronation gift, I suppose. Thoughtfully, Solomon does not ask for wealth, women, power, or any worldly temptation. He asks for wisdom, translated in the NIV as “a discerning heart.” He asks for wisdom to govern the people of God and to distinguish between right and wrong. God is evidently thrilled with this exceptional request and promises him wisdom as well as the things he didn’t ask for, riches and honors.

Let’s clear the air about Solomon. His idea of wisdom was no one else’s idea of wisdom. He was a tyrant, ruthless, even murderous, who schemed, exploited, and enslaved, who taxed his people relentlessly for every pet project. By the time he dies, Solomon has made the kingdom such a mess that there’s an immediate civil war and the country splits. He is also known to worship any god that seems to bring him benefit, selling out every chance he gets. Yet God seems to overlook this.

The more generous historian will regard Solomon as bearing wisdom, not as an individual or as a leader *per se*, but in the development of a more mature nation with administrative and legal systems, who built a wealthy, cosmopolitan nation-state, introducing advanced learning from throughout the region. The wisdom of Solomon wasn’t so much a personal gift as it was a legacy of organizational and cultural development, even though it also had its detrimental side. His “wisdom” was actually in getting the right people, the right bureaucrats and advisers, to organize the kingdom and make it hugely prosperous.

If we spin Solomon the best way, he can be regarded as visionary, as a builder of greatness, from the temple to the treasury to the army to the library to the judiciary. Wisdom in this sense envisions more than the flat, one dimensional notion of how things appear and how things connect. Wisdom sees and projects connections, working through multiple dimensions to achieve insights and outcomes far greater than others. Solomon was building the assets and resources of a great nation, but the casualties in

achieving that goal proved the undoing of the whole thing. His wisdom was missing a key element.

Maybe Paul can shed some light as he, too, is trying to build and organize a far flung set of faith colonies that would center for the ongoing faith and mission of Jesus Christ. In the Hellenistic culture of the eastern Mediterranean, the notion of “wisdom” is powerful and complex, going beyond philosophy into religion.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul urges the new faithful to begin exercising a *sacred* wisdom that sees beyond the usual and conventional. He wants them to embrace the **un**common, **un**usual and **un**familiar way of a sacred faith in one God, one Savior in Jesus. Paul declares that wisdom is attained in making the most of every opportunity through seeking an understanding of God’s will, in effect being led by and cooperating with God’s will.

Where they once would have considered it a wonderful occasion to go and get drunk, Paul urges wisdom now. Be filled instead with the Holy Spirit – a spiritual high, if you will. Instead of a party where you’re singing bawdy songs and shouting loudly in drunken revelry, choose wisdom and speak in sacred tones about spiritual things, letting the best music arise from your heart in a thankful response to the Lord.

Paul knows that his people in his churches can be perfect fools, and they know it, too. The mature individual whose mission in life is to go out and party is an idiot, a fool. This is the one who drinks to a staggering and slobbering state, who can’t remember what they did or what they said the night before. The next day they feel miserable, look worse, and may do it all over again the next night. Wisdom recognizes that life is more and that God expects better from his faithful people than such a waste of time when wonders and miracles could be achieved.

The last verse about “always giving thanks to God ... for everything” reminds the faithful to maintain a humble spirit within themselves, that what they gain or attain, or achieve or receive is a gracious gift of God, not something of their own accomplishment.

This humble spirit is a defining character of wisdom. If our egos, agendas, and self-importance are not under control, then our vision gets clouded and the way of faithfulness, the way of the Holy Spirit remains obscured, unable to penetrate our own wall of self-interest. Wisdom has little use for such an attitude. We actually get in the way of God’s blessing. We end up with a beautiful steaming bowl of nitroglycerin that looks so wonderful until it gets jarred and explodes spectacularly in our faces, much like what happened to Solomon and the ultimate fruits of his wisdom – decimated in no time.

Robert Reich, the brilliant little man who was Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, is a very sharp guy, Rhodes scholar who was at Oxford at the same time as Clinton, and was teaching at Harvard when Clinton got elected. One of his first challenges was to get confirmed by the Senate for this cabinet appointment. He spent a few days with some mentoring coaches. In a trial run of what a Senate confirmation

hearing would be like, they'd ask him a question and he would do his best to answer it. After the third question and answer, the lead coach called a halt.

Irritated, he said, "You're answering the questions." Reich replied, "I thought that's what I was supposed to do; they ask a question and I give an answer."

"No, not at all. You never *answer* the question. You don't want to appear arrogant, like some know it all. They don't care what you know or what you think. They want to know that you're humble, that you respect them, and that you'll work with them. Everyone knows you're qualified; they want to know if they can work with you."

"But can't I answer the question and

"No. Practice saying this: 'I don't know, Senator. I don't know, Senator. I don't have an answer on that, Senator, but I look forward to working with you to address the issue. I can't answer that at the present time, Senator, but given your experience on these matters, I know I will enjoy hearing your insights.' Like that. Show them how easy you are to work with and you won't have any problems."

Following those instructions, Reich was easily confirmed as Secretary of Labor.

Wisdom was not being the smart-guy. Wisdom was ensuring the other guys were the smart guys and that you were on their team all the way. Then things could get done, That was wisdom in that case. An attitude of humility opened doors of opportunity.

We see wisdom having two principal qualities; humility that keeps ourselves in check so we can recognize the role of others, and the role of God and the Holy Spirit in particular. And the other is broad understanding that allows us to see connections and relationships, realizing how people behave, are motivated, and interact, projecting outcomes forward and achieving results from this holistic picture. Such insights don't come easily of course.

That leads us back to the first point, humility, and allowing God to gain the room in our lives to bless us with sacred wisdom and perspective to fulfill his will. That's the aim of our faithfulness, after all, to become the vessels of God's blessing as God calls us to act and to serve. We do it with true wisdom, and with true humility going hand-in-hand.