

## Getting Wisdom

Edward Langerak

First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN, October 15, 2006

**Hymns** include “Bringing Many Names” (11) and “Now in the Days of Youth” (350)

**Word with Children:** Dorothy could follow the yellow brick road to Oz, but still needed to be brave; compare “Pilgrim’s Progress.” Hansel and Gretel needed to be brave, plus they had to find their own way. For children who don’t know the way, it’s good to ask parents and teachers.

**Choir Chant: Psalm 119: 27-104:** How I love your law...it makes me wiser than my teachers and elders...its words taste sweeter than honey.

### Sermon

The readings today go in proper Old Testament order: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes. The Psalm that the choir just gave us beautifully portrays the joy of having found the answers to life’s persistent questions: lovingly submitting to the law of God makes one wiser than not only one’s enemies, but also one’s teachers and elders, who, after all, are only human. How sweet it is!

Now, from Proverbs, we get a slightly different angle: it is our parents who clue us in to what is wise. However, notice that they cannot get it for us; we have to get it ourselves.

#### Proverbs 4:

- 1: Listen, children, to a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight;
- 2: for I give you good precepts: do not forsake my teaching.
- 3: When I was a son with my father, tender, and my mother’s favorite,
- 4: he taught me, and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live;
- 5: Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.
- 6: Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you.
- 7: The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight.

Psalms and Proverbs include what is often called the optimistic wisdom literature, teaching not only that being wise will make you healthy and wealthy but also that it is fairly easy to find the yellow brick road to wisdom, though Proverbs does imply that the road is not all giddy bliss and that one has to work on sticking to it. With Ecclesiastes we find this optimism challenged.

#### Ecclesiastes 7

- 11: Wisdom is as good as an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.
- 12: For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money; and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom give life to the one who possesses it....
- 15: In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evil-doing....
- 23: All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, "I will be wise"; but it was far from me.
- 24: That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?
- 25: I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness.

For Ecclesiastes, wisdom is definitely better than folly, but it’s no guarantee of health and wealth, and it turns out to be difficult to find. Well, some of the differences between these passages has to do with what we mean by wisdom. It’s presumptuous to draw sharp lines here, but the T S Eliot quotation in the

bulletin (“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge; where is the knowledge we have lost in information.” From *Four Quarets*) seems to associate information with data and isolated factoids, and knowledge with connecting the dots in a way that integrates the information into useful understanding. Wisdom, traditionally understood, includes knowledge and understanding, and adds the dimension of putting it to good use. It connotes having good values and thereby right and appropriate goals as well as appropriate ways to reach them. The question, of course, is how do we know what are appropriate goals and ways to reach them .

What we often call conventional wisdom aims at success conventionally understood: health, wealth, fame, and fortune. And, in fact, Proverbs is full of conventional wisdom, and even Ecclesiastes gives Benjamin Franklin type worldly advice. Some of my personal favorites include Proverbs 15:1, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Or Proverbs 22:24, “Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads.” For some reason I’m starting to like Proverbs 16:31, “Grey hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.” And the chapter we read from Ecclesiastes includes this gem against eavesdropping (21): “Do not listen too carefully to everything people say, or you may hear your servant curse you.”

One problem, of course, is that this sort of folk wisdom is relative to context, sort of like our two folk proverbs, “Look before you leap,” and “He who hesitates is lost.” It all depends. Sometimes we do need to use harsh words and even associate with hotheads; as the bumper sticker says, “If you aren’t outraged, you aren’t paying attention.” And, indeed, conventional wisdom itself often recognizes that one needs discernment in deciding how and when to apply it, as is clear from this deep insight in Proverbs 26: 4&5, “Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.” Timing is everything and you need context and skill to tell what time it is. Which is why we associate prudence with the ability to discern the proper timing and appropriate use of folk wisdom. This is why even for conventional wisdom, the French philosopher Montaigne said “We can be knowledgeable with other people’s knowledge, but we cannot be wise with other people’s wisdom.” Applying wisdom is so sensitive to individual context, that we must get it ourselves.

In addition, it is clear that some dimensions of the wisdom in Proverbs and the deep, very deep, wisdom in Ecclesiastes involves much more than or other than the prudence that will make us conventionally successful. For one thing, our text personifies wisdom as a woman to be loved. In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter wisdom is personified as a woman who speaks directly to us. Listen to what she says: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work...when there were no depths I was brought forth...when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master builder, and I was daily his delight.” Hence the next chapter begins with, “Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.” So we are talking about the wisdom that permeates the very structure of our lives, that makes them meaningful and worthwhile. We are talking about spiritual wisdom, which can be decidedly unconventional, and the question is where to get it.

Recall the reading from Proverbs 4 and notice the tension in this parental advice, a paradoxical tension all good parents feel as they try to give their children both roots and wings. On the one hand, the father is saying, “Listen to me, and don’t forsake the tradition that I am passing along.” On the other hand, given what we have noticed about wisdom, he has to use a very active verb when he says “*Get* wisdom” and “*Get* insight.” If it’s *insight*, and not just rules of thumb that you are after, and if wisdom is something you are to pursue, and not just inherit, you must do more than merely listen; you must ask questions; you must examine your life and traditions; and you must not only think, you must think about your thinking, and you must think for yourself. Legally, someone can be *in* authority over you without your consent, and thereby have the legal right to command you, without your consent. But morally and spiritually, nobody can be *an* authority for you without your consent, be it explicit or implicit; that is, nobody can make you think their commands are right, without your consent. We talk about doctor’s orders, but they function as commands for you only if you believe that they are good advice. We can, in blind faith or bad faith, simply

refuse to think about it and merely conform to social authority and cultural pressures, but that is to *fail* one's responsibility not to *escape* it. If you, with the Psalmist, think that a moral or spiritual law makes you wiser than your elders, you are actually saying that you have decided to trust that law (or lawgiver) because you have decided it (or an authority issuing it) is wiser than the elders. Even if, with the Psalmist, you find that this law is good for you, and you find yourself loving it, and you find that its words taste sweet, you still cannot escape the question whether you *should* love it. We sometimes find ourselves loving things we perhaps shouldn't, or at least we shouldn't act on that love, and there are many sweet tasting things that we should be careful about eating. I don't mean to underplay the beauty of loving what is good; I only mean to underscore the responsibility of agreeing that what we love is good. Love can be blind, of course, or at least overwhelming, but the human condition is that we *think* as well as *feel*, and with that combination comes responsibility.

Of course, highlighting the point that wisdom involves getting it yourself rubs against the fatherly admonition that you should listen to and never, ever, depart from his advice. As my own father would say about me, and as I say about my own children, "Encourage kids to think for themselves and then, darn it, they may well do it; and not always well." We want to say, "Think for yourselves and here's how to do it," but that's paradoxical and, though it has an element of truth, it's a path that goes only so far. So mistakes are often made, sometimes painful ones, which is why it seems to so many people that it would be easier for everyone if children and students would just listen and believe rather than question. In fact, Socrates, the patron saint of philosophy, was executed for his encouraging the youth of Athens to examine their lives, because that challenged and even undermined the traditions of the elders. But Socrates taught that an unexamined life—an unquestioning life--was not worthy of human beings. (I question that claim, by the way; we all know people who were fortunate enough to be raised in a rich tradition and lived very worthwhile lives without raising critical questions about it. In fact, that typically is how people in homogeneous cultures live.) In any case, given the pluralistic context in which most of us live today, getting wisdom is likely to involve questioning traditional answers. This can be exhilarating but also painful. As Woody Allen once quipped, "Maybe the unexamined life is not worth living, but the examined life is no picnic either."

One thing that got me thinking about all this is that I am one of the adults involved in this year's confirmation class. Now, when I was confirmed, (we called it "Confession of Faith") the idea was that the minister had a list of the right questions to ask and a list of the right answers to give, along with a list of warnings against the wrong answers, and even, as I personally discovered, warnings against the wrong questions. But here we are in a congregation in which probably most of us believe that unanswered questions have done a lot less harm than unquestioned answers. So confirmation class here allows nay, encourages questioning traditions.

Questioning can be hard if it is done honestly, because what gets challenged is not just one's parents' advice—that's often not so hard for teenagers to do—but also all the popular assumptions of one's culture, including one's friends and peers, and that can take courage. Socrates agreed that the seeker of wisdom needs lots of courage about convictions. Usually when we think of courage and convictions, we think of the courage to *die* for them, or--which is sometimes harder--to *live* for them, or even to *kill* for them, which, alas, is too often easiest. Socrates actually valued all three of these kinds of courage; at his trial, for example, he proudly pointed out that he fought in lethal battles against the enemies of Athens and its values. However, he also thought it was irresponsible to exercise these three types of courage about one's convictions—to live, die, or kill for them--without also exercising what he thought was the rarest type of courage about them, which is the courage to *examine* them. He thought that only examined convictions should elicit the courage to live, or to die, or--especially--to kill for them, or you might end up living or dying for a folly or killing innocent people like Socrates, or Jesus.

Socrates believed that the main barrier to knowledge and wisdom was not ignorance; rather, it was assuming that one already knows what is important. Once the famous oracle at Delphi told Socrates that he was the wisest person in Athens. This astonished him, until he started to question the people in Athens who

called themselves wise. These were the “sophists” (from Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom), and sophistry is what we now associate with the cunning use of words, so that logic chopping and emotional manipulation replace reasonable inquiry, something we are too often reminded of every few years as the first Tuesday in November approaches. Socrates discovered that these wise guys really didn’t know what they were talking about, but they thought they did. He modestly decided that the oracle was right: he didn’t know much but at least he knew that he didn’t know, whereas the sophists didn’t know much either, but they didn’t know that they didn’t know. So he called himself not a sophist—one who is wise—but a *philos-sophia*—Greek for a *lover* of wisdom—and claimed that true seekers ought to *woo* wisdom, like a lover should, rather than simply assume they already *possess* her. I don’t claim that Socrates had the identical notion of wisdom as the writer of Proverbs, but he would have appreciated Proverbs’ emphasis on wisdom as a potential bride, to be loved and courted, rather than merely assumed. He would agree with Proverbs and, especially Ecclesiastes, that some levels of wisdom are elusive; it doesn’t stare you in the face and you can’t just go up and grab it. *How* you approach it matters, as does *where* you approach it, and *when* and (especially) *why* you approach it, all of which will be affected by the condition of your own character, by what the Bible calls the desires of your heart.

The word for “heart” is used over 1000 times in the Bible; it refers to your inner self and your basic motivations, as when Psalms asks God for a clean heart (51:10) and enjoins us to count our days so that we may gain a wise heart (90:12) or when Matthew says that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (6:12). The point is that we are in no position to court spiritual wisdom when our heart is in the wrong place. And I think this point applies whether we image this wisdom as a potential bride or as a potential bridegroom; our enlightenment and the quality of our courtship and, hopefully, our marriage with wisdom will be as much a function of our own characteristics as it will be of the characteristics of what we seek.

So then, how do we put our hearts in the proper shape? Well, maybe it’s just dumb luck or sheer divine grace. Indeed it’s not uncommon for religious seekers to say, in hindsight, that God found them rather than that they found God, and they feel gifted, not in the sense of being especially wise but in the sense of getting a gift. However, let’s not get fatalistic about this too quickly; as Kierkegaard noted, perhaps we *learn* backwards but we have to *live* forwards. So let’s notice that the Bible constantly worries about *hard* hearts, or *closed* hearts, or *fat* hearts that are *puffed up*, and it constantly recommends an *open* heart, which it associates with a *humble* heart. Humility is sometimes confused with a sense of unworthiness or of timidity, but when Socrates called for intellectual humility and when Jesus called for spiritual humility, they are actually called for the courage and confidence to be teachable, to avoid letting assumptions about what you already know or about righteousness you’ve already attained interfere with new insight. So humility implies the courageous confidence to be teachable. But being *teachable* is not the same as being *gullible*. Sometimes people think that the journey of spiritual faith requires you to ignore reason, to close your mind when you open your heart, that the only alternative to breaking your faith is stubborn adherence to tradition. But both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures insist that we love God with our *minds* as well as our hearts.

So, how can we be intelligently teachable, especially on matters of spiritual wisdom, when we need open hearts? Perhaps some of you remember a few years ago when Marcus Borg gave a talk from this very pulpit on “Thin Places.” This is a term he borrowed from Celtic spirituality, and it refers to places and times when the heart can be especially open to the divine dimension and to spiritual wisdom. (This talk became a chapter in his latest book, *The Heart of Christianity*.) These places can be geological locations, such as Jerusalem or Mecca, as well as places like mountains and wilderness areas. Depending on the person, they can be found in the arts—such as music, poetry, literature, paintings, and photography. People can be thin places when their words, deeds, or character open our hearts in a special way. I think that in the past few weeks the Amish in Pennsylvania have become a thin place for many people with respect to how forgiveness can flow from hearts that are definitely not closed in ways some of us thought they had closed themselves off. But what I especially remember from that talk was Borg’s discussion of how communal practices can be thin places—participation in sacraments, in discussions, in liturgies, in prayers, and in

meditation. Solitude can also be a thin place, but I remember his talking about how even meditation, which some of us associate with going it alone, is often done communally, as some of us have experienced with the Buddhists of Thailand. I make a point of the communal aspects of thin places and open hearts because the confirmation youth will be invited to join this congregation, and I think they should know that what they are joining is a community in which people share less a theology or creed and more their spiritual journeys, including their experience of thin places.

[And wisdom speaks louder in deeds than in words. I sometime ask my students to describe the moral perspective within which their families raised them. Often they look puzzled and say that they don't remember that their families ever had one of those things. But they often become quite articulate when I rephrase the question as one about the sort of moral virtues or principles that their parent's lives illustrated or that can be inferred from the deeds and attitudes that their parents encouraged or discouraged. The best way for children to experience thin places is to see their parents experience them.]

I much appreciate the call to worship in today's Bulletin, a call that invites us to see each other as seekers on a journey. Journeys can take many forms, and spiritual journeys often take on the characteristics of both a pilgrimage and a quest. *Pilgrimages* can be undertaken by people who know what they are looking for and who know what path to follow. It might not be a yellow brick road, but the Bible can function to some as one of those guidebooks that tell you where to go and what to see and do. *Quests* can be undertaken by those who aren't sure what they are looking for. There may be no path, or it's vague, at best, and the Bible functions as a library of those travelers journals that talk about what was seen and experienced, but they don't always agree and, even after reading them seriously, one has to make up much of the itinerary one goes. In both types of journeys, there can be high adventures, sometimes dangerous ones, wonderful camaraderie, unexpected challenges, and surprise endings. And both can require courage, perseverance, a sense of humor, and moral and spiritual depth. And, although a pilgrimage will have a clearer idea of its destination, it can share with a quest the attitude that the point of it all is as much the journey itself as it is to arrive at the destination. So I suspect that our spiritual journeys take on characteristics of both types, though people, and probably religious communities, differ interestingly on relative balance. I suspect our community leans more in the direction of a quest than, say, most evangelicals. I think quests tend to involve more intellectual curiosity and more tolerance for ambiguity than pilgrimages tend to, but I'm open-minded about that.

The point is that when we invite youth to join us, we are inviting them to join a community that has at least as many questions as answers, and a community in which doubts are honored. Sometimes doubts are thought to undermine faith, but that would be faith only in the sense of how sure you are when you assent to, say, creeds. Faith also includes trust and, importantly, fidelity or commitment. I think we should cheerfully admit that honoring questions and doubts can, in fact, reduce confidence in the truth creedal propositions. But we should also point out that one can be strongly committed to each other, to religiously inspired actions, to God as we name God, and to the value of sharing our journeys, even with theological questions and doubts. When youth joins such a community, they will bring many names to the quest. And because they will enter with their distinctive choices, hopes, doubts, and thoughts that find a voice, some of the names will be new ones. And not all new names will resonate well with all of the old ones. But some of them may open our hearts in new ways. In any case, new names and even new exclamation marks are what we can welcome when God has given us not just some periods, but also plenty of commas and question marks.

