

Homily – The Wisdom of Jesus

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I find that there is so much information on the internet that it is hard to know where to pay attention and what is reputable. To help wade through it all, I have a subscription to a website called The Browser. The tagline for this website, The Browser, is writing worth reading. Writing worth reading.

Each day, The Browser website editors scour the net and post four or five fascinating articles that range from art, to philosophy, to hard science. And, as the tagline says, I find many of the articles to be worth reading.

Four of the most recently posted articles are:

“When Consciousness Begins” from a journal called Nautilus

“Max Weber Was Wrong” from a site called Reason

“Soap and Intimacy” from the New York Review of Books, and

“If China Makes First Contact” from the Atlantic Monthly

Lots of good writing and reading, and sometimes some good sermon fodder.

Recently there was an article on the Browser called “Does Age Bring Wisdom?” This article was written by a thirty-three-year-old academic who was bemoaning some of the ideas and beliefs that he had held his twenties, and he was curious about what would happen as he continued to age.

My own life experience shows additional or greater wisdom as one ages. As I have aged, I feel like I have become wiser, and as I look at our elders I certainly see a lot of wisdom. I should point out that it is possible that I appreciated this article by the thirty-three-year-old because it confirmed something I already believed. It did not burst my bubble.

But, I also liked the article because it introduced me to a piece of wisdom called “Chesterton’s fence.” G. K. Chesterton was a writer and philosopher from one hundred years ago who is best remembered for his fictional Father Brown detective series. In his 1929 book, “The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic”, Chesterton introduced the principle that reforms should not be made until the reasoning behind the existing state of affairs is understood.

He writes, "In the matter of reforming things, as distinct from deforming them, there is one plain and simple principle; a principle which will probably be called a paradox. As an illustration imagine that there is a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, "I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away." To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: "If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it."

Chesterton's fence – you shouldn't remove or change something until you know why it was done to begin with. I can't say that I always follow this principle, but I certainly feel wiser knowing it.

We have a lot that we can learn from the sages who have gone before us. Personally, I don't believe that God expects us to start from zero and reinvent the wheel in one's own short lifetime. Instead, we can, or must, build on the common "communion of saints" throughout the ages. This is the inherited fruit and gift, which is sometimes called the "wisdom tradition."

But, backing up for a moment, researchers in psychology have defined wisdom as the coordination of "knowledge and experience" and "its deliberate use to improve well-being." With this definition, wisdom might be measured using the following five criteria.

First, a wise person can discern the core of important problems.

Second, a wise person has self-knowledge.

Third, a wise person seems sincere and direct with others.

Fourth, others ask wise people for advice.

Fifth, a wise person's actions are consistent with his or her ethical beliefs.

Now, I should point out that growth in wisdom depends on how open you are to receiving wisdom. If you are not receptive then the wisdom will just be missed or will seem like boring, irrelevant platitudes. And again, in my own life sometimes I can hear a piece of wisdom many times, but until I have experienced it first-hand, or been brought to a place of openness, it falls on my deaf ears.

Now, today's Psalm, that we heard a few minutes ago, is classified as a wisdom Psalm, though in reality all of the Psalms are chock full of wisdom. The Old Testament is divided into three types of literature, the books of the law, the books of the prophets and the books of wisdom. The 150 Psalms are in this last grouping, and in addition to the Psalms, wisdom literature in the Old Testament includes the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Solomon. These wisdom books, with their

orientation to life as actually experienced, often plumb the depths of human experience, showing how elusive wisdom can be as the search for her proceeds. Wisdom literature, especially, Job and Ecclesiastes, even grapples with the proposition that God created, sustains, and directs the universe. And wisdom literature even questions itself as it examines the challenges and rewards in the very search for wisdom.

Now, there are several types of wisdom literature. Best known is the pragmatic counsel offered by the proverb. Here are two non-biblical examples. Haste makes waste, and ignorance is bliss. Proverbs are a way in which society passes on its experiences in memorable, entertaining, and often ironic sayings. The ethics of the proverb is essentially prudent and conservative. It commends diligence and care in one's labors, respect of elders and for those in authority, prudence in speech, sobriety, frugality, and especially, the diligent pursuit of wisdom

In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as a teacher of wisdom and endowed with the Spirit. The Apostle Paul calls Jesus "the wisdom of God" in whom all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. And as we read in the New Testament, the teachings of Jesus are often about the transformation of human consciousness. As examples, Jesus asked these timeless and deeply personal questions:

What does it mean to die before you die?

How do you go about losing your little life to find the bigger one?

Is it possible to live on this planet with a generosity, abundance, fearlessness, and beauty that mirror God?

And, in today's Gospel reading, the parable of the ten maidens, we hear Jesus advising us to be ready to be in relationship with God. Put simply, we must each do our own spiritual work to transform our human consciousness so that we see the world as God sees it. In this light, Christ is in all and around all for the wisdom of Jesus shows us that there is a Divine Reality underneath and inherent in the world of things.

The wisdom of Jesus also tells us that the human soul has a natural capacity, similarity, and longing for this Divine Reality. And, the wisdom of Jesus confirms that the final goal of all existence is union with Divine Reality. And, when we see the world in this way it transforms our daily living.

This wisdom of Jesus is sorely needed, for we live in a society and age with elderly people, but very few elders. Using today's parable, the elders are the bridesmaids who had oil, lit lamps, and were prepared, while the elderly people were not. That's

not because they're bad people, but there haven't been guides to walk with them into the wisdom of Jesus. That is one of our goals here at St. Barnabas. We want to create wise elders and provide you as guides to others.

Now one of the qualities of elders is that they are wonderful mirrors. They no longer need to be mirrored themselves so they can do it for others. They are not crying, "Notice me. I'm important." Real elders are masters at granting their attention and awareness to other people. They are the truthful mirrors when hard truth needs to be told, but also gentle mirrors that can affirm, praise, and not distort the moment. The elders that I've met in my life revealed both a brightness and a sadness at the same time. They are bright, they're here, they're clear, their eyes are open, they are present. Elders mirror you, rather than asking you to mirror them. It's like they're listening and seeing at a deeper level. Elders usually don't talk much. They need very few words to make their point. Too many words are not needed by true elders. Elders, express a brightness and clarity often in nonverbal terms, and use words only when really needed. True elders just keep taking it all in rather than giving a knee-jerk response, joke, or clever come back, intended to entertain or impress. Do you want to be one of these elders who live into the wisdom of Jesus?

Before I end today I want to share a story from James Finley, a wonderful spiritual writer and guide. James shared with his own Spiritual Director, Thomas Merton, his frustration at his seemingly inept efforts to experience God's presence. Merton responded, "How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun." Not that we don't need to continue to seek God, but by our own efforts alone, we cannot achieve spiritual maturity. We must bring ourselves to the light, where God's grace seasons us into juicy, sweet, flavorful ripeness. During autumn, when we in the northern hemisphere have fewer and fewer hours of daylight, we may have to seek out the sun's rays more intentionally. In moderation, sunlight strengthens the immune system, and enhance our emotional health. And, at any level God's light strengthens our wisdom. So, find some time when you can simply bask in sunshine, exposing your skin and soul to the light freely given, only waiting to be received.

Now, as I said earlier, I find much wisdom and sermon fodder in the website, The Browser. But, I hope it is obvious that even more wisdom is in the Bible and in the teachings of Jesus. We all need elders and guides in our lives so that we may lean into this wisdom of Jesus that transforms our consciousness. In the end the grace of God is there for all the bridesmaids and not just the elders. But what a shame. We all need to just stop and bask in the sunshine of God's love. May your life be filled with opportunities to learn the Wisdom that comes from God.