

Proper 20
Proverbs 31:10-31
James 3:13-4:3
Mark 9:30-37

Wisdom

When I think of someone who is wise, I think of a long time friend who died a few years ago. Many called my friend, wise woman, often behind her back, but good-naturedly to her face as well. The reasons I thought of her as wise included many of the traits James describes: peacemaker, reconciler, gentle, truthful, in right relationship with God and neighbor. The author of the epistle of James reminds us that wisdom comes from above (3:17). Likewise Proverbs 8 tells us that wisdom is God's companion in creation, making visits to earth and dwelling in people. Thus wisdom is associated with God's spirit, a way of understanding God's presence with us.

The acid test of whether a person has wisdom is compassion. The lack of compassion drives people to be divisive, to write others off as unworthy, to justify acts of violence with or without words, because we are filled with our own desires, our human cravings that are unfulfilled (James 4:1-3). Wisdom teaches us to see others as important to God. Wisdom opens our eyes to see the common ground among all persons, to respect the dignity of the other person, to subdue our "wants" for the good of another. Wisdom makes a person compassionate.

The Wisdom Writings of the Old Testament are recognized in the books of Proverbs, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, some of the psalms, and the Book of Job. There may be passages from these sources that are attractive to you and some that are not. The meditation on "time" is memorable: "for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh" (Eccl 3:1-4).

The Proverbs is a collection of sayings dating from about 1000-600 BCE that were used to educate the young. Most parents care about the happiness of their children as they mature and leave the nest for independent lives. To that end, parents seek to instill in children lessons for life that will help them attain their goals, avoid the pitfalls of the foolish, and hopefully avoid hardship and sorrow. Ancient parents seeking the same things taught children these short sayings that were memorized as guidance for a happy life. It was also the intent and aim of the writings to preserve social and moral order in the society.

Is there such a thing as modern wisdom literature? YES. Hundreds of books and articles deal with the same themes and topics of the biblical wisdom literature: how to succeed in business, how to be a good leader, how to handle relationships, how to manage a family/household, how to raise children, how to make wise decisions, how to endure suffering, how to use free will ethically, etc. Wisdom literature is personal and communal. My personal favorite form of modern wisdom literature is biography and autobiography, which tell how one man or woman has been successful in the journey of life, regardless of difficulty or challenge.

Children's literature often contains a wisdom figure, such as Aslan in the *Narnia Chronicles*. In *The Wizard of Oz* is an interesting paradox in that the Oz figure is supposed to be wise, turns out to be a fraud, and then offers the true wisdom of the story: each of the characters seeking something to complete their lives – courage for the lion, a brain for the straw man, and a heart for the tin man will find the thing he seeks within.

Oxford Companion to Philosophy defines/describes wisdom as “good judgment about evaluation of complex situations and conceptions of a good life in the light of a reflective understanding of the human condition.”

I will share two examples of the need for wisdom in the philosophical search for the good life and the faith tradition that seeks to know God as the absolute Good in our lives.

The science journal *Nature* reported a new way to obtain cells for producing stem cell lines that does not destroy the embryo. I lectured on this paper last Friday in a biology class at Hood. It is the same procedure used to check an embryo for a genetic disease called “preimplantation genetic diagnosis,” which has been in use for over a decade. If a couple knows of a high risk of having a child with a genetic disease with severe compromising consequences for quality and quantity of life, they may choose to use in vitro fertilization that allows each fertilized embryo to be checked for the genetic disease before implantation. Alternatively a couple might have prenatal testing during the pregnancy and based on the results be faced with a difficult decision of stopping the pregnancy on genetic grounds.

The current national ban on research with embryos or development of human stem cell lines is at least in part based on the claim that the procedure destroys embryos and each embryo is morally equivalent to a person. Therefore to avoid destroying embryos which some would equate with killing, no federal money can be used for the research. States such as Maryland and Mass. have committed state tax money to the research demonstrating a lack of consensus among voters.

The Episcopal Church at General Convention 2003 and 2006 encouraged stem cell research on behalf of persons with diseases that might be successfully treated with the cells, e.g. Parkinson's, Diabetes, and Alzheimer's. I thought the newest method, which allows the removal of a cell and the preservation of the embryo for implantation the wise solution to the ethical debate. Imagine my shock to read in the journal *Christian Century* (Sept 19, 2006) that some Roman Catholic Bishops have called the new procedure “evil” because the embryo is exposed to more than minimal risk and claim that the one cell removed should not be destroyed because it might represent a “very early embryo.” Good people of good will may disagree about the research on stem cells. I am reminded that wisdom is the mysterious way our transcendent God inspires us to see God's creative hand at work in the world about us. As you engage such difficult moral debates, pray for wisdom that God's unfolding revelation will continue in our time.

The second example also begins with a short article in *Christian Century* about how an American Baptist church in Watertown, New York, has dismissed an 81-year-old female adult Sunday school teacher, citing a biblical passage that prohibits women from teaching men. 1 Tim. 12: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a

man: she must be silent.” The polity of the Baptist tradition relies on local authority and local autonomy. The tradition affirms that scripture is the primary means we have of knowing what God intends for us to do in any circumstance of our lives. To the extent that scripture contains all things necessary for salvation, I agree, but to extract one verse of scripture for the purpose of making a judgment about the worth of a person within the household of faith is using the bible as a tool of power, not a source of wisdom. Wisdom does not rest on rules of a historical time and place superimposed in the present. Wisdom sees God working in the present, in all sorts and conditions of humanity.

Verna Dozier on Sept 1 at the age of 88 left the temporal world for her eternal home. She was a wise woman. Raised in DC, graduate of Howard University, teacher of high school English, and Christian education in her home parish of St. Mark’s on Capitol Hill, Verna influenced people throughout the Christian world. Author of *The Dream of God* in 1991, Verna Dozier was a radical advocate for the laity in the church. She consistently called the church to turn around from the institutional hierarchy and return to the community of faith, the ministry of the priesthood of all believers, and the mutuality of the early Christians. She insisted that from Constantine forward the institutionalization of the church had lost the witness intended for the church as the people of God working together in compassion for the coming of the kingdom. Lost in our struggle for power – who is in – who is out – who is right – who is wrong – the church is just one more human institution. Using the bible as a hammer in the hands of the powerful, every adversary is a nail. Verna taught that a parish is only a means to witnessing to the gospel. The mission of the church is to be accomplished by the ministry of the members.

James understood the message Jesus was giving the disciples, the future church, and us. So you want to be a leader, fine, don’t worry about your own survival, die to your old self, be born again, start over as a child, and have the purity, simplicity, trust of a child. Let the vision of God direct all your attention, be single-minded as Jesus was focused on the Friday death and Sunday resurrection. The child represents a fresh start and a new life in Christ. Taking a small innocent child into his arms, Jesus said, “what you do to the least of these, you do to me.”