

## In the Presence of Wisdom

June 3, 2007

A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

This is the season of exams and graduation. I am thinking that there are some among us today who might be feeling rather wise. They have studied hard and long and as the exam season ends and we celebrate the wonderful accomplishments of those who have done so well, it is good to sit back and ponder the meaning of wisdom.

So let us begin by my offering a little seasoned wisdom. To make a good grade on a test might make one smart in the moment, but does not necessarily make one wise. Dr. Robert Hutchins, a former president of Chicago University once said: “It is possible to have a diploma under the arm and very little under the skull.” And in an article he wrote for the Seattle Times, the Rev. Dale Turner, former pastor of Plymouth United Church of Christ in Seattle, once quoted Agnes W. Thomas – who said:

My daughter has her master’s  
My son his PhD  
But father is the only one  
who has a j-o-b.  
(from Dale Turner’s book – Changing Seasons)

Today our focus is on wisdom – and I want to suggest that the wisdom named in our text has little to do with how many degrees one has, how good one’s grades are or were, how many years one has studied – or how much one gets paid. I do not mean to be disrespectful. If you have made good grades, if you have studied and earned your way to a good job, then that is to be celebrated and applauded. But the list is long of people who had a great deal to offer the world – and they never graduated from college – some never from high school. Myles Horton, for whom Myles Hendler-Voss is named, had parents who were never educated in schools. They could not read or write. But they were very wise. They knew in different ways – and they gave Myles the gift of learning not for accomplishment – but for wisdom.

Myles was invited to be a student at Union Theological School, and became close to Reinhold Niebuhr, a very famous theologian and scholar. Reinhold asked Myles to be part of a particular upper level class he was teaching, and Myles insisted he did not have the academic ability to be in that class. But Niebuhr was firm in his request.

The class had other professors, professionals from the community, graduate students and other advanced students in the group. Myles had not had the opportunity to go to good schools, and he knew he was out of his league. After the first class, Myles was more sure – and he went to Niebuhr and said – I will be dropping your class. When asked why, Myles said – because I don’t understand a thing you are talking about. I would rather spend the time reading what I can understand in the library than not understanding the conversation.

As they talked, other students gathered round – and Niebuhr asked them – can you understand what I am talking about. One after another confessed that they could not. But they had been trained not to be so honest with the professor, so they would not have said anything had they not been asked.

At this, Niebuhr turned to Myles and said – you must stay in the class. You are the only one not invested in the system so much that you will be honest with me. You will be the barometer for all of us. And we need your voice in the conversation. You will be our voice of wisdom. (From A Long Haul, by Myles Horton)

And so some of us might find it a word of grace today – as if God is grading on the curve – and we are going to come out okay after all. There is so much emphasis these days on knowing as much as you can, getting the best grades you can, competing for the best jobs that pay the most money – that sometimes we lose sight of what wisdom really is.

So I hope I have cleared out a space in your mind to think with me for just a few moments about the presence of wisdom.

We know that in the beginning God created. In this text from Proverbs, we also know that at the beginning, there was Wisdom. Not in the beginning – but before that. At the beginning. And so, Wisdom and God created together all that is. Wisdom was God's partner. Wisdom has been around since before the world began. Wisdom is deeply ingrained in all of life – and to find wisdom, we must open ourselves to paying attention in a different sort of way. Also, we must go into the public places – where wisdom breaks free from memorization and expectation to be part of the rhythm of the drums and the unspoken language of the dance.

Wisdom is known as Woman Wisdom – a feminine spirit. There is a likelihood that woman wisdom grows out of a tradition of goddess worship that had been put aside in the time of Proverbs by a mostly male oriented society. But it was not forgotten. To know wisdom is to listen beyond culture. To know beyond the dominant ways of understanding in a given society. In a male oriented, driven society, we need a goddess understanding to be whole and well.

There are some people that you and I know that we might say – she is wiser than her years. Or – he is an old spirit. We are not talking about their age at all, but rather, about how they are in the world. Such people in my experience have an ability to run their roots very deep into the soil – all the way to the river that flows deep below. They know life not just from books, not from formal learning, but from some capacity to know beyond knowing. They have an empathetic spirit that helps them listen, pay attention, observe. It is almost as if they lived once before – and bring that wisdom with them.

And maybe it is so in some way. I think the wisdom of the past is never lost with our death. It stays on. I don't quite know how. Fred Craddock tells the story of his grandmother who lived her last few years with Fred and his family. Every Christmas she

would give the family a beautiful, hand sewn quilt. One that she had worked on for months. An original. But not really. Because if you looked closely, Fred said you could see a piece of his sister's dress, a little section of his brother's pants, a square from his old shirt – this original was made from cloth that had a history and a story – all woven together now into something new.

I think wisdom is a lot like that. It exists in different forms at different times. But it is never lost to those who are willing to pay attention and notice.

I want to tell you a story about myself. I don't think I have ever told it before – and in part because it sounds rather foolish. I have some anxiety about what you will think of me when I tell you this. But it is true – it is my experience and even if I can't explain it, even if I know it makes little or no sense, it is still my experience. I was not on drugs when this came to my mind. In fact, it has been my experience on several different occasions. And even though I tend to sometimes be forgetful, this experience has nothing to do with my losing my mind.

When I had been the associate pastor at Central Congregational church in Atlanta for several years. teaching and playing with the children, walking the halls, eating in the fellowship hall, sitting in the sanctuary for worship – I one day had the experience of remembering when I was a young child in that church. I could see myself running the hallways with the other children. I remembered playing on the playground. I had vivid recollections of being in worship, with my legs dangling from the pews – not yet long enough to reach the floor. I remembered growing up in that place and with those people – I remembered even though I never set foot in that church until I was over 30 years old.

I don't know if you have ever had such an experience or not. It was a very strange thing to remember – to remember what I know never happened. And yet, the memories were important to me. They never really happened, but still – they were true. For I think I had observed long enough and paid careful attention enough to have connected my spirit with the wisdom of that place. A wisdom that had nothing to do with any particular content – but was a connection to the spirit of a place and a people.

I don't know much about such things – but I know it was true.

I do not know much about honeybees, but I do know that bees have an inherent wisdom to take nectar from a flower and to transform it into honey. No one teaches them how to do this. They know. The wisdom is in them. I recently learned that if a goose becomes injured or sick in flight, and has to leave the formation of the other geese, that it will not go alone. Another goose will follow and will stay with the hurting goose until either it can fly again or until it dies. This is wisdom that is already in them.

When our bodies become sick or injured – without our mind thinking about it – our bodies respond in such a way as to protect the injured parts, to pull energy for healing from other places in the body. Wisdom.

If we pay attention, we will see it all around us. Wisdom. My dog Betty Boop knows when I am sick or not feeling well before I know. Sometimes I see her staying close by. Watching me more carefully than usual. And I have to ask – what does she know that I don't know. She has her own wisdom.

Our text from Proverbs comes from Wisdom Literature. The gist of the text is that God has created the world in an ordered fashion – and that all is well. The sun will bring us the morning, and the evening will conclude the day as the sun disappears from the horizon. Day after day. The seasons will come in their order – winter, spring, summer, and fall. Wisdom has joined in the creative venture to help God make a world that works in some particular order that makes life possible.

Robert Browning once said: “God is in his heaven. All's right with the world.” We like how this sounds – when life is going well. But we argue with it when our world is falling apart. So the book of Job brings some balance to the wisdom literature. As does Ecclesiastes when it says – for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to live, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to harvest. And so forth. The world is ordered with a particular wisdom that is beyond our ability to fully understand. We are born, we live, and we die. And there is nothing we can do to make that different.

I have had a number of conversations with some of you over the past few weeks. I have listened to you talk about many things – from your health to your hopes and dreams. I have listened as some of you tried to figure out how to put the pieces of your life together in some better way. I have been with you as you cried and as you laughed. I have heard some of you cry that life as you want it is now over. And yet, somehow, two or three weeks later – there is a shift. Something changes. I think it is a connection with wisdom – a wisdom that is hard to see in the moment – but it is with us. It is always present. Most of the time, there is little I know to say that will change anything about your reality. But still – the times of sharing are rich and good. I am aware as we talk of the presence of a spirit in the room that has been here since the start of time. I think it is wisdom.

Wisdom is among us. It isn't always what we want it to be. But wisdom is a part of Earth, is deep in the spirit of Earth, is related to all that is.

Nurture the memories. Go deep into the truth. This is where we will know what we need to know. This is where we will find our way.

Kenneth Patton says it like this:

Behold the child, the visitor. The child has come forth out of the great womb of earth. The child has come forth to stand with star dust in her hair, with the rust of planets in his blood, her heart beating out the seasons of eternity, with shining in her eyes like the sunlight with hands to shape with that same force that shaped her out of the raw stuff of the universe.

When one baby is born it is the symbol of all birth and life, and therefore all people must rejoice and smile, and all people must lose their hearts to the child.

Today we have celebrated the presence of wisdom again in the dedication of Myles. Wisdom is in Myles. It is in you. It is in me. It is among us. Wisdom. We have what we need. Amen.