

Pentecost 11: July 30/31, 2016

Wisdom



No biblical figure is better known for wisdom than Solomon. You recall how his wisdom came to be. God appeared to him in a dream and said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." His reply pleased the Lord. "I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong." God gave him a wise and discerning heart, so that, in the words of God, "there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be." Solomon the wise. "I devoted myself to study," he writes in the Old Testament reading, "and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven." Solomon would write in Proverbs, "Wisdom calls out: To fear the Lord is to hate evil. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice. From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, before the world began. I was the craftsman at the Lord's side, rejoicing always in his presence." You see Lady Wisdom on the screens as the personification of wisdom. But it's not hard to see that Solomon is writing about another. One who is "the wisdom of God" in the words of St. Paul. "Christ Jesus," he continues, "has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

When I was young I used to think that with age came wisdom, which is that quality of having experience, knowledge and good judgment. I know better now. I remember vividly an exchange my police son had with an utterly foolish elderly man. Wisdom is not a function of age. Wisdom is a function of faith. Nowhere is that stated more emphatically than in the Proverbs: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). *To know me is to know the Father*, says Jesus. So that is where wisdom finds its foundation. Faith in God and in his Christ is the fountain from which all wisdom flows. "Whoever believes in me," says Jesus, "streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:38). So this morning, if we know nothing else, let us resolve this much: Resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified. For in him is life, and that life is the light of men.



Wisdom calls out: To fear the Lord is to hate evil. We know evil. It is splashed onto our TV screens and news feeds, it makes the headlines regularly on the front page or our newspapers. We hate evil when we see it in senseless shootings and terrorism. Word is that Ballwin police officer Mike Flamion, permanently paralyzed from the neck down, will never be able to return home. Terrible. We know evil. We hate evil. That hatred morphs



into something else when we see evil in ourselves. God's holy Law forces us to see ourselves in such a way, as "poor, miserable sinners." Don't delude yourself into thinking you are not that bad, certainly not as bad as some terrorist. We possess a great evil that must be put to *death* if we are to possess the *life* of Jesus. What is that evil? It is self-righteousness. No one likes the finger pointed at them. We all want to be seen as righteous and holy. We must repent not only of all the wrongs things we have done. We must also repent of all the right things we have done for the wrong reasons. If our righteous acts were done to feather our nest and commend ourselves to God, they, too, must be repented of. When we realize how closely sin is lurking at the door, how easily we can lapse into self-righteousness, we can appreciate Solomon's conclusion to his exploration of wisdom: "Meaningless. Utter meaningless. A chasing after the wind!"



Solomon makes it clear what wisdom is not. It is not toilsome labor under the sun only to die and leave it all to one who comes after you. There are no guarantees that person will be wise, indeed, he or she may be a fool.



"You fool," Jesus says to the builder of bigger barns. "This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself." The Lord only knows who will get the vast proceeds from Prince's



estate. Foolish.

Wisdom is not the accumulation of wealth as a goal in itself. That is nothing more than greed, and greed is not good regardless of what Hollywood or Wall Street declares. Greed is idolatry, and *I am a jealous God. I will have no other gods before me. I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.*



“No man can serve two masters,” says Jesus. “You cannot serve both God and money.” The temptation is great because of how easy it is to equate wealth with success. And we all want to be successful. And we all like to enjoy the fruits of success. Deep down we all would rather enjoy our comforts than share in someone else’s suffering, would rather be self-reliant than God-dependent. How many times do we have to hear it? “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” These are Jesus’ words, not mine.



To set wealth as your god is to inherit what such a course has to offer. Anxious striving, pain and grief, restless nights, and a pathetic end. “Meaningless, utterly meaningless” in the words of Solomon



“Set your hearts on things above,” is Paul’s counsel in the epistle. Solomon defines what a heart set on things above looks like. He says “a man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.” Sound too simplistic? I think it sounds incredibly freeing. We carry way too many cares of the world around on our backs, as if we can save the world. Jesus did that; he doesn’t need our help. He wants us to serve, but just in our corner of the world. He wants us to be satisfied with his provision. To enjoy a vine ripened tomato. A fresh cup of coffee on an early summer morning. To care for an elderly parent or a dependent grandchild. To work hard and to play hard. To sleep soundly in the knowledge that the day past was a day the Lord had made, one in which we could rejoice and be glad in.



Such satisfaction inevitably drives our hearts and minds upward. To set our hearts on things above is what Jesus means when he says “be rich toward

God.” *Seek first my kingdom and righteousness, and all the other needs of this world will be given to you as well.* It’s a matter of priority and focus. Start the day in prayer and devotion. Seek the Spirit’s leading in your work. Engage in robust conversation with Jesus as you go about your day. Always be ready to interpret events in light of the Lord’s prayer, “Thy will be done.” And look for good in all things, which is God’s promise to you. The wealth of God has come to you in his holy Word and his precious Sacraments. To immerse yourselves in these is to silence other voices that would whisper to us, “Did God really say?”

Wisdom calls out: I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice. From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, before the world began. I was the craftsman at the Lord’s side, rejoicing always in his presence. In the beginning was this Word, and it was with God and was God. This Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.



And we have beheld his face, and it is Jesus. He has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Jesus has become our righteousness. Faith in Jesus means our life is now hidden with Christ in God. When God sees us He sees Jesus. So he sees only righteousness and holiness. In Jesus the image of God has been restored in us. We can enter into his presence with thanksgiving and not with fear. We have been declared righteous and holy through faith in Jesus, and nothing can change that declaration. All because Jesus has become our redemption. The cross is the pivot in our relationship with God. Where we came to the cross foolishly clinging to earthly wealth, we have left the cross clinging to Jesus’ blood and righteousness. This is being rich toward God, and we are wealthy indeed.



What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This is meaningless and a chasing after the wind. Jesus, on the other hand, welcomes the crushed in spirit, the miserable and the despairing. He lifts the lowly, comforts the miserable, justifies the sinner and saves the despairing. This is meaningful and being captured by the wind, which is the Spirit of God. This is wisdom, and it is of greater worth than much fine gold. It is the riches of God’s grace. Amen.