

Sermon

“The Beginning of Wisdom”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, August 15, 2021

12th Sunday After Pentecost

Lord, we begin again each day in gratitude.

Glad for another day in which to live in your love.

Glad for another chance to respond faithfully.

**Glad for time enough enjoy your creation and our
friends, family, neighbors.**

**Glad for this community of faith which encourages us to
live a life which really is alive to you and your love.**

**We hear your call to live in wisdom before you. So help us
today as the Word is read and proclaimed to hear your
invitation, and honestly acknowledge our ambivalence. May
we gird on trust in you to see ourselves and our world as
they truly are — and may we come to know the wisdom of
faith.**

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy
Spirit. Amen.**

*Eph. 5:15 Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,
16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 17 So do not be
foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 Do not get drunk with
wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 as you sing
psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making
melody to the Lord in your hearts, 20 giving thanks to God the Father at all
times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Psa. 111:1 Praise the LORD!

*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.*

2 *Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.*

3 *Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.*

4 *He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.*

5 *He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.*

6 *He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.*

7 *The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.*

8 *They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.*

9 *He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name.*

10 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever.*

- I. This morning as we begin I want to invite you to take a moment and put in mind someone who is wise.**
- A. Not necessarily the smartest person you know**
 - * This is not about degrees, or intellect**
 - B. Think of the person to whom you would turn to as a counselor in perplexity . . .**
 - * The person whose presence you would gladly have in the face of some insoluble time of trouble.**
 - C. Someone who knows somehow about the essence of the “good life,” and who models that in how they live in this world.**
 - D. Now ask . . . how did they become wise?**

E. Arsenius was a well-educated Roman of senatorial rank who lived in the household of emperor Theodosius and served as tutor to the princes: Arcadius & Honorius.

Arsenius once asked an old Egyptian monk for advice about his temptations. Another monk who saw this said, "Arsenius, how is it that you, who are so learned in Greek and Latin, are asking that uneducated peasant about your temptation?" Arsenius answered, "I have a lot of worldly knowledge of Greek and Latin: but I have not yet been able to learn the alphabet of this peasant."

[from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*]

I love the humility of this story about Arsenius! For all of his learning Arsenius recognizes that he does not know everything. Indeed, he hasn't even mastered the "alphabet" of the peasant's spirituality.

II. You could make the argument that we who live in the 21st century have better data and more knowledge even than Arsenius.

A. Indeed, anyone with a phone has access with only a few taps of the finger to the vast repository of knowledge that the internet provides.

1. And while it is true that there is much that is trite, and simplistic, and cynical on the internet — it is also true that vast libraries of good information are also available to anyone who is discriminating enough to seek them.

B. And yet — for all our access to all this knowledge and data — in which we are awash — there seem to be relatively few who have honed the art of wisdom.

1. We are data-rich and virtue-poor.

- C. Wisdom is something beyond knowledge. It cannot be gained through a course of study because:**
- 1. it is more art than intellect.**
 - 2. It is a mixing of judgement & information, virtue & experience.**
- D. The ancients called it “prudence” and it was one of the Cardinal Virtues.**

Virtue — derives from the Latin word for “excellent.” The virtues are the “excellent” things. They are the path to a well-lived life.

Cardinal — as in “the Cardinal Virtues” derived from the word “hinge.” The good life hinges upon the pursuit of these four virtues.

- E. Prudence — In modern usage, we think of “prudence” as being “cautious,” and perhaps wisdom is sometimes cautious,**
- 1. but in the ancient context in which the virtue was named, “prudence” meant something like: rightly knowing one’s place in the world, and developing the capacity to know/perceive things as they really are so that we act rightly.**
 - 2. Both knowing & living the truth.**

“...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” John 8:32

The truth will set us free. Living in falsehood ultimately imprisons us.

- III. Both our passages of scripture today address the question of wisdom.**
- A. Ephesians —**
 - B. Psalm 111 — Beginning of wisdom as fear of God.**
 - 1. This phrase in Hebrew scripture runs gamut between “reverence” on one end and “terror” on the other. The meaning is derived contextually and most often leans to the “reverence” end.**
 - a. In our context it seems to me that this is a call to live in a worldview where God is still a player.**
 - 2. Enlightenment people are embarrassed by the idea that God can and does act outside the confines of “natural processes.”**
 - a. Our world is a “closed system” and therefore one can only explain things using other things within the system.**
- Adelard of Bath 12th C. Monk:**
“To say a rainbow appears because God put it there is, ‘a miserable refuge.’”
- C. So how do we deal with the suggestion that “the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord” when we are so hesitant to acknowledge that God can and does *act* in our lives and in the world?**
 - D. If the ancients (both philosophical and theological) had it right and wisdom (prudence) is a virtue . . .**
 - 1. How do we gain wisdom?**

- IV. Steps to wisdom — What is the truth that sets us free?**
- A. Ephesians - Wisdom marked by:**

1. **Wisdom as making good use of the time (redeeming time)**
 - a. **Hallowing of time.**
 - b. **Refusing to waste time when so much is needed to be done - “...because the days are evil.”**
- * **Seeking to know the Lord’s will - discernment**
 - a. **God’s will *can* be found.**

Rom. 12: 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.

- * **Sober - filled with HS**
- * **Singing & making melody in your heart**
 - a. **A call to be joyful in discipleship.**
- * **Giving thanks for everything**

Rom. 8:28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

B. “fear of the Lord”. — This is to recognize who we are and whose we are. It requires enough humility to understand that we are not self-made.

“At this point the monastic understanding of humility has a role to play. It is unfortunate that it is a concept which has become so unattractive, and carries associations of low self-esteem, for in fact its true meaning lies in the proper sense of self. It means knowing and accepting my limitations, and not denying them; I am not in charge; I am not the ultimate source of wisdom. I am not self-sufficient; I cannot manage on my own. When I admit that God is in charge I am willing and ready to change, probably time and time again— which is simply another way of saying that I am ready to open myself up to a process of continuing transformation.

Esther de Waal, “Lost in Wonder”, 82

C. Let me borrow from Luther’s *Larger Catechism* about the first Commandment:

“That ... upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.”

1. Do we expect to receive the things that are worth having from God?

D. I am taken by a story Henri Nouwen tells about his visit to Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

1. He asks her what advice she can give him to help him live out his vocation as a priest. She replies:

“Dear father, spend one hour a day in adoration of your Lord, and never do anything that you know is wrong . . . and you will be alright.”

2. That simple advice is the essence of the fear of the Lord —

† **Keeping God ever before you through prayer . . . an awareness of God’s presence**

† **Living truthfully . . . doing only what is right.**

E. So to summarize:

1. Expect to receive the things worth having from God as *gifts*

2. Keep God ever before you

**3. Never do anything you know to be wrong/
untruthful**

...and you will be “alright.”

This is the *beginning* of wisdom. If we will joyfully start with this simple beginning — no doubt God will reveal much more to us later as we walk the path of faithful discipleship.