

August 15,2021

Strange Wisdom

Texts: **1Kings 2: 10-12;3:3-14;Ephesians 5: 15-20; John 6:51-58**

As we left the cottage to come home this year, I was thinking of my dad, who is no longer with us. A few years ago, just as we were leaving, my father took me aside and said to me, "That's quite a woman you married, Allan. She's so good with the kids, she's sweet and she's kind. She's smart and she's full of fun. You're very lucky."

And I said, "Yeah, dad, I know, she had me fooled at first, too." Okay, I didn't really say that. That would be an example of being unwise! But I did check with my wife to see if it was okay for me to tell that joke in the sermon, and she gave me the okay. That's an example of being wise! And my father really did say his part, to which I heartily agreed.

Today our Scriptures are talking about wisdom. They begin with Solomon's famous plea for wisdom on ascending the throne of his father, David. Solomon had a dream in which the Lord appeared to him and told him, "Ask me for what I should give you." And Solomon asked for wisdom.

Now for me, the most intriguing thing about Solomon's request is that asking for wisdom - instead of for wealth or a long life or victory over his enemies - was itself an act of wisdom on Solomon's part. In spite of what he says about being as a little child, not knowing how to go out or come in, Solomon is actually already quite wise. He asks God for nourishment for his soul, by asking for wisdom. He asks God to give him what only God can give, instead of for things that time and circumstance, and even worldly smarts and wiliness, can give. That's already wise. He already knows that asking for material things, or for victory over enemies or even long life, is not necessarily something that is pleasing to God, and that these are things that may not actually be that great.

Money and riches empty from our pockets quickly. Money doesn't stay in the bank for long. It is fleeting as Solomon himself points out in the book of Proverbs. And no one ever thinks they have quite enough money. In his 2007 book, ***Richistan: A Journey Through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich***, author Robert Frank interviewed many of what we would now call the 1% on their wealth. And he found that, no matter how wealthy people were, most people said that they would only really be comfortable if they had about twice as much. That is, a millionaire would say that she needed at least two million to be really comfortable, and someone with ten million dollars would say that they needed about twenty to really be safe, and someone with a billion said that they thought 2 billion would mean their money worries were over. Bill Gates said in 2019, "I've paid over \$10 billion in taxes. I've paid more than anyone in taxes. If I had to pay \$20 billion, it's fine. But when you say I should pay \$100 billion, then I'm starting to do a little math over what I have left over." What he would have left over is about \$30 billion dollars. That would be hard to live on! (Gates later clarified that he had been joking. Um...)

It's kind of incredible when you think about it, that people with that much money would still feel insecure, as if they needed more. But it's true. And it's true, I think, because the kind of security that they want in life, the security against the ups and downs of life, security against worrying about your

kids or about getting a divorce, doesn't come from having money at all. Having money doesn't bring life, doesn't nourish the soul. You can be very rich, and still have your marriage break down, as Bill Gates unfortunately found out this year. Having security, having a soul that is at peace, well, that comes, instead, from knowing God, from sharing in God's wisdom, from having a relationship with God.

That's why the apostle Paul could write to the Philippians that "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through the one who gives me strength."

The secret Paul's talking about is knowing Jesus Christ. Paul didn't have an easy life, but he had a glorious life. He can be content because he's doing what he's supposed to be doing for Christ. It's not money that makes you secure; it's knowing Jesus, so that in life and in death, you are covered.

So Solomon's refusal to ask for riches is already wise. And his refusal to ask for victory over his enemies is also wise. Victory over enemies usually does nothing but breed new enemies, unless you are remarkably magnanimous. Victory is never permanent. Ask the Assyrians. Ask the Babylonians. Ask the Egyptians. Ask the Romans. Ask the British, upon whose Empire the sun once never set. The sun has set now. Ask any empire that ever existed, but which is no more. Victory is never permanent. Eventually, your enemies recover or new people arise to be new enemies, to defeat you. Asking for constant victory is asking for constant war. It's not a good plan.

And Solomon is wise, too, in seeing that long life itself is not necessarily always a blessing. It can be, and the young always seem to think it is, but the reality is that it can also be a painful struggle as your body and your mind betray you. You lose the people you love to death before you, and the world in which you grew up changes into something completely different and somewhat foreign to you, before your very eyes. (Remind me again why I need to care what influencers are doing on TikTok?) As older people are always telling me, it takes courage to grow old. There are indignities involved. I will say no more. Yes, Solomon was wise not to ask for long life, since he didn't know whether he'd be like my friend Bob, who died at 98 with his mind and body still intact and working, or like so many others who have suffered from what I call 'the long goodbye'.

So Solomon's prayer to the Lord for wisdom is a sure sign that he is already wise. He is asking God to increase the gift which he already has, a gift that will serve him well in his calling to be the ruler over God's people. We may not start out as wise as Solomon, but by taking his example, we can ask for God's wisdom ourselves, so that we can make better use of the talents that God has given us and better use of the time that God has granted us.

Solomon's request for wisdom is based on a deep understanding of wisdom. What he's asking for is an ongoing relationship to God, to know how to live. This is not at all a commonplace wisdom. In fact, it's rather rare in the world. People would rather look to practical rules, to sound bite slogans, to political philosophies, or even to religious rituals, to find their way in the world, rather than to a relationship with God. Slogans and rules are much easier to get on board with. A relationship with God takes effort; it takes prayer. It takes some Scripture reading. It takes some effort to act for justice and to show love to your neighbor. Secular wisdom is easier. "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." Excellent advice. Unless you get your best work done after midnight. "Look out for number one!" Very popular, but self-centered advice that leads to people climbing on top of others to get ahead.

“He who dies with the most toys wins.” Well, you’re still dead, and someone else will play with those toys. To paraphrase Jesus: “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you. And whose will your toys be then?”

“Find your best life now: 7 steps to world domination” Okay, that one I made up, based on a crazy book by a well-known mega church pastor. His shtick is that you want to be in a relationship with God, not so you can learn how to serve God better, but so you can learn what you have to do to make God your servant, so God will make you wealthy, and give you victory over your enemies, and give you a long life. His book suggests that wisdom is everything Solomon didn’t ask for. It’s a very popular take on spirituality. People want to answer the question, “What do I do to get God to give me riches and success and long life?”

Some people misread this whole passage and think that if you ask God for wisdom, you’ll get what you really want, which is wealth, victory and a long life. It’s like tricking God. I don’t want wisdom, but if you want me to say that I want wisdom to get what I really want, okay, I can do that. It’s as if asking for wisdom were a way to get all the things that Solomon didn’t ask for. In Seminary, I had a friend who thought about asking God to send him to serve a church in Alaska, so that God would send him to serve a church in Hawaii to learn obedience.

Instead, Solomon’s wisdom points us towards a different question: who do I have to know to be wise. By asking God for wisdom, he was asking God for an ongoing relationship, for God’s continued leading, to show him the right path. And that’s a very different kind of search for wisdom. It’s not asking, “what do I do?”, but it’s saying, “Who do I have to know to live a good life?” Solomon’s wisdom sets us in the right direction about knowing God.

Take the time to meditate, to pray, to read Scripture, to read spiritual books, to be in worship. Take the time to protest injustice, to feed the hungry, to stand up for the oppressed, to oppose racism, sexism, homophobia. Take the time to know God, and to follow God in Jesus Christ. Spend your life seeking God and seeking justice. Use your time and money to love God and love your neighbor. That’s the secret to a good life. That way when you reach eternal life, and finally see God, you will come face to face with the one you have known all along.

Now that’s wisdom.

Amen