

What is Wisdom? Who Is Wise?

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Today marks the end of the traditional celebration of the Christmas season; Epiphany Sunday they call it. In this religious festival, the legend of the Three Wise Men figure very prominently. I am going to tell it, not argue with it. It is a story. The Three Wise Men from the East function as representatives for all the gentile nations gathered in that barn in Bethlehem, where, miraculously, a male child, the son of a Jewish mother, seemed to embody the dream of godliness manifest in this world. As the story goes, the Three Wise Men scanned the heavens and read the stars that told them that a new king had been born. They journeyed to pay homage. First, they looked in the obvious place: they go a palace, the conventional seat of power, only to discover that the star was pointing to an altogether different kind of place and royalty—the kind you find among the poor and the marginalized; the kind where families can't find a room in the inn and so give birth to babies in barns. There they paid their respects and left their treasure. And then, perhaps that very night, they had a dream: “don't go back the way you came.” I think this mythic tale is a good way to introduce what I have to say about wisdom—what it is, and who is wise; why we honour those in whom it is manifest, and why we wish that we had a good deal more of it ourselves.

The story of the wise men in the Gospel of Matthew points to key features that figure in what we esteem as wisdom—first, the three magi possessed intimate *knowledge* acquired from study, learning and *experience* that enabled them to read signs from the exterior world and the heavens that led them to their goal. Next, they expressed a kind of *humility, patience, and the ability to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity* which are also hallmarks of wisdom. Notice that

first they went to the palace of Herod—conventional common sense and custom would have dictated that surely this was the place to find the royal child whose birth the stars announced. But soon they realized they were mistaken. Imagine the tension and uncertainty of the situation—no, what they sought was not in the king’s house. What to do? What to say? All we know is that rather than covering their up their error, and thus saving face—their pride, reputation and honour—before the king by depositing their gifts with him, they persisted patiently onto the next step of their quest though it led them to the humblest of settings and the lowliest of subjects.

This brought to my mind a passage in the Talmud that goes like this: the sage, Ben Zoma said: who is wise? And then he answered—he who learns from all people, as it is said in the Psalms of David: ‘From all those who taught me, I gained understanding.’ (Ps. 119:99) That is to say, one who seeks wisdom, even if it means traveling to a stable, is the one most likely to acquire it. She’s is willing to go anywhere and to anyone without regard to her own reputation in order to seek knowledge; to achieve the goal of her quest. The visit of the wise men to a barn in Bethlehem suggests that wisdom is a kind of thirst that will take us to every person and every place; in this it is *akin to love* that cannot rest until it is satisfied. There is something about wisdom to me that is very much like love.

Seeing the star, knowing what it revealed was only the beginning of the journey—that took knowledge and experience in practicing the discernment of signs and portents. Humility, patience, not losing it in the face of uncertainty enabled the magi to discern a mistake and patiently continue their quest. Love of wisdom led them on to attaining its treasure, carried them out from the palace, into the alleys and backstreets until they finally found in a feeding trough for

livestock that which they sought: real beauty and true royalty in company with barnyard animals, rough neck shepherds, and anxious, joyful parents.

The end of this particular story echoes its beginning. The quest of the three wise men began with knowledge and experience to read external signs in the heavens; it ends with them discerning and trusting interior signs and portents arising of their own subjective experience—dreams told them “don’t go back the way you came”—that is, a “still, small voice,” the one that arises from being attuned to what we call “conscience” and “direct experience of...mystery and wonder” was known to them, trusted by them, and spoke to them with an authority sufficient to prudently lead them out of this story to enable perhaps an even greater one to begin.

Now most of us are not magi, or the three queens of orient, so what about wisdom today? And us? All of us find ourselves in situations where we wish we had it, and could exercise it so that it would serve as a guide to helping us make the best decisions at important moments in our lives. We wish that wisdom dwelt in us and that we could express it precisely because we want to lead meaningful lives as we count our days and as we step into an always uncertain future. That is, wisdom resides not just in making good decisions in crucial moments but also in what Confucius called *gen*— in the whole Way of life that precedes the decision—a way of life that draws on “a subtle weave of intellectual, emotional and social gifts”—of listening to one’s heart and head about what is morally right, and socially just—not just for oneself, but others in the here and now and in the future. (see Stephen S. Hall, *Wisdom: from Philosophy to Neuroscience*, 2010, pp.6-8. Hereafter, Hall)

Describing wisdom and its prescriptions for achieving the good life have a very long history in religion, philosophy and custom. Writings that offered instructions and observations in the formation of ethical character and in leading a successful and happy life started to appear in Egypt and Mesopotamia over four thousand years ago. Behind those works, and reaching

back into our pre-history, were generation-upon-generation of human experience, of hard-won wisdom and insights that women and men treasured and passed on in how to do what is wise in everyday life.

This collective wisdom appeared with the very rise of written languages in Egypt and throughout Asia. It encouraged attitudes and courses of action deemed right, just and pious, and prescribed ways of behavior that would facilitate and strengthen personal relationships, forms of communication and commerce, prudence and industry that make life in community congenial and secure. It's no accident, I think, that in the ancient Greek world wisdom was personified in the female deity Athena—she was both the patron of ancient Athens and of all urban arts and crafts, especially weaving and spinning—for what is wisdom if not the patient, careful gathering in and weaving together of our myriad threads of thought, emotion, and experience into the fabric of a life which covers our vulnerable nakedness before nature?

In the book of *Proverbs*, in Hebrew Scripture, wisdom is also personified in female form and depicted as a co-worker with God in the process of creation—"I was there when He set the heavens into place...When He fixed the foundations of the earth, I was with Him as a confidant, a source of delight every day...Now sons, listen to me; happy are they who keep my ways."

(*Proverbs*. 8:27, 29-30, 32). The wisdom literature of the ancient world is a great hymn to the power of the human mind as it discerns the lessons of experience; it is frequently depicted as a gift from the heavens, from creation itself, which endowed humanity with the faculty of wisdom. Its authors are convinced that everyone who attends to the wisdom of the past and employs powers of rational thinking and humility has the ability to know what to do and what to avoid. (see

introduction to *Proverbs*, in the *Jewish Study Bible*, Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., 2004, pp. 1447-9)

The resonance of the history and lessons of wisdom right down to the present today can be seen, for example, in a 2002 survey conducted in Canada in which psychologists asked

subjects to nominate people who struck them as particularly wise; consider the names and the history behind them—Mahatma Gandhi, Confucius, Jesus, Martin Luther King Jr., Socrates, Oprah Winfrey, Buddha, the Dalai Lama, and Nelson Mandela among others—contemporary, historical and mythic figures prominent in religion, media and politics, surprisingly rich in social activists, and yet a reasonably good set of people—as with wisdom itself, we seem to recognize the wise when we see them. (Hall, pp11-12)

The process of acquiring and expressing wisdom has, until only the past few decades, been reserved exclusively to the worlds of religion, philosophy, and custom. Now it has become a growing field of research and analysis in the sciences. By using the highly technical machinery of the clinical laboratory—like MRI scanners—by conducting surveys where thousands of individuals have answered questions about what they think are the attributes of wisdom, and by keeping meticulous running track, in longitudinal studies over decades, of how people make decisions in both mundane and life changing situations, research scientists in the fields of social neuroscience and psychology have begun to throw light on what extraordinary and everyday people think wisdom is and how we use it.

What these studies show, I think, is a striking congruence with much of what we have already encountered in the story of the Three Wise Men and the wisdom literature of the ancient world from Greece to Palestine, India and China. Though expressed in the empirical vocabulary of contemporary sciences, the protocols and outcomes of these studies speak of timeless human virtues: of knowledge acquired through study and everyday experience, of humility, patience, and the ability to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity, of exercising moral judgment, emotional self-control, loving kindness, the ability to defer immediate gratification in order to achieve a greater good, and a fundamental sense of justice which commits the wise to the welfare of

others—even if that means upsetting the status quo. In its particular time and place, wisdom can be socially dangerous—just think about almost every person identified by Canadians as exemplifying wisdom, they’ll tell you: Confucius was unemployable; Socrates and Jesus put to death; Mandela and Gandhi were imprisoned; Martin Luther King Jr. harassed throughout his life and eventually assassinated. (see Hall, and the examples of what he calls “the eight neural pillars of wisdom”, chapters 4-11, pp. 61-210)

But see, there I go again, referring to heroes of wisdom, to larger-than life characters! I am grateful for the stories of their lives and deeds, their examples, the religious and philosophical traditions they founded, the stirring social movements they led—but they seem so impossibly out-of reach. What about us? What about me? Is wisdom within our ability to achieve and share with others? Can we, in our own way, try to be wise women and men?

Let me cite one study, a couple of stories and bring these remarks to an end. About fifteen years ago, a team of sociologists and psychologists under the direction of Monika Ardelt, carried out a study to assess wisdom, with a focus on how regular folk, like us, deal with crises and adversity without getting overwhelmed. Ardelt and her colleagues began visiting senior citizens and administered a series of questions with follow-up interviews in churches and community groups in north-central Florida.

The questions addressed three features of wisdom: cognitive, reflective and emotional; that is, a) the ability to understand human nature, to perceive a situation clearly, and to make decisions despite ambiguity and uncertainty, b) a person’s ability to step outside oneself and understand another point of view, and c) how to remain positive and minimize negative feelings and emotions. Several qualities emerged again and again: seniors who scored high on the “wisdom scale” learned from experience, especially negative experiences; they could calmly examine a troubling situation; they could recast a crisis as a problem to be solved, taking action

in situations they could control, while accepting their inability to do so in matters outside their control; and they were almost embarrassingly positive about life. One seventy-seven year old African American World War II veteran, who'd seen his share of adversity and success, put it like this: "I've had as much bad things to happen as good things, but I've never allowed outside forces to take possession of my being. That means, whenever I had a problem, I went to something wholesome, like bowling, to solve it. I find life beautiful." As well, these seniors seem to cope well and resiliently with life because, as one put it: "when you come closer to the end of things, you focus on emotionally meaningful goals" and let the little things go.

Finally, the wise in this group spoke humbly over and over again about the importance of compassion as a cornerstone in their life, of loving service on behalf of others. One wise person remarked: "When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people." It turns out, in this and others studies about wisdom, that Winston Churchill was wrong when he famously said: If you're not a *liberal* at twenty you have no heart, if you're not a *conservative* at forty you have no brain. It appears that when it comes to wisdom and age, that just the opposite is true.

In a different place and long, long ago, it is recorded that the Buddha said: "It would not be true to say that the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is part of our practice. It would be true to say that the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is all of our practice." And in one hadith, or saying of the Muhammad, a Bedouin asked the Prophet: "How can I be a just man, the best of men?" And he got this response: "Desire for others what you desire for yourself, and you will be the most just man....Do good to others, and you will be the best of men." (on Ardelt's study, see Hall, pp. 53-6; on compassion as the fourth "pillar of neural wisdom" see pp. 115-32)

But where do we learn to be just and good—to be wise? Stephen Hall, who wrote a book length study of the science of wisdom: concluded—it is in the domain of the private, the domestic, the familial “where wisdom has its greatest lifelong impact. “Gandhi was shaped by his mother’s saintliness...Franklin by his father’s sagacity. Confucius’s diligence was rooted in a childhood with a single parent, and perhaps Socrates’ hard-nose form of philosophy owes something to his having had a stonecutter for a father and a midwife for a mother.” All of them, moreover, had teachers and mentors—generative adults whose words and example shaped them toward a life of wisdom.

In our Advent service about teenagers, I told you about my ninth-grade English teacher, Miss Bissinger. By very objective standard, I was flunking out of her class, failing in school, and running with a pretty tough crowd—I’d even been suspended for bad behavior in other classes. She could have just written me off; she had every right. Instead, she saw a young person thirsting for knowledge, real intellectual challenge and a purpose in life. She treated me like a human being, gave me one incredible book after another, and thus threw a life line to a drowning young man. A couple of years later, a local church leader named Wayne Ursenbach took the time to just sit down and let me pour out my heart and mind, my religious doubts and dissent. Instead of freaking out, he wisely, patiently listened to me, really listened without passing judgment, calling on dogma, or reading the riot act. I’ll never forget that evening, that empty church classroom, those metal folding chairs on which we sat for hours—and his kind, compassionate face and words.

Finally, there was my maternal uncle Everett. A veteran of war, a business and family man, and a local church leader like Wayne Ursenbach. My mother sent me to stay with him a couple of summers in my teen years to experience some wholesome family life in Minnesota,

and hopefully to straighten out a bit. Perhaps it was there that we built something a bond. Well years later, newlywed and still chafing uncomfortably in a conservative religion, Everett the family man and religious leader told Diana and me a couple of stories from his well of wisdom:

- The architect and the mysteriously moving foundation
- The blessing and the surprise.

These people aren't legends. They didn't found schools of philosophy, start religions or fill up the pages of history books. They were just folk, people like you and me. And I'll never forget them—that's what wisdom is and does: generative people open closed doors, help us find our footing and give us a grip on life. May we find and be those kind of people for ourselves, for those we love, and for the sake of the world.