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Ephesians 5:15-21, 1 Kings 3:4-15  
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*Wisdom From on High*

In Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Wobegon, the wise Lutheran Pastor Ingqvist is alarmed when he glances at Dear Abby columns and notices how often she refers her readers to ministers. "Talk to your minister," Dear Abby counsels a 14-year-old deeply in love with a 50-something married man serving serious time in a federal penitentiary. ". . . as she pours out her love for Vince, her belief in his innocence, the fact that his wife never loved him . . . not like she, 14 year-old Trish, can love him, and the fact that despite his age and their never having met except in letters, there is something indescribably sacred and precious between them." All pastor Ingqvist can think is: "Don't be ridiculous."

"Thou shalt not be ridiculous," writes the author of Ephesians. "Do not be foolish. Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise."

Our texts today call us to reflect on wisdom and wise-living in the midst of an often ridiculous world. The 1 Kings passage tells the story of Solomon's dream. Solomon, David's son, one of the greatest of all the Israelite kings has ascended to the throne, and no sooner does the crown belong to him, than God comes to King Solomon in a dream and asks the new king what his heart desires. Before he answers the question, King Solomon gives thanks to God for God's faithfulness to him and his father David, and all the people of Israel for keeping the covenant made to his ancestors. And then Solomon confesses his fear. He says he is just a child, he does not know how to govern a kingdom, and so King Solomon prays not for wealth or power, not for victory over his enemies or a long and healthy life, King Solomon prays for wisdom, for an understanding mind, for the ability to choose between good and evil, and God grants King Solomon his prayer – and adds to it honor, riches, victory, and a long and healthy life. For King Solomon, the path to wisdom begins with thanksgiving and humility.

In the Ephesians text, the author is writing to the church at Ephesus, encouraging the Christians to order their life together in wise ways. The seeds of wisdom, the author writes, are watered by thankful hearts. Wisdom is not moralism. Wisdom is giving thanks for what God has done. Wisdom is a practice of faith. Wisdom is looking around at your life, no matter the circumstances, and saying, "there is blessing here." Wisdom is waking up in the morning and as sleepy neurons fire and sunlight peeps in through the window, it is giving thanks for the breath of life, for the gift of another day of laughter, love, and work.

An entire section in the Old Testament, which includes the books of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Job, is considered wisdom literature. In this age of communication, information is found everywhere, on the internet, along the aisles of Barnes and Noble, in the depths of Perkins Library, on the front page of the newspaper, in those silly advertisements that show up in our inbox everyday. Information might be quantified in giga-bytes, parsed in laboratories, and stored in PDA's, but the Bible suggests Wisdom is gleaned in the earthiness of life. Wisdom has roots in traditions, practices, ways of living

that have stood the test of time. People do not become wise on their own. Wisdom comes from learning the rituals, habits, and stories of the communities we live in and the places we inhabit.

The literary critic, Harold Bloom, contrasting this age of information, knowledge, and wealth, with the economically impoverished yet wise ways of his childhood, says this: “Everything in my grandparents home found its meaning in the stories of scripture, its songs, its prayers. They were wise without education, had traveled virtually nowhere. My generation, my cousins and siblings with our Ph.D.s and M.D.s have no comparable learning. When we try to talk about meaning, we offer nothing but clichés and superficialities.”

There are many ways we learn wisdom that scripture supports. Wisdom is learned in the everyday. Wisdom finds meaning, substance, and purpose in habits that might normally be considered routine; raising children, learning to become friends, conversing with your neighbor, getting the kids off to school, giving your best at work, preparing the evening meal, paying the bills, calling your mother, saying bed-time prayers. Wisdom distinguishes the significant from the trivial. It sees the extraordinary in the ordinary. It locates the sacred in the otherwise mundane practices of life.

Wisdom is gleaned from a particular place, the contours of the landscape in which we live. There is some bit of wisdom that we learn by living in Durham that cannot be learned in Charlotte or Atlanta. Those cities have their own wisdom to pass on. Likewise, there is wisdom that can be learned by going to Duke that you would never get at Carolina. Or you might have the wisdom to go to both schools. There is wisdom about life that farmers, because of their dependence on the land, have that city-folk will be hard-pressed to learn – the rhythms of planting and harvest, sunshine and rain that reflect God’s pattern of creation and redemption.

Likewise, there is a rhythm to academic life that teaches wisdom, the four-year cycle of cocky high-school senior transformed to confident university graduate, and sometimes the other way around, repeats itself time and again on college campuses.

In Pat Conroy’s novel, *The Prince of Tides*, the pseudo-autobiographical account of Conroy’s boyhood in the lowland marsh of South Carolina, he begins like this:

“My wound is geography. It is also my anchorage, my port of call. I grew up slowly beside the tides and marshes of Colleton. Because I was a Wingo, I worked as soon as I could walk. I was born and raised on a Carolina sea island and I carried the sunshine of the low-country, inked in dark gold, on my back and shoulders. The boy in me still carries memories of those days when I lifted crab pots out of the Colleton River before dawn, when I was shaped by life on the river.” We are shaped; we learn wisdom, from the places we inhabit.

Wisdom is often learned in the painful places of life, as the book of Job suggests. A man who lost his wife after more than 40 years of marriage said recently, “I used to think of life as a roller coaster with some high times and low times and steep inclines and declines in the middle. But that’s no longer an adequate description. Roller coasters are found in amusement parks, places of fun and games, and when the ride ends you simply get off in the same place you began. “No,” he said, life is more like being on a boat in the middle of the ocean with only one oar, and you rise to the top of a wave and get glimpse of the horizon and then you go down into an abyss of the deep, from which you wonder if you will ever surface – and then somehow, by grace, you do. The oar isn’t

used to paddle, it's used as a rudder." This is a painful way to learn wisdom, but sometimes it is the only way.

However, of all the ways to grow in wisdom, the Bible gives most of its attention to wisdom as learned by giving oneself to a community, the church, and its rituals and practices. When the author of Ephesians speaks of wisdom, he is referring to an act of faith. As an example, he says people learning to be wise together should sing together. If you want wisdom, says Ephesians, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs among yourselves, making a melody to the Lord in your hearts. For the church, the starting block for wise-living is the processional hymn. Wisdom is learned through worship. For many of us our early and often lasting conception of God, self, and church, our theology if you will, is shaped by the hymns we sing. Singing together is a school for learning about God, learning to give praise to God, learning to love one another, and live holy lives.

We all know of places and times when the people of God have been anything but wise. Solomon, for all his faithfulness, was not a perfect king. He built a magnificent house for himself before repairing the Temple in Jerusalem. He arranged an unwise political alliance with Egypt in order marry the beautiful Egyptian princess. He worshipped at Gibeon and other places that were not consistent with Jewish law.

Likewise, the church throughout history has at times majored in silliness and minored in problem-making, and yet Ephesians gives us an image of the church at its best, a place where people in all stages of life gather to sing together, to pray together, to serve together, to learn from one another. In baptism, the church lays its hands on an infant, youth, or adult, and the church says to that person, "You don't know it yet, but we are going to give you a story to live by. You don't have to do it on your own. We've been at this business of life with Jesus for a long time and there is a bit of wisdom we have learned as a community that we want you to know." The saints of the church become our professors. The heroes of the bible become our mentors. The stories of the bible become our stories. Our brothers and sisters in Christ become companions in the way that leads through cliché's and superficialities to truth and life.

Finally, wisdom is a gift given by God. Whereas we in modern America may pray and hope for the resurrection of the NASDAQ, King Solomon and all of Ancient Israel prayed and hoped for the coming of wisdom. Israel believed that wisdom was the Spirit of God at work in people's lives and that sacred wisdom was present when the world was created. The Christian church adopted similar language. During Advent, the church prays to Holy Wisdom, "O Come Thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh. To us the path of knowledge show and guide us in her ways to go."

God's greatest gift is wisdom, wisdom through which the world was created, wisdom which came as a person in the flesh of Jesus Christ – born in a manger, died on a cross, wisdom poured out of his body as the bread of life, that the world's hunger would be satisfied. This is foolishness of the cross that Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God which is stronger than human strength.

Karl Barth was the most influential Protestant theologian of the last century. He was one of the few pastors in Nazi Germany to stand up to Hitler, stating clearly that the true church would never become a hand-maiden of the state. He worked on his groundbreaking *Church Dogmatics*, a 14-volume six-million word treatise from 1932 until his

death in 1968. Shortly before he died, Dr. Barth was giving a lecture at Princeton University to a group of mostly academics. When he finished his lecture, a lay-person in the back stood up and said, “Mr. Barth, you have given your life to the church, you have written pages upon pages of theology, what is the one thing you want me as a disciple of Jesus to know?” Many academics would not be able to rise to the occasion, but Barth responded simply, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” How wise. How very wise.

Amen.