

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

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Asking for Wisdom

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ephesians 5:15-20; 1 Kings 3:3-14

So you're in a quandary, and you need to talk about the situation with someone you trust. Whom will you call? What qualities in another person will help you the most?

These are important questions, because from time to time we all need some no-nonsense, hard boiled advice. "Tell me what I need to do to solve this problem. Tell me where I need to improve. Let me know what I'm doing wrong."

In the old Peanuts comic strips Charlie Brown often sought advice from his friend Linus. They would stand together leaning on a low brick wall discussing problems big and small. "What's the meaning for Christmas?" Charlie Brown might ask one day, while on another he might try to tackle a challenge a little closer to home, "How can I get the attention of the Red-headed girl?" Linus often had a sensible, reasoned answer for Charlie Brown that he would patiently explain. Linus seemed wise beyond his years, and that was part of the charm of the comic strip.

More famously, Charlie Brown also sought help from Linus' older sister. Lucy Van Pelt regularly set up shop in a converted lemonade stand with a sign above her head reading "Psychiatric Help 5¢." A sign below that indicated "The Doctor is in." She often belittled him. Sometimes her advice seemed senseless, and the sessions always ended with her hand stretched out "5¢ please." But, even Lucy sometimes hit the nail on the head, and even if she was lacking in courtesy, she was sincere. She wanted to help Charlie Brown to be a better person.

In my own life, I know that I have made some poor choices by turning to the wrong person for advice. Even worse, I've made the poorest choices by turning to no one. I've simply made up my mind and forged ahead. Usually, choosing the wrong person is almost like that: I go to speak with a person whom I can be pretty sure will be ready to endorse my own desires.

We all could use some hints about seeking guidance. Our best help comes not from someone who will simply say 'yes' to us, but rather someone who will challenge us, prod us, urge us to do the harder work that must be done. This requires a measure of dispassion. It's best if the person we consult won't be affected by how things turn out.

That is one thing that is so troubling about some of the important reforms that are being attempted in our country at this time. Whom do our leaders consult when they try to fix what is broken or improve what is working poorly? We see in

the discussions that many who are offering advice have a large economic stake in the outcome. They are not disinterested observers. They are high-stakes players seeking to further their own interests.

Suppose I am having a conflict with my mother, and who doesn't from time to time? It may be easiest to talk to another family member about it, but they've got a stake in the outcome. They're enmeshed in the same system. How much better to get beyond my closed family group and gain the larger perspective of an outsider who's looking in. Then, perhaps, I'll gain some useful insight into how in a time of conflict to honor and love my mother, myself, our family.

We see this kind of dispassion in King Solomon's response to two women who are fighting over a newborn child. "We'll divide the baby, and give half to each." I don't think for a moment that Solomon is ready to murder a child, but he's made a brilliant move, and one that he can only make as a dispassionate actor in the drama. Unable to untangle the conflicting claims of the women; he pursues the goal of reuniting the baby with its real mother.

What I am describing here is the removal of our own ego concerns, our own personal agendas, our own fleeting desires as guides to sound decision making. In fact, in the practice we gain by consulting a wise counselor, we learn the discipline of seeking some distance from the swirl of life which often overwhelms us. We learn to step back, to see even ourselves as part of a much larger picture.

That picture is very large indeed. It includes me, my unique history, experiences, and gifts. It includes you. It includes family, friends, work mates. Our community. Our nation. Our world. Most of all, that larger picture must include God. The work of discernment always takes God into account, sees God in every situation, understands that God is involved in all of life. So, on the one hand, we are called to a certain dispassion about ourselves, while on the other we are invited to summon a greater passion for God. These two together create what the Bible calls ‘wisdom.’

Wisdom is a magnificent thing. That is why the request that Solomon makes is so important. “Give me an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?” Solomon asks of God, and God grants his request and gives him a wise and discerning heart and mind.

God will grant the same thing to you and me. A wise and discerning heart. Unfortunately, we fail even to ask for it.

Quite frankly, that is because wisdom aims in a different direction from the things that are so valued, so emphasized, so promoted in our culture.

As one example, science and technology ask the question, “can we do a certain thing?” Wisdom asks, “should we do it?”

Through medical interventions, can a 70-year-old woman give birth to a healthy baby? Science answers, ‘yes,’ but wisdom probes whether this is a good thing.

Through the development of performance-enhancing drugs, can we make a swimmer swim faster, a runner run longer, a fighter fight harder? Again, the answer to the question is ‘yes,’ but wisdom wants to know the consequences and what this means for all of us.

Through genetic engineering, can we remake the human mind, the human body? It’s regularly done now with rats, or monkeys, even cows who produce our meat, our milk. Wisdom, though, urges caution and care.

Wisdom, you see, is much different than knowledge. Knowledge can be hoarded, secreted away, held for the benefit of a few at the expense of the many. Wisdom is for the good of all. Knowledge can lead to power. Wisdom leads only to goodness. Knowledge separates and segregates us. Who’s got it? Who lacks it? Wisdom brings us together. Indeed, Scripture shows “no interest in abstract knowledge—that is, in knowledge abstracted from justice and equity, goodness and truth.”

Wisdom is, in the words of Ellen Davis, “The art of living well.”¹ Living well with ourselves, with others, and with God. That life happens, not when we get our own way, but when we discover God’s way. Not when we have power over

others, but when we learn to empower others. Not when we grab for all we can get, but when we celebrate all that God has given.

Wisdom can be expressed in pithy aphorisms. The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is filled with them. “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” Or, “let your foot be seldom in your neighbor’s house, otherwise the neighbor will become weary of you and hate you.” Hidden treasures and quirky surprises! All in Scripture. And yet, wisdom can never be summed up in a list of maxims or rules, no matter how exhaustive. Every situation calls for its own wisdom, each moment demands new insights and direction.

Wisdom is a living thing, quite hard to pin down, but when we hear it, we know it’s true. I’ve experienced it in the work of a Church Session. Struggling faithfully over a difficult issue, we come to a moment when someone speaks. And everyone else gets quiet. We know that is what God wants us to do.

For sure, the elders of this congregation strive for wisdom.

I’ve experienced it in conversation with a trusted advisor. I’ve laid out my concerns, my needs, my worries. They’ve asked me to describe how God is a part of it all. Where is God at work in this situation? And, in that description, an answer comes forth. It did not come from in here. Wisdom has spoken, and I can only listen.

In the larger issues that confront our nation—financial reform, changes to health care—I sense that wise voices are speaking. They are just quite hard to hear. We need to seek them out, and attend to them, the ones who reference, not just themselves, not simply their own fears. But rather, the ones who can paint on a larger canvass which encompasses the needs of everyone and the best hopes of us all.

Wisdom is a wonderful thing. Much to be prized. Precious to us all.

Solomon recognized that. So did good ol' Charlie Brown. May you and I seek wisdom in our lives together, and in our world.

To seek wisdom is to seek God. And that's what we are all about.

¹ *Getting Involved with God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001).