

“Wise Up”

I Kings 3:5-12; Matthew 13:44-46

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 1, 2014 – 7th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

We've all had teachers who stand out in our memory. Often we remember them for their mastery of a subject and how they motivated us to learn. Most had the keen ability to make the whole process enjoyable. Favorite teachers also took a genuine interest in each student. We owe a great deal to these dedicated women and men for helping to shape our lives, though probably few of us ever went back later to thank them.

There's another kind of teacher who stands out in our minds as well. They are the less inspirational. Perhaps they didn't know their subjects as well, or just didn't have the drive to become outstanding teachers. These educators could make 40 minutes seem like four hours. I suspect we learned in this setting, too, but almost in spite of them.

One math teacher in my high school often got quite perturbed with us. Thinking back, and considering my classmates, he may have had some justification in this. You knew you were in trouble when he addressed you with one of his favorite phrases, “Wise up, mister!” This meant you weren't doing something right, but it could have been any number of things.

His actual words, though, had about as much impact on us as saying, “Get smart!” As if by simply telling you to do this you could improve your retention of the multiplication tables, your ability to calculate square roots, or increase your overall academic performance.

“Wise up, mister!” Well, we did have a lot of wise guys, but I don't think he meant this. Wisdom is a theme in our Old Testament reading for this morning. Solomon follows his father, David, as king of Israel. He goes to the holy shrine at Gibeon, and there God appears to him in a dream. God invites Solomon to “Ask what I should give you.”

Solomon replies, “Your servant is in the midst of the people you have chosen, a great people, so numerous that they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil...” God grants his wish. Indeed, so much so that Solomon and wisdom go together even down to this day.

This particular text from I Kings has also been used in many coronation ceremonies through the years, including that of Queen Elizabeth. It wouldn't be a bad prayer for all politicians to pray before assuming office. The words acknowledge our limits and, at the same time, affirm the source of all wisdom.

Wisdom is the ability to discern good from bad, best from better, workable from the impractical—all within the parameters of a bigger picture. It is to know when to act, and when to wait, when to speak up and when to listen. It is to discover a deep inner core in yourself. Not many people are truly wise, but everyone possesses some degree of wisdom.

If being wise is a desirable goal, how do we get it? In a speech back in 1948, Winston Churchill offered this thought: "The first duty of a university is to teach wisdom, not a trade; character, not technicalities." Perhaps that thought still has some merit and could rightly be extended to our public schools as well.

Currently it doesn't look like Churchill's advice has been taken to heart. There's great pressure on our schools nowadays to turn out technocrats. Facts, figures, and formulas seem to be high on the learning scale, with reflective ability less emphasized. Preparing for a future career is important, but so is preparing for being a responsible and productive citizen with good life skills. I believe we should educate our children to succeed in living, as well as getting a job.

Wisdom is the sum total of knowledge and experience, all settled out in a way where the pieces fit together. So we really can't teach someone to be wise. What we can do is nurture and prepare them that, in time, they might receive this gift. It grows along with us.

Perhaps you recall from your civics class that there is a minimum age to be President of the United States? It's 35 years old and that age requirement is there for a purpose. Not that something magical happens on the day you hit this age. On your birthday you don't automatically have the scales lifted from your eyes and say, "Aha." What this age requirement acknowledges is that the leader of our country needs enough maturity to apply what has been learned up to this point. That takes years of just living.

On the other hand, age alone doesn't guarantee wisdom. There are old fools as well as young ones, and the longer we live and don't make much progress, the more unlikely it will be that we ever will. You have to live, but you also have to learn.

The Bible tells us that all wisdom begins and ends with affirming God's place in the world. Unless we can see human limitations, we can't understand our rightful place within the universe. When we don't know our place, we can't have the proper perspective. It is God who made us, and not the other way around.

Genesis captures this basic insight in poetic language when it says, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth..." True wisdom begins with acknowledging the Lord as primary. Without that basic insight, a man or woman cannot be fully wise. If God is at the center of your life, then you're on the right course. Wisdom certainly has as much to do with insight and character as with intellect.

Our Gospel lesson for today then gives us an example of wisdom in action. These are the twin parables of Jesus about treasure hidden in a field and of finding a pearl of great value.

The treasure is probably coins or jewels hidden in a clay jar. Because of the numerous wars that swept over the region, it was common for valuables to be buried until such time as the danger had passed. If anything happened to the owner, the location of the treasure might be lost for good or until another happened across it by chance. Every peasant probably had such a secret hope as he tilled the earth.

Most likely the man in the story is a poor laborer who uncovers the jar while plowing. He acts immediately as a result of his find. Yet it's worth noting that the man does not simply take the

jar, but scrapes up all he can get hold of to buy the field and thus establish legal ownership to anything found there.

Turning to the other short parable, pearls were highly valued in ancient times as well as they are today. During Jesus' lifetime pearls were largely from the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, or the Indian Ocean.

One day a certain merchant comes across an exceptional pearl after years of searching. Once he discovers this particular one he knows he must have it. So he takes the risk and raises the needed money to buy it because it's truly what he has been waiting for. Like the farmer, the discovery comes as a surprise.

In both instances a secret dream is suddenly and surprisingly fulfilled. When such joy captures a person, it penetrates all of his being; everything else seems of much lesser value. It determines and dominates future activity. The decisive thing in the double parable is not what the two men give up, but their readiness for doing so. Their discovery is worth whatever it takes to make it happen.

In the parables both the farmer and the merchant are held up as examples. They know what they want and what they have to do to get it. The Kingdom of God is the gift that Jesus brings. So the person who is wise will gladly give up any lesser pursuits for the greater satisfaction of finding in the true way.

Keep these three things in mind today. Wisdom begins with knowing that God is at the center of our existence. Wisdom is more a function of character than of intellect. Wisdom requires us to act when the obvious is presented to us. These are the three stepping stones that move us into the fullness of life.

Wise up!