

## "WISDOM OR FOLLY?"

AUGUST 28, 1988

The school year is about to begin. Some of those I knew as seniors in last year's P.F. group have already arrived at their colleges. But I am aware that some are yet to go and sit in the pews today.

I remember my own college days being days of great folly as we who sought wisdom and knowledge learned of the opportunities and consequences of our independence. And so to you who are about to enter your college years, or who are about to go out into the world, I say, pay particular attention to what I have to say today, for I speak of wisdom and folly.

". . . the nature of the problem of [humanity]" writes Stephen King-Hall, ". . . has always been the same. It has been the need of making a choice between self and selflessness; hatred and love; taking and giving; competition and co-operation; the short view and the long view; . . . ."

The need of making a choice, that is to say, between wisdom and folly.

Our scripture reading today offers a rich and colorful picture of that choice.

Wisdom or Folly? Which do we choose?

Augustine wrote that "The greatest good is wisdom." and 900 years after him, Thomas Aquinas wrote, "Of all human pursuits the pursuit of wisdom is the most perfect, the most sublime, the most profitable, the most delightful."

To begin, let's look at that part of the scripture passage that peaks of wisdom. Here, Wisdom is a woman who has built her house, slaughtered her beasts, mixed her wine, set her table, in preparation for a great feast. And we are invited to that feast, for the lady wisdom has sent out her maids to proclaim the invitation to the feast of wisdom.

The feast will take place in her house-- a house supported with seven pillars--suggesting that the house is one of some expanse and wonder. A house that was not built in a day, but rather over time--upon the experience that comes with years.

We all hope that we grow in wisdom and stature as the experiences of our lives add up. And experience is a fine teacher. Several years ago, some months after my younger brother had died of cancer, I visited a woman, whom I would

call wise, who had served in the capacity of my youth leader, for a time. We had not seen each other since before my brother's passing and I decided it was time to see her again. I remember ringing her doorbell. Upon answering her door, she looked me square in the face for a long moment, and I will never forget her words. Before she invited me in, she said, in a matter-of-fact way, "You look a little wiser around the eyes."

Wisdom can come with experience, it's true, and thank goodness the young have the benefit of the experience of others. In listening to the wisdom of others, we may not gain wisdom, but we may at least learn enough to avoid making a few mistakes. Wisdom's house continues to be built upon the wisdom of hoards of people throughout the ages, and we need not think that our lives must be lived without the benefit of the wisdom of those who have passed through life's doors ahead of us. So isn't it appalling that our world of today seems so bereft of wisdom?

Barbara Tuckman writes in her book The March of Folly that Folly is the "pursuit of policy contrary to self-interest."

I remember a few weeks ago, Rev. Dunn spoke about evil and he said that we were enchanted by evil. It appears that we are enchanted by Folly as well--by the adventure it might offer. The wanton woman who is Folly, in the Proverb, acknowledges that enchantment, when, in offering, not a feast, but only bread and water, she says, "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." Folly. It is a policy contrary to our self interest and yet it still enchants us.

I very much like the imagery of this passage of scripture. It is so vivid. Instead of sending out maids with an invitation, like Wisdom, the foolish wanton woman sits at the door of her house and calls to passers-by, trying to divert them as they go "straight on their way". I can visualize that scene.

Folly seems to call to us that way, diverting us from a path we have chosen in a more responsible moment. And we've all had moments of folly--some serious and some not so serious.

I remember, as a child, a neighbor boy named Danny. Danny was something of a trouble maker. I remember that my mother didn't want me spending time with him. And I should mention before I disparage Danny, that he is now a responsible and respected member of society. But one day, Danny became the voice of Folly for me. In an idle moment, he suggested that we go to a nearby construction site and get dirt clods to throw at passing cars. It would be fun and easy and safe, he said. We could hide behind the piles

of dirt that were there and duck our heads before the dirt clods even hit the cars. It seemed harmless enough, after all they weren't rocks, just dirt clods. And it was easier to say yes to the persistent Danny, than to say no. So I took the lazy way out and I looked only to the short term fun, rather than to the long term consequences, which, for a ten year old, were considerable--because we got caught. Unfortunately, we threw a clod at a car owned by someone who knew us and our parents. But it was the way of folly to tempt us with short term fun. The proverb mentions, in the last verse we read this morning, that those being called to by the wanton woman, who offers only a short time of folly, time that may appear sweet, aren't aware that in her house, "the dead are there, . . . her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Wisdom or Folly, which will we choose?

Now, I must tell you. I got to this point in my sermon preparation and, as I encourage the members of my covenant classes to do, I asked myself, "So what?" This all seems pretty self evident. Of course we would choose wisdom over folly; of course we would choose what is in our self-interest over what goes against our self-interest; we think ourselves sharp enough to take the long view over the short view. Yes, it's all self-evident--we would choose wisdom. We would choose wisdom because we want the reward of the feast in the mansion much more than we desire the forbidden and illicit bread and water in the house of Folly.

So I asked, so what? I got to this point and I was stuck. I thought, well, maybe I could simply offer these words as a reminder to continue in the ways of wisdom, to keep up the good work. But that was too easy--it was lazy--it was folly.

I remembered a lawyer friend of mine telling me, as we debated some issue one day, that it doesn't matter who knows what they're talking about. What matters is who sounds like they know what they're talking about. I thought of taking that path; speaking with a voice of authority and embellishing what I've already told you and leaving it at that. But then it occurred to me that this too was just a short term solution--an easy and lazy way out. And with that revelation: that I had been listening to the voice of Folly I arrived at this thought:

It seems that folly is, in fact, more the order of our day than is wisdom. We may think we are wise, but so often we choose the way of folly. Paul wrote that "The wisdom of this world is foolishness." We hear the tempting voice and worldly advice of the wanton woman and, thinking ourselves wise, accept her encouragement to the forbidden bread and water. We look to the short view so that we might "get ours now", ignoring the long term consequences, leaving future

years and later generations to suffer from our folly.

One need only look at the polluted beaches on the east coast to see the result of a decision made, based on a short term vision. We need only remind ourselves of nuclear waste that is being stored in decaying containers, a short term solution, that will effect the lives of future generations, we need only look at the diminishing quality of our air and water to know that even though we like to think we are choosing wisdom, we are often mistaken.

But we are not without hope. James writes that ". . . the wisdom from above is in the first place, pure. . ." (James 3:17) He draws a distinction between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God, one suggestion being that we CAN experience, at least in some small way, God's wisdom. God's wisdom can be a part of our lives and we are not doomed to constant folly.

I'm sure you can think of worldly examples of God's wisdom--maybe better than this one, but try this on for size. Today lumber and paper companies are restoring forestland rather than simply ravaging it for short term gain. They have taken a long view and seen that it is in their self-interest to act wisely with our natural resources. It was in their self-interest as a profit making concern. The cynic in me suspects that profit was the over-riding factor in their decision. But it was also in their interest as creatures on this planet. It was a wise decision. Could it be that some of God's wisdom broke into our world by way of that decision? Perhaps.

The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that ". . . wisdom is more profitable than folly, as light is more profitable than darkness: the wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in the dark." and in the same breath he writes this, "Yet I saw that one fate comes to all of them." then asking, "To what purpose have I been wise?" returning us to an earlier question, "so what?"

Perhaps we need to look beyond the results of our choices--to the reasons for our choosing. Earlier in the book of Proverbs the lady, Wisdom, herself, speaks. She says, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. . .when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him. . . rejoicing before him always."

It is as if wisdom is a necessary part of all of creation and we benefit most in this life when we are truest to our created nature. As we live out our years, gain experience and grow from the experience of others, we enter into wisdom's house and become builders of that house as well, making room for those who will seek wisdom in future times.--not because we seek the feast. That is a short term

goal. But rather so we can become more nearly what we were created to be, so we might, as the lady Wisdom said, "leave simpleness, and live, and walk in the way of insight". That is the long view--that is the reason we should honestly and diligently seek to be wise.

Wisdom's house is built, it is strong and our task, always, is one of decision.

The wisdom of the world, though tempting, is not the same as God's wisdom. The wisdom we seek will come by way of the long view, through prayer, through a growing relationship with our Creator and through an understanding that we are in relationship, not only with God, but with all of creation, our world and the people and animals and plants that inhabit it. If our choices are wise, perhaps we will see Wisdom standing beside us and rejoicing before us. May it be so!

PRAYER: Most gracious and loving God, May we see Folly for what it is and seek Wisdom--wisdom not of this world, but Your wisdom. It is in Christ's name we pray, amen.