

Ecclesiastes 7:10-14

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"THE DANGER OF KNOWLEDGE"

(THE VALUE OF WISDOM)

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Once again, I begin by telling you I've changed my sermon title. The secretaries know how I hate to give my sermon title to them before I write the sermon, but we do it for the sake of our newsletter. But I never know if my sermon will be well represented in the title. So I've changed it again, like I did last week--or rather, I've added to it. I've added the subtitle, "the value of wisdom" for reasons that I hope will become evident.

Either James Madison or Alexander Hamilton, we're not sure which, wrote these words in number 57 of the Federalist Papers: "The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society;..."

They didn't speak of knowledge. I suppose that knowledge was a given factor--an understandable requirement if one was to be wise, but they thought it important to mention wisdom and virtue--they didn't make a point to mention knowledge.

I've been interested recently in the concern our leaders have over our ability to compete in the changing technological world. And I see our leaders pointing to Japan and Europe as examples of educational efforts that we should be emulating--we hear voices saying "math and science--let's make sure our children get more math and science." And yet we don't hear many saying, "let's nurture wisdom in our youth."

There is a story of some people who lived at the bottom of a cliff. They witnessed large numbers of people jumping off the cliff. They thought they should do something to help the situation, so they built a hospital at the bottom of the cliff. But, as you well know, that's not where the real problem was.

Our society seems to be building a cliff at the bottom of a cliff. We are taking efforts to cram facts into the heads of our school age children these days, but we don't seem to be teaching them how to use those facts. We're not teaching them to be wise.

Solomon, the writer of Proverbs, a very wise man, wrote, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom..." (Prov. 9:10) And yet, another wise man, named Clarence Darrow, wrote these words, "The fear of God is not the beginning of wisdom. The fear of God is the death of wisdom. Skepticism and doubt lead to study and

investigation, and investigation is the beginning of wisdom."

I find myself somewhere in between those two statements. I understand the fear of God to be as Thomas Aquinas spoke of it. That is, the fear of God is the respect of God that rests on faith in God's revelation to us, not fear as the dread of punishment. I understand the fear of God to be the awareness and consideration of the fact of God as a starting place for all my thoughts about the world, and there, in my understanding lies the beginning of wisdom--and yet, I see, that investigation is vital to the furthering of wisdom.

We must investigate rather than simply collect facts and accept them--even when it comes to God. But, and here is the point of all I wish to say today, it is only when our investigations lead us to the place where our factual information takes on meaning that wisdom has begun--and that place is where we see our relationship to God as fundamental to our understanding of all we are and all we do. And that happens as we integrate all the areas of our learning; math, science, art, literature, and religion and so on. Then we see the connections between those disciplines, and we can then begin to make judgements wisely.

Both the Hebrew and Latin words for wisdom mean, "to taste". We need to taste to understand--to be wise. It's not enough to be able to recite facts about life--we need to taste life. Thus the knowing looks from the elders when the young people pontificate about the meaning of life. Not because they are wrong. They are correct as far as they can be. It's only that the young haven't tasted quite as much of life. There are more surprises yet to come.

We're not teaching our young people to taste life--not enough. We encourage them to get good grades, to be moral and ambitious, but we are less involved with the tasting of life and the cultivation of wisdom.

Matthew Fox relates a story about the time he was asked to give a series of lectures at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. He was told that he could pick his own topics except for the first lecture which was to be entitled, "Wisdom and the University." After much wrestling he decided to speak his mind and opened his lecture with these words, "To speak of wisdom in a university today is a bit like talking of chastity in a brothel. No one goes to the university today for wisdom..."

He continues in his telling of the story that he chose to speak about why wisdom is no longer a category in the university. The word "university" originally designated a place where one went to experience his or her own place in the Universe" and thereby come upon wisdom. "The goal of

education [today] is not wisdom, but getting a job."

The danger of knowledge is that if it alone guides our path, the benefits of wisdom will be lost. The rapid rate of increasing knowledge is producing dilemmas with which our ethics are unprepared to deal--in part because we have emphasized the acquisition of knowledge over the cultivation of wisdom. Knowledge without wisdom will never provide us with the proper framework within which we can be useful to a troubled world.

I especially like the thought that the university was a place where people found their place in the universe. Gabriel Marcel in his work, "The Decline of Wisdom" tells of his research that found all religions, east and west, linking wisdom with an understanding of the universe. Wisdom is not merely introspection or correct judgement. Wisdom must involve and integrate the whole of the universe.

There are a people in Africa who, says one investigator, do not know loneliness. They understand the world to be their family so that wherever they go, they feel known. They have come to relate to the whole of creation, they have come to know that there is a place for them in the universe, and there is wisdom in that.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, in saying this, "Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?" showed a comprehension of the place we hold in the universe and he was wise enough to accept that place. He also showed wisdom in saying, "The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it." He saw that it is not the information that preserves us, it's how we use it.

In the second chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of wisdom that is "not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age," but is, "a secret and hidden wisdom of God," that is revealed to us through the Spirit. In a relationship with God, we come to see the interrelationships between all the parts of God's creation, and when we do, we begin to gain wisdom.

I can't help but wonder if such wisdom might cause humankind to be more careful and thoughtful as they move to destroy the rainforests and pollute the oceans.

The value of wisdom is that it provides us with a foothold in a vast cosmos--it grants us a clarity of vision that shows us we are related to all creation in that we are related to God the creator. With that, we can use what facts we have collected to the good of God's creation and our lives and knowledge will take on meaning.

We have knowledge--almost more of it than we can

handle. We have less wisdom. Respect of God as the creator of the universe, which reminds us of our universal family, is the beginning of wisdom and we need that.

My hope is that we who are the Church will continue to raise up our children in ways that promote wisdom so that they might use their knowledge well.

And, as the apostle James wrote, "if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God." For in the asking, we acknowledge our place as creatures before our Creator and wisdom has begun.

AMEN