

“In Search of Wisdom”
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Hingham Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
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1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

About six years ago, I was at the dump in the city of Oaxaca, Mexico, participating in a tour. It might seem like a strange place for a tour, but there was a good reason for it. My companions and I were volunteering for a non-profit and we were in the process of building homes for the desperately poor families who picked through the garbage in order to survive.

Kids as young as five, all the way up to and including elderly great-grandparents, worked in the stench and the hot sun. So, we were seeing not only the horrors of life lived in a garbage dump, but also what generosity and hard work was doing to provide shelter, safety, and stability.

But the dump wasn't only a place to help others. It was a place to learn from our friends about the importance of community, about social justice (or the lack of it), about courage, about hard work, and yes, about wisdom.

On that tour, we finally reached the top of what was basically a mountain of garbage and dirt and I saw for the first time an 85-year old woman named Soledad. When I saw her, I knew I was looking in the face of the wisest person I had perhaps ever encountered. I can't tell you why, exactly. There was just something serene, accepting, loving, and strong in her eyes and in the way she held herself. I knew immediately by the way she approached our group of northern strangers, the way she looked at us, the way she smiled, that she was someone from whom I had much to learn.

Over the next few years, I did learn a lot from Soledad. I had the honor of helping to build her a house and we had many conversations, usually about how to live graciously in the midst of suffering and squalor.

There are many types of wisdom. Those of us who have had the blessing and good fortune to have a wise mentor or two in our professional lives know how valuable they can be. I know that many of you play the role of spiritual mentor to others here in our church, teaching by example as much as anything else what it means to be a wise follower of Christ.

Tracy and I have had many conversations about what it means to be emotionally wise. Emotionally wise people are able to accurately recognize and interpret their own feelings and the feelings of others. Emotionally wise people know how to respond appropriately and lovingly to the feelings of others.

Who are some of the wise women and men in your life when it comes to the way they approach their professions, their relationships, their spiritual lives? What stands out about them and what makes them wise in your eyes? And are you spending enough time with them in order to learn from them?

And if you lack wise people in your life, perhaps it is time to seek out one or two. We all need them.

Do you consider yourself to be a wise person? Why or why not? And where does wisdom come from, anyway, aside from observing and conversing with the wise mentors and leaders in our lives?

Loss and suffering. Conflict and reconciliation. Reading. Art. Travel. Meaningful work. Time spent in the mountains and on the water. All of these things can add to our wisdom. Some say that

the older people amongst us are the wise ones, that time and experience make us wiser. Somehow, the older I get, the more I tend to agree!

Seriously, though, I have met plenty of older folks who were anything but wise and many young people who were wise beyond their years.

It's important, of course, to remember the difference between knowledge and wisdom. They are related, but no matter what college you attended or how many degrees you have, wisdom is not simply the sum total of facts, theories, or dates that you have memorized. Wisdom is a much deeper and, I would say, more important quality. Wisdom empowers us to discern the difference between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, and to act in a way that is life-giving to ourselves and others.

Jesus himself probably had very little formal education. The evidence we have from scripture is that he was well schooled in the Hebrew Bible, but none of the four Gospel writers ever say that he read or wrote anything. In fact, it would have been very unusual for a carpenter's son to be literate in 1st century Palestine.

I believe that the wisdom of Jesus came from his life experiences – both positive and negative – and from the Spirit of God within him. His wisdom is very clear in the stories that he told, in the way that he led his disciples, and in the way that people trusted him immediately.

In our reading for this morning, King David dies, and his son, Solomon, succeeds him. The first thing Solomon does is to admit that he has no idea what he is doing. I remember when my big brother, returning from his freshman year of college, told me that his philosophy professor had said that the wisest people amongst us are the ones who know what they do not know.

For a high school junior, this was a very difficult moment. I had thought that I could attain wisdom through the accumulation of knowledge, and now my big brother was saying that, no, it doesn't work that way. It's important to know what we *don't* know before we can really know ourselves and others and what we need to learn about the best way to live life. It took me a while to really accept this, but I did, and I do believe that it's important to be honest with ourselves about that which we do not know so that we might become truly wise. In scripture, humility is one of the key qualities of a wise person.

The other thing Solomon did right away is to ask God for wisdom. There are so many other things he could have requested. He was king, after all. But he did not ask for wealth. He did not ask for sex or celebrity or comfort or long life or victory over his enemies. And God was impressed.

He came to God in prayer and asked for what he needed the most in order to be an effective and faithful leader.

Abraham Heschel, who was probably the leading Jewish theologian of the 20th century and who was active in the Civil Rights movement, wrote this about prayer and the way it helps us attain wisdom:

“...It's no panacea, no substitute for action. It is, rather, like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness. It is in this light that we who grope, stumble, and climb, discover where we stand, what surrounds us, and the course which we should choose... In its radiance, we behold the worth of our efforts, the range of our hopes, and the meaning of our deeds.”

In other words, prayer helps us to be wise people.

In discussing wisdom with a friend of mine, he said that perhaps the best thing we can do to attain wisdom is to accept the fact that we *cannot* know it all and that we *don't have* to know it all to have rewarding and grace-filled lives. In truth, one of the definitions of faith is the willingness to look to something greater than ourselves to guide us and to give us wisdom.

In the Hebrew Bible, the breath (or the wind) of God is equivalent to the wisdom of God. Scripture tells us that this holy wind of God blew over the waters at creation, breathed life into Adam and Eve, and roared through the crowd on the day of Pentecost.

My prayer is that each of us here today -- and all of us together as a community of Christ -- will breath deeply of God's wisdom. In so doing, we (like Solomon) will be empowered to play the roles to which we have been called and to make our way faithfully through this beautiful life that God has given us.

Amen