

An Invitation to Wisdom
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Proverbs 9:1-6
Pentecost 13 B

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<Read text: Proverbs 9:1-6>

Who here would say they'd rather be foolish than wise? Unless you're being deliberately obstinate, I'd can't imagine any of us saying they would prefer to be foolish. We know this. Wisdom, good; foolishness, bad. Right, well, that's a good starting point. How much thought past that have you ever given it? If you want to be wise, if you want to have wisdom, well then you better know why it's so great. You better know what it really is to be wise and most importantly you're going to want to where to get this wisdom.

Okay so first off, why bother with wisdom in the first place? We say we want it, but could you answer someone who actually took the time to ask you why? What makes wisdom so great? In short, wisdom is that which allows us to make good choices over bad ones. Choices that are beneficial instead of damaging or hurtful. Wise decisions benefit in some way, foolish choices end up harming us in some way. Most people don't want to intentionally harm themselves, so we'd always prefer to make wise choices.

Well then, if we're going to make wise choices we better understand what wisdom is and where to gain it. How do you make a wise choice, what do you need to make that determination? You need knowledge about the possible outcomes of your decisions. You need to be able to know what the results of your possible options are going to be. To look down the road at each choice and decide which is likely to have the best possible outcome for you. Of course, to start with you need to have the wisdom to actually stop and consider instead of acting without thinking, but that's almost an entirely different conversation.

So basically to make a wise decision, you need knowledge first. You have to know how the world works, how the people involved behave and then you need to be able to predict the results of your actions. A simple definition would be that wisdom is the application of knowledge. We sometimes equate wisdom with intelligence but that's not entirely true. You need some degree of knowledge and intelligence to *be* wise, but just having knowledge does you no good if you don't know how to *use* it. So using what we know, we make decisions that we think at the time will have the best possible outcome.

Of course, sometimes we do this and it blows up in our faces. In hindsight we can see we made a foolish decision instead of a wise one. Why didn't we see it before? Well, because at the start our knowledge was incomplete, and somewhere in the process we learned something new that changed the equation. This is one way we gain additional wisdom. Through experience. The most foolish of people fail spectacularly at something and then try it again exactly the same way. They've learned nothing from the process. Those who seek wisdom will learn and therefore change their approach the next time. Wiser still is to try to learn before the mistake is ever made.

And so to increase our wisdom, we need to constantly expand our knowledge-base. We need to learn more about our world and the people we know in it. We need to pay attention to the actions of others and how they result. When we are faced with a dilemma we seek out similar examples to see how they turned out. We study, we learn, we experience and we use all that to try to make wise choices in our life so that our lives are made better and not worse.

This is the ideal. But have you perhaps noticed a gaping flaw in this structure? You see, if wisdom is built with knowledge, with facts as its foundation, then we are in trouble. And if the end result of wisdom is to seek a good outcome for ourselves, we're also in trouble. Because on our own we don't have the slightest clue about any of that.

As Pontius Pilate once said in a huff, "What is truth?" How can you build up a solid foundation of knowledge on how this world works when not one of us can agree on all the details of that question? There are too many variables and too many answers to any one question. Consider the history of science, a study of facts, and how many times the true answers have changed in just the last hundred years. Now try coming up with things that are true about the people in your lives, how they will act, what they are thinking. Why when you ask advice from 10 different people do you get 10 different answers? Because everyone has their own idea of what's really true in this world. Everyone has their own different set of knowledge. Even if it was consistent, there's just too much to know for any one person to track the variables in a given situation.

And all that doesn't even touch the fact that your end goal may be flawed as well. As I said, the end result of making a wise choice is to try to do what's best for you. But by nature you don't know what that is. No matter what you come up with on your own, it's going to have a selfish goal. All worldly wisdom is going to point to that. Whether it's to gain materially or emotionally or in some other way, it's going to point you to yourself.

Ironically, trying to make decisions for your own good is about the worst thing you can do for yourself.

You'll pardon me for having gone this far without mentioning our God, but I think it was necessary. I think too often we let ourselves get confused that making wise decisions and our faith-life don't have much in common. But God wants you to be truly wise. And to understand the difference between worldly wisdom as we usually think of it and the wisdom that God offers, we needed to take some time to explore how we usually think about wisdom and the flaws of that system.

The primary flaw with worldly wisdom is that it is all at once designed to trap us in a limited understanding of our world while at the same time making us feel smarter and wiser than we are. There is so much to learn and so much to process in terms of worldly wisdom that it gives us a great sense of accomplishment when we think we understand it. Either we end up feeling smart and wise for mastering it, or we waste an inordinate amount of time trying to master it. But it's all one giant trap to keep us from realizing that not only is the end result of worldly wisdom self-defeating, but it is meant to keep us away from the larger truths of our life; the truths and the wisdom that come only from God.

You see, the things that God wants to teach us run so contrary to the natural wisdom we have that only God himself can cause us to believe them. Only God can change our hearts to accept his truth. But he wants to give that to us. That is the invitation he gives here. To leave behind our simple ways and come feast on his wisdom. We get so caught up in chasing the scraps on the streets, in the thrill and challenge of that pursuit, that we fail to realize there is an open banquet we are being called to, and unless we go we are going to die starving on the streets.

The reason God's wisdom is repellant to our sinful nature is because on the surface it appears too easy, too simple and at the same time it is completely contrary to the wisdom we learn by nature. Our natural wisdom says we must be selfish, even if we do it in an enlightened way. We have to care about ourselves first and foremost. God says no, selflessness is the only way to truly care for yourself. Our wisdom says that those on top should have the best and be served by those under them. God says no, those on top should give the most and serve the rest the hardest. Our wisdom says that true achievement and victory is accomplished through grand schemes and conquering battles. God says no, the greatest victory ever was won through a humiliating death of God himself.

Much like the things Jesus had to say today in our gospel, these are things we cannot accept by nature. God must give them to us himself. But when he does, it opens us up to a much larger and better world of knowledge and wisdom. We still should seek to be wise. And to do that we still must have knowledge to apply properly in our lives, and we still should do it to achieve a good outcome. But in our Lord, the ends of that equation both change.

As we said the problem with the knowledge of the world is that it is fluid and unstable. The truth of God is not. That which is given to us in Scripture does not change. God does not change and neither does his word. Tomorrow there will not be some new discovery that says God doesn't love you as his own son or daughter anymore. A year from now attitudes will not shift to say that Jesus has not died to pay for every one of your sins. New evidence will never come forth to say that God is not ruling this world for your benefit to keep you on the path to your eternal home. The knowledge we gain from our Lord stands firm forever.

So what is the wisdom that stems from this knowledge? How do we apply it? Very simply actually. Trust God. In every area of life where we would be faced with worry, fear or indecision, God has made us a promise to calm those fears and lead us to action. Everything we learn about our God in his word is there to lead us to trust him in all things. We trust that he has washed us clean at our baptism and that he has redeemed us with his blood on the cross. We trust that he will raise us from the dead just as Christ was raised from the dead. We trust that we will be with him in heaven for eternity. That trust alone removes our need to be selfish here or to have any fear here. Worldly wisdom says if you don't look out for yourself who will? But we know that God already has.

In fact, it goes beyond just eternity. We trust that God is caring for us now. And not just me, but the people I care about. I don't have to worry about my loved ones because they are in God's care. I don't have to worry about my own life, because I am in God's hands. Now, there is a difference between not worrying and sitting idle or intentionally making stupid decisions. But I also don't have to be obsessed with worldly wisdom and making the right choice in every situation because where God has not spoken on a matter, he will bless either outcome for my good and the good of his people. Of course I will still make mistakes, that's not an excuse to be reckless, but I also can trust that God works even those for the good of his people.

What is the end result of this proper wisdom? It's not limited good that lasts only for now and still leads to my death. Instead it is eternal salvation and it is peace and comfort and security now. These are things worth having. Only God can give them to you. And God wants you to have them. The invitation to wisdom stands. Leave the distracting, limited wisdom of the world and come and feast of what God offers. Feed on the truth he has in his word, and let his wisdom guide you to a better life now and forever.

Amen.