

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 20, 2006

Reflection:

“Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.” - Anonymous Greek Proverb

Wisdom: Hebrew: hokma Greek: sophia

Readings: 2 Samuel 16: 5-9, 15, 31-33
John 6: 35, 41-51

Hymns:	Hymn #430	Come Sing, O Church, in Joy
	Hymn #339	Be Thou My Vision
	Hymn #432	Canto de Esperanza

Wisdom by Any Name
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In 1900, Theodore Dreiser wrote a book called Sister Carrie. It tells the story of two main characters: Carrie Meeber and George Hurstwood. Carrie rises from poverty to stardom, while George has a reverse run of luck: falling from financial success to the streets of the homeless poor.

A somewhat controversial work at turn the century, the novel has become regarded as an American classic.

What I recall about the book is that it is a work that upsets the idea that experience and success defines the notion or virtue of being wise or having wisdom. There is in “wisdom” something more, something which neither of these characters ever realizes: perhaps that true wisdom requires a certain “self-forgetting,” a humility that we are walking on the face of the earth and that it – and the rest of the universe – is not of our creation. That’s a good place to start!

Toward the end of the book, Dreiser writes the following about Carrie, now at the pinnacle of her career:

Sitting alone, she was now an illustration of the devious ways by which one who feels, rather than reasons, may be led in the pursuit of beauty. Though often disillusioned, she was still waiting for the halcyon day when she would be led forth among dreams become real. ...It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight, which tints the distant hilltops of the world.

Carrie never really integrates all of her life and experiences into something that might be called “wisdom,” “street sense,” or even “common sense.” Rather she lives on the illusion of being fabulous, as a consumer of those who find her irresistible, ultimately a means to get to the things that please her.

Sometimes, I think that our consumer society has something of the “Carrie approach” to life. Some say that as this behavior becomes more intense, as we become more “consumerist,” we lose both the human and the sacred. Some nations believe that has already happened here in the West.

In wandering through my mind to prepare this morning’s comments, I wondered how many times we’ve gone through this sort of a cycle of losing the humanity and the sacred in favor of different kinds of consumables: power and status, for example, along the way losing our footing and the mystery of being in awe of God.

Solomon, at least initially, appears to be trying to reignite the presence of that awe and God-fearingness that was, at times, elusive to David.

Solomon takes the throne from his father, somewhere around the age of 12 – 14 years old. This morning’s readings begin following verses 1 – 9, known as “David’s Legacy of Evil.” In these verses, David, who is on his deathbed, has unfinished business. He instructs Solomon in what needs to be done to remove the bloodguilt, which he has brought upon the House of David. David’s instructions that we know of refer specifically to four men:

Adonijah David's fourth son, who had plotted to accede to the throne – one way or the other;

Abiathar – a priest of David's kingdom who had supported Adonijah (not Solomon) as David's successor;

Joab – the former loyal general of David (power behind the throne) who ordered the death of David's rebel son Absalom and others loyal to David; along with

Shimei – a Benjamite who once cursed and threw stones and dirt at David, as he fled Jerusalem, while temporarily under the control of his son, Absalom.

Unlike a Carrie, waiting and riding the winds of fate, Solomon takes actions against these four to assure that his bloodlines are clear of guilt. Eventually, with the exception of the banished Abiathar, all the others are executed at their first misstep.

Wisdom. At twelve or fourteen years of age, how much wisdom can one have? Remember that at about the same age, Jesus was leading discussions on the scriptures in the temple. And you know, I have met some pretty wise and wisecracking twelve year olds!

It was all a long time ago that these things were recorded, so much is left to conjecture, however we do know that the writer of Kings, edited the original records to highlight (enhance) Solomon as the model-king who followed the teachings of Moses and Deuteronomy. As wise and forward thinking as Solomon may have been, it was an Age of Wisdom of which he was also a part. An enlightened age benefiting from following the Mosaic Code, our writer would like us to know!

In the reading, when Solomon asks God for wisdom to reign faithfully, to discern wisely, to follow God's will – he reminds us that all the riches, the beauty, the power, and the might that can be amassed – cannot replace the relationship that we need to have with God in order to be fully who we are - whether a ruler of the mightiest kingdom of the times, son of Bathsheba or Bathsua (still unclear),

monarch with 700 wives and 300 concubines who was a “lover of women” especial foreigners – or anyone else.

In his better moments, in fighting the Philistine giant or dancing before the Ark, David, too, remembered this.

The books of Kings were crafted during the times of Josiah’s reform, a period during which a resurgence of the Deuteronomic Code was underway and God’s will was at the top of the list – not a close or forgotten second. Wisdom - was - in being able to know God’s will and express that in ways that benefited others. It was more than experience or accumulation of demonstrative power and wealth: it was known by a persistent effort in a direction that ever informed, ever guided us, and sought the will of God.

It brings to mind and heart the prayer of Reinhold Niebur written on July 1, 1943 for the Union Church of Heath, Massachusetts. You may know it as the “Serenity Prayer”:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and
the wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make all things right, if I surrender to His will.
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

The “he” Niebuhr speaks of, of course, is Jesus – as we know, of the House of David. The prayer and the prophets all call for the same thing to get to these places of serenity, peace, wisdom: a certain degree of submission, a word that we have a difficult time processing. And we should be clear about what we mean by it.

Certain forms of submission are obviously damaging, but submitting our will to the guidance of God, as we know God, is not a remission of power or resignation, but an embrace of the power and the freedom of being up front and personal with God and God’s presence in ways that could never be imagined by the “conventional wisdom.”

And this thread or message is throughout the writings of Old and New Testaments. As with the author of Kings, the author of John had a purpose in mind that hinged on such willingness to serve God.

The “high Christology” of the Gospel According to John builds on the mystical union of Jesus as Christ and One With God and Spirit. It’s the culmination of the times of expanding upon the Deuteronomic Code to the life of Jesus and a place that brings us to the promise of the living bread and blood. John want us to know, to believe, that Jesus is the food for the journey home; by his resurrection, history and the ways of humankind have been forever changed. John exhorts his readers to catch up to all that awaits them, not to expect salvation sitting on fanciful dreams or human achievements.

“No,” John might as well have said. “This is not about dreams, this is about the active and dynamic presence of God in our lives.”

And it has to be. The wisdom that leads and beckons us to such a relationship with God is made up of the continuing and combined documented experiences of all the writings, all our history, and all our own lives - seeking a discerning mind and a listening heart, not just to what is right – but to do what is the will of God and find the ways to follow that will.

As many as there are who feel this is all slipping away from us, there are many who feel we are on the verge of a spiritual revolution, seeing signs of “seeking” in many places, simultaneously appearing around the globe, catching on with an energy and spirit that has promise. Healing is present in many places in big and small ways. God, we pray, is doing a new thing in new ways.

An example often sited of such “changings” is the impact of “Twelve Step Programs.”

As most everyone knows, the Twelve Steps were developed by members of Alcoholics Anonymous in their attempt to understand the process by which the earliest recovering alcoholics had found sobriety, put down on paper to give others a path to follow. Today, the Twelve Steps are used by hundreds of different organizations

worldwide and those seeking ways to deal with addictions, compulsions, and other issues. Many of these groups also use “The Big Book” – the story of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In that book is a section in the chapter called “Into Action” that is called *The Promises*. It refers to what will happen if the steps are followed, if individuals are willing to turn their lives over to God and to seek God’s will and how to be of service to others.

In many ways, these promises are all around us in different ways in the work of the prophets, the evangelists, the imams, tribal chiefs, or the teachings of Jesus: they embody wisdom by another name. See if you agree:

....If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness, we will not regret the past, nor wish to shut the door on it, we will comprehend the word serenity, and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain insight into our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook will change. Fear of people and economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations, which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us--sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.....

I imagine Sister Carrie is still sitting out there, seeking halcyon days and delight. There’s not much we can do about that, but maybe, just maybe if we can find a way to seek the wisdom of God’s will in our lives and our communities, maybe the Carries, the Kings, and others will be brought along. There is, after all, no limit to the power of the Spirit.

And wisdom, I think, by any other name is always about knowing who we are and how we are called to be in love and service to one another. From there, anything is possible.

May anything and everything be possible in your lives! May God's will become clear to you with each passing day.

Amen.