Sunday, September 11, 1994
WISDOM AND THE WILL OF GOD
Proverbs 1:7,20-22, 3:13-18

I want to begin this sermon by putting each one of you into a hypothetical situation. You are facing a problem that has been on your mind for some time now. You need to come to a decision about it, and you begin to wonder, "What, if anything, does God want me to do about this? How can I discover God's will for me in this decision I am about to make?"

So, maybe you turn to the Bible in an attempt to discover what God's will is in your situation. After an exhaustive search, you find that the Bible has nothing directly to say about the decision you need to make. Then, you think to yourself, perhaps I can get an answer through prayer, and so you try that. But again, you come away with no clear direction. You might even try studying what Christians throughout the centuries have done in making similar decisions, but you find nothing that fits your present-day dilemma.

And so you decide to ask one of the ministers in your church, "What are some other ways that God's will is made known to me and to others?" If that minister happened to be me, here's what I would suggest to you.

In the Bible, there are some books in the Old Testament which are classified as "wisdom literature." There is an ongoing discussion among Biblical scholars about what books should be so designated. The older notion of wisdom was confined to Proverbs (where the scripture reading was taken from today), Job, Ecclesiastes, plus a few Psalms: 16, 37, 49, and 73, according to Dr. Walter Brueggemann, a widely respected Old Testament scholar. However, Dr. Brueggemann goes on to say that today's scholars are suggesting that forms and substances of wisdom thought are found in many other places in the Old Testament as well. Furthermore, the teachings of Jesus were influenced by his knowledge of the wisdom tradition.

No matter where that discussion leads, all scholars agree that the book of Proverbs is an integral part of the "wisdom tradition" in the Old Testament. Incidentally, in the Old Testament, "wisdom" is personified. When Biblical writers personify something, they take a reality and speak of it as if it were a person. The Biblical writers speak of wisdom as if she is a woman. You can meet her and talk with her.

Listen to this description of her: "Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her."

In addition to offering a great deal of wisdom on a variety of topics, the book of Proverbs also tells us that wisdom is in the world right around us and is actively seeking us. You and I encounter her all the time. If we would only pay more attention, she would help us in more ways than we can imagine. According to the book of Proverbs, wisdom stands at the city gates, on the city streets, in the town square, and at the busiest corners to speak to us.

Wisdom is a part of God. It is built into God's creation. Listen again to Proverbs, "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding, he established the heavens." "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago."

Wisdom is built into the fabric of creation, which means it is also built into each one of us. In nature, in the sunrise and the sunset, in the rhythms of life, in birth, growing up, marriage, work, and at death — wisdom is everywhere all the time.

Wisdom reveals God. Wisdom communicates God's presence and God's purposes. One distinctive thing about wisdom is this: we can learn about God and God's will by participating in life. Because in life, we encounter wisdom. God speaks to us through life. Just by living, we can know something about what God wants for us and for all. Now, of course, we need to pay attention.

But God's wisdom is always ready to call on our consciousness. It is up to us whether we open the door.

More specifically then, what are some of the things wisdom tells us about God, and what are some of the things wisdom tells us about human life and our purpose in life?

The wisdom of God tells us that God is a benevolent, universal power. God loves everything. God wants everything and everyone — human beings, rabbits, rocks, trees — to live together in relationships of love, support, encouragement, and mutuality. God wants a world in which everything can be fully and freely what God means for it to be. God intends for the universe to be a cosmic community in which all things work together for the good of all. This design is woven into the fabric of existence.

According to God's wisdom, as a human being made in the image of God, you can choose between wisdom and folly. Wisdom is the way of God. When you hear of God's purposes and say yes to them, then your life will be secure. But if you choose folly, then you can expect calamity, panic, and storm.

According to Proverbs, God does not do bad things to you when you follow the way of folly. A God of pure love would not intentionally inflict pain. But you bring upon yourself the unhappy consequences of your values, choices, and way of living. One passage in Proverbs puts it this way: "They shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices."

Like a firm but loving teacher, wisdom says that life is a classroom, and we can learn its lessons if we open our ears, eyes, and minds. The good news is that wisdom is ever-present to help us see what God offers and what God asks. Wisdom does everything she can to help us turn away from folly.

For example, wisdom says, "Look at the ant. The ant is small but exceedingly wise. The ants are a people without strength, yet they provide their food in the summer." If you observe the industriousness of the ant, you can learn how God wants you to prepare for the winter. Wisdom speaks to you from the ant hill.

God's wisdom and therefore God's will can also be seen in what we sometimes call "natural law" or "life principles" or even "folk wisdom."

Stephen Covey, in his book First Things First, calls this kind of wisdom "the law of the farm" because in agriculture, we can easily see and agree that natural laws and principles govern the work and determine the harvest. But in social and corporate cultures, we somehow think we can dismiss natural processes, take shortcuts, cheat the system, and still win the day.

He uses the example of “cramming” in school. Some students goof off during the semester and then study all night before the big test, trying to cram a semester’s worth of learning into their heads. Can you imagine “cramming” on the farm? Can you goof off in the spring when you should be planting your crops, loaf in the summer, and then try to force the seed into the ground, water it, fertilize it, and hope for a good harvest in a few weeks in the late summer or fall? Cramming doesn’t work in the natural system, like a farm.

In the short term, cramming may appear to work in a social system. You can go for the quick fixes and techniques with apparent success. But in the long run, the law of the farm governs in all areas of life. That’s part of the wisdom that God has built into creation.

Take character, for example. Can you “cram” and suddenly become a person of integrity, courage, or compassion? Or take physical health as another example. Can you overcome years of bad diet, no exercise, and smoking by spending the night before the marathon in a health spa?

Vibrant health is based on natural principles, on wisdom. It grows over time out of regular exercise, proper nutrition, adequate rest, a healthy mindset, and avoiding substances that are harmful to the body. But instead of paying the price, we’re caught up in the illusion of appearance — the fantasy that the right clothes, the right makeup, the quick-fix weight-loss programs will fulfill our physical needs. It can bring short-term satisfaction, but it’s cotton candy, all fluff and no substance. It doesn’t last.

What about a marriage? Many people who marry don’t want to change their way of living at all. They’re married singles. They don’t take the time to nurture the seeds of a common vision, or the seeds of caring, tenderness, and consideration, yet they’re surprised at the harvest of weeds.

Consider your relationships with children. You can take the shortcuts — you are bigger, you are smarter, you have the authority. You can talk down, you can threaten, you can impose your will. You can try to shift the responsibility for training them to schools, churches, or daycare centers. But over time, will these shortcuts develop responsible, caring, and wise adults who have the wisdom to make effective decisions and live fulfilling lives? Will they result in rich, rewarding relationships for you with those who have the potential to be your closest friends?

The wisdom of God says that the problems in life come when we’re sowing one thing and expecting to reap something entirely different.

Wisdom reminds us that God speaks to us in many ways to guide us in our living and in our decision-making. Wisdom says, “Look around you. Observe the natural processes. See how things work and don’t work.” Frequently, God through wisdom does not give us direct answers but rather the context and framework in which we can discover the answer. God expects responsibility on our part.

Wisdom lets nobody off the hook by reference to God. Nor does it give anybody special prerogatives by virtue of exceptional authority. In other words, God does not grudgingly disclose God’s will only on occasion for some to see. God has not granted a monopoly to any one church or church official. Wisdom says that God’s will is writ large for any who will take the trouble to see. This is not the same as letting every person have their way. It does mean that

God wants us to take responsibility for decision-making based on those eternal principles which govern life.

In other words, wisdom affirms that we human beings have primary responsibility for our destiny. The clear affirmation of wisdom is that human choices fix human destiny.

I have a friend who recently had an offer of another job — more money, more prestige, more opportunity to influence the field. According to conventional standards, it was an upward move. My friend said it was very attractive. But then my friend listened... listened to experience... and to the voice of wisdom. Here is what my friend said, “I knew in my heart that job was not me. I know I look good on that resume, but I also know I don’t really have the horsepower to run on that track. I would have to spend too much of my time being anxious. It would not have been fair to my new situation, to my family, or even to me.”

He could not have found this answer at the back of a book, or even directly in the Bible, but it’s there indirectly. The Bible affirms that God has given human beings the ability to choose wisely and decide responsibly. He listened to wisdom.

It’s not always easy to make decisions, even when we listen to wisdom. You cannot always be certain as to what wisdom invites and warns against in a given situation. Sometimes a little mist hangs in the air. Sometimes the fog is so dense, all you can do is grope your way. There are also times when wisdom eludes you. She may be crying to you from the street, but all you can hear is static.

And sometimes you will make mistakes, make the wrong decision, even after you have tried to listen to all the wisdom you can. At this point, all you can do is acknowledge your limitations and know that God forgives you and that God never gives up on you.

In addition, remember this: wisdom also has much to say to us about human life and our purpose in life. Wisdom teaches that the goal and meaning of human existence is “life.” What does it mean by “life"? It does not mean mere survival or longevity, or life after death. It is based on the assumption that God’s gift of life is meant to be good here and now, good for the community and the wider creation in which you live, and good for you. Those two can never be separated.

In the Jewish tradition out of which our Christian faith grows, the traditional Jewish toast over a glass of wine, “To life,” conveys a sense of exuberance, of enjoyment of all the aspects of life — emotional, physical, social, spiritual. It includes the celebration of those special moments in our life together: births, coming of age, weddings, anniversaries, homecomings, and more. “To life!” Amen.