Sunday, September 14, 2003
LISTENING FOR GOD'S WISDOM
Proverbs 1:7,20-22, 3:13-18

Some time ago, an individual from the community who is not a church member came to me to talk about a problem she was facing, which had been on her mind for several months. She needed to come to a decision about it soon. She was seeking my counsel because she had been wondering, what, if anything, did God want her to do?

She said that she had already turned to the Bible in an attempt to find out what God's will might be for her in that situation. After an exhaustive search, she discovered that the Bible had nothing directly to say about the decision she needed to make. She had also been praying about it, but as yet had not come away with any clear direction. Since her problem was a kind of ethical dilemma, she even tried researching what Christians through the centuries might have done in making similar decisions, but had found nothing that made sense in her present-day dilemma.

So as a kind of final resort, she decided to consult a minister, and for some reason, she chose me. As I remember it now, her question to me went something like this: "What are some of the ways that God's will and God's wisdom are made known to me and to others? How can this help me in making my decisions?" We had a wonderful discussion about the definition of wisdom in the Jewish and Christian traditions, its relationship to God's will, and how it can help you in your day-to-day decisions. That discussion is the basis of this sermon.

In the Bible, there are some books in the Old Testament that are classified by tradition as "wisdom literature." There is an ongoing discussion among Biblical scholars about what books should be so designated. Most scholars agree the book of Proverbs (where the scripture reading was taken from for today) is wisdom literature. Other writings include the book of Job, Ecclesiastes, and a few of the Psalms: 16, 37, 49, and 73. Some scholars also suggest that forms and substance of wisdom thought can be found in other places as well. Most scholars agree that the teachings of Jesus were strongly influenced by his knowledge of the wisdom tradition.

The Biblical writers sometimes speak of wisdom in personal terms, and when they do, they describe her as if she is a woman. You can meet with her and talk with her. Listen to this passage: "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 large amount of wisdom on a variety of topics, the wisdom literature in the Bible also tells us that God's wisdom is in the world all around you and is actively seeking you. You encounter her all the time. When you listen and pay attention, she can help you in more ways than you can imagine. In the book of Proverbs, you are told that wisdom stands in the city gates and on the city streets, on the town square, and at the busiest corners, waiting to speak to you.

The Bible tells you that wisdom is a gift from 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 human beings at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago."

The wisdom of God is built into the fabric of creation. It is also built into each one of you. You can find it in yourself, in nature, in the sunrise and the sunset, in the rhythms of life, in birth and growing up, in marriage and work, and in death. God's wisdom is everywhere all the time.

Wisdom reveals God. Wisdom communicates God's presence and purposes. One very important fact to remember about God's wisdom is this: you can learn about God and God's wisdom by participating in life as fully as possible. In everyday living, you can meet God's wisdom.

More specifically, what are some of the things wisdom tells you about God, and what are some of the things wisdom tells you about human life and your purpose in life? How can this help you in your decision-making?

First of all, the wisdom of God tells you that God is the benevolent, universal power that you most frequently experience as love in all of its manifestations. It is God's will that everything and everyone live together in relationships of support, compassion for one another, and mutuality. It is God's desire that the world be one in which everyone can be truly and freely what they were meant to be — that is, it is God's intention that you fulfill your God-given potential. 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 creation.

I know this all sounds very abstract, idealistic, and impractical. Day-to-day life is not often like that. People continue to push each other around. Human beings rob and kill each other. Terrorists can strike anywhere and anytime. Children die unexpectedly. Jealousy, greed, hate, and self-righteousness still motivate people to make the wrong choices.

That shouldn't surprise you because, according to God's wisdom, as a human being made in the image of God, you can choose between wisdom and folly. When you pay attention to wisdom and live according to its principles, your life is built on a secure foundation. But if you choose folly, then you can expect calamity, panic, and storms.

Following God's wisdom does not make you immune from the troubles that life can bring, but it can guide you through them to the other side.

According to the book of Proverbs, it is not God that causes bad things to happen to you when you choose the way of folly. The God of pure love does not intentionally inflict pain. But you bring upon yourself the unhappy consequences of your values, choices, and way of living. One verse in Proverbs puts it this way: "They shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices."

Like a firm, loving teacher, the wisdom of God tells you that life is a classroom. You can learn its lessons if you open your ears, eyes, and minds, or you can ignore its lessons. The good news is that wisdom is always present to help you see what the way of God offers. Wisdom does everything she can to help you turn away from folly, but it's always your choice.

For example, wisdom in the Bible 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. God's wisdom speaks to you from such lowly places as the ant hill. God's wisdom can also be seen in what is sometimes called "natural law" or "life principles" or "folk wisdom."

Stephen Covey, in his book First Things First, calls this kind of wisdom “the law of the farm,” because in agriculture, you can easily see and agree that natural laws and principles play an important part in determining the harvest. But in social and corporate cultures, you might sometimes think you 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. They try 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 like crazy, and then hope for a good harvest in a few weeks? 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 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. Can you overcome years of bad diet, no exercise, and smoking by spending the night before a 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.

Instead of paying the price, you can easily get caught up in the illusion of appearance — the fantasy that the right clothes, the right make-up, the quick-fix weight-loss programs will fulfill your physical needs. Such things can bring short-term satisfaction, but it’s like cotton candy — all fluff and no substance. It doesn’t last.

Marriage is another example. Many people who marry don’t want to change their way of living at all. They are married singles. They don’t take the time to nurture the seeds of a common vision or the seeds of caring, tenderness, and compassion, yet they are surprised at the harvest of weeds.

Consider your relationships with your children. You can take the shortcuts. You are bigger. You are smarter. You have the authority. You can talk down, you can threaten and impose your will. You can try to shift the responsibility for training them to schools, churches, or other institutions. 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 with your children, who have the potential to be your closest friends?

The wisdom of God says that the problems in life come when you’re sowing one kind of seed and expect to reap a harvest of a quite different plant.

God’s wisdom in the Bible says, “Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come.” This is from the book of Ecclesiastes, where the writer is in the pangs of foreboding over old age and death. His writings tell of his systematic search for an alternative, a life apart from the Creator. In the end, he found that both hedonism and despair led to a

vexing sense of meaninglessness. Here's his big discovery: "Be in awe of God and pay attention to God's wisdom," and then you will find life.

I have a friend who recently had an offer of another job. More money. More prestige. More opportunity to influence his field of expertise. According to conventional standards, it was an upward move. My friend told me it was very attractive. But then my friend listened — listened to experience, listened to the voice of wisdom that was all around him. Here is what he said to me: "I knew then in my heart that this new position was not for me. I know it looked good on the resume, but I also know I don't 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 to me."

He could not have found this answer at the back of a book or even directly from the Bible. The answer was in many places. He listened to God's wisdom. I told the woman who came to see me, whom I described at the beginning of this sermon, the story of my friend. She said it helped her in making her decision.

It is not always easy to make a decision when you listen to wisdom. You cannot always be certain as to what wisdom invites and warns against in a given situation. Sometimes you have to put your emotions aside and listen to reason, and at other times you have to put reason aside and pay attention to your emotions. There are also times when God's wisdom will elude you. She may be crying to you from the street, but all you hear is static.

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

When you listen to God's wisdom, especially as revealed in Jesus, one of the best summaries of that wisdom is: life is good, be happy now, let it go. Amen.