

Wisdom
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – August 15, 2021

Please Read:
Proverbs 9:1-6
John 6: 51-58

Aristotle once said, “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom,” but Socrates said, “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.” So, I admit the topic of Wisdom is a bit of a non-starter, especially when I’m quite sure my name doesn’t pop up when you google pastors qualified to talk about wisdom, and when we’re still reeling from the news of Tina’s retirement, Victoria’s transition, and the Reeves’ family move. *All our losses and all our griefs* are weighty this week, compounded by the litany of news stream topics starting with the ominous spike in Delta-variant numbers, the raging forest fires around the world, the earthquake in Haiti, Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, and resignation of Governor Cuomo because of sexism and crass abuse of power ... Well, maybe it is a good time to reflect on the biblical idea of wisdom, and what it means to internalize, or to embody God’s wisdom as we move through significant transition ...

Our lectionary gospel text continues the extended reflection of Jesus as the Bread of Life. And this Sunday, John drills down on the image. He comes perilously close to making it sound like Christians are cannibals with the language Jesus uses about “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood ...” The point is, Jesus is not an eatable delicacy, but a personal reality of love that God means for us to internalize. It is the love of Jesus which permeates our being and transforms us, hopefully changing the way we think, speak and act in ways that are more loving and kind.

Sara Miles, Episcopalian author and priest, writes about her conversion experience, “One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans – except that up until that moment I’d led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.

“Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I’d scorned and work I’d never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food – indeed, the bread of life ...”

So writes Sara Miles of her transforming moment, and later we’ll hear how it transformed her ...

The Proverbs text on Wisdom presents Wisdom as a host who invites you to live life like a great feast, to come in from fast food quality of naiveté and ignorance and into the seven pillared house (a metaphor for abundance) where you can feast on the exquisite cuisine of understanding and insight. This is the way to the “good life,” to true wealth and joy. In verse six we are advised to “Lay aside immaturity, and *live, and walk in the way of insight.*” In other words, it’s not just *knowing* what it means to be ethical and just. Wisdom is *doing* what is ethical and just.

How would you define wisdom? Throughout the Christian tradition the answer has been the same: wisdom is when we seek the ways of God, when we seek to live up to a standard worthy of our *imago dei* and our status as beloved children of God. If you are uncomfortable even with believing in God, I recommend Ross Douthat’s “A Guide to Finding Faith” in today’s NYTimes’s Sunday Review. Faith (rather than fear) is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom is living by faith, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly; feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, caring for the stranger, widow, and orphan; and offering hospitality to God's beloved at the margins. Wisdom is "the ability to discern right from wrong, and to choose to do right." *Knowing. Choosing. Doing.*

We can talk about morality and ethics, but wisdom is primarily about what we do with our *power*. In her book *The Wisdom Jesus*, Cynthia Bourgeault describes how Jesus modeled the path of *kenosis*. Taken from the Greek word in Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5–9), it means to "let go" or "to empty oneself." In Jesus, this self-emptying pattern reveals itself as "not love stored up but love utterly poured out." It means pouring out the power of love for the common good. It means forgiveness, acceptance, openness to the Other. It means welcoming those who are different, whether with a different skin pigmentation, gender identity, or religious or cultural background. It means supporting those who struggle with addictions and investing in the minority who don't have the benefits of privilege or wealth ...

Jesus' wisdom on earth was a purely kenotic, downwardly mobile path ... Jesus could have been a prince on a throne, holding power, riches, and every kind of privilege. Instead, he gave up power for others. He let it go ... He consciously chose a path that meant suffering, humiliation, desolation, and finally death on a cross. In response, God lifted Jesus up and gave him glory.

In Jesus, God shows us what wisdom looks like in real life; being vulnerable, humble, and self-giving. In Jesus, we see one who did not run from the things that broke his heart, nor did he first calculate what he could gain from a situation. Jesus sought instead to give away his life, so he and others might flourish as God intends for all to flourish ...

God invites us by the power of the Spirit to choose to allow our hearts to break, and then take the pieces—our lives, our goods, our love, and our privileges—and share it all like a broken loaf of communion bread.

This goes against the grain of our culture. We assert our "right" to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," which means we are free—and even expected—to organize our lives around our own individual desires. So much of our story consists of groups of people protecting themselves and what's theirs, with a gun or a flag or the cloak of racial, class, or gender privilege.

Jesus's story is the opposite. In this moment, as we reckon with the limits and consequences of self-centrism, domination systems, and the church's capitulation to empire, we could lean into the Jesus way. We could reclaim *kenosis*, or perhaps claim it for the first time ... When you take something you possess—your bread and power, your abilities and identities, your comfort and control, your treasured structures and even life itself—and release your attachment to it and make it useful to God's Kingdom-building on earth, you are practicing *kenosis*.¹

I think this is worth remembering as we are going through losses and transitions as a congregation. We are going to miss the Reeves, Tina, and Victoria. They have given so much in their different

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—a New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Shambhala: 2008), 70.

ways to this community. But in the midst of our loss and reorientation, maybe God is inviting us to stop and reflect on how we are called to change in this new season of ministry and mission. What will our priorities be and how will be staffed for realizing those priorities? How shall we make decisions that reflect God's wisdom, a wisdom that I'm reminded may look foolish, but is wiser than human wisdom ...

However, we go forward, my commitment is to welcome your thoughts and opinions on how we are called to move forward. What do you think about the administration and the music ministry needs of our church? How do we live forward in a way that proclaims to the larger community that we are embracing the wisdom of God, the way of Jesus, and a radical love and justice for all people?

After her first communion, Sara Miles goes on to say how receiving Jesus changed her life ... "In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.

"And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I'd experienced. I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I'd first received the body of Christ. I organized new pantries all over my city to provide hundreds and hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week. Without committees or meetings or even an official telephone number, I recruited scores of volunteers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"My new vocation didn't turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays, folding my hands in the pews, and declaring myself 'saved.'" Nor did my volunteer church work mean talking kindly to poor folks and handing the occasional sandwich from a sanctified distance. I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects; sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man; stick a battered woman's 357 Magnum in a cookie tin in the trunk of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my newfound church ..."²

Friends, the good news is that conversion, radical change, is always an opportunity to live into the reality of God's wisdom and change the world for good. That's a wisdom that I need. That's a wisdom that you need. That's a wisdom that we all need as we go forward in faith, hope and love. I may not know much, but I do know this: We are still God's beloved, and the church is God's chosen vehicle to change the world. And God is not finished with us yet. As Wisdom invites us, "Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight."

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

² Sara Miles, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), p. 2.