

## **“Reflections on Wisdom”**

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Texts: James 3: 13-18 and Proverbs 4: 1-9

Last week, we reflected on 1 Corinthians 13, the scripture about love most of us have heard 1000 times at weddings. In that scripture, the Apostle Paul reminds us that, “if I have all knowledge (among other things) to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” Well, this week, I would rewrite that scripture it would say, “if I have all knowledge, but do not have wisdom, I am more dangerous than if I were ignorant.” In today’s world, knowledge can be found anywhere, even in the palm of your hand! We can “Google” just about anything, and if that doesn’t work, we can always get lots of truth from social media (not really true, but for a laugh)! I grew up learning, “Knowledge is power”! And while that can be true, the use of power, without consulting wisdom, can be dangerous, even deadly.

Knowledge is defined as “the accumulation of information”. We can get all kinds of information, from facts about inanimate or animate objects, to what our neighbor is involved in, to what is happening in financial markets, to weather,

to...I could go on for days...just about anything. Wisdom, on the other hand, “is knowing how to apply your knowledge to benefit others.” In other words, “wisdom is applied knowledge”. Further, “knowledge is associated with the mind, and wisdom with the soul. Knowledge is knowing what to say and wisdom is knowing when to say it.”

Sometimes I wonder (after all, this sermon is called reflections on wisdom) if we have accumulated so much knowledge, vast amounts of knowledge, but at the same time we seem to have little space for wisdom. In our effort to “one-up” someone else, we get the “dirt” (a.k.a. knowledge) about them so we can pounce. We come armed with the “facts”, which may actually be true facts, but the only intent being to disprove, dislodge and discredit our opponent. And just like the Bible can be read to prove virtually anything, from a certain point of view, knowledge can also be twisted, taken out of context, or simply misrepresented to prove a point. Both political parties do it daily, and I’m afraid, many of us do it with our adversaries. Easy victory, you need? Discredit them, using knowledge you’ve acquired of “who they really are”. What’s the wisdom in that methodology?

We have all kinds of weapons of mass destruction at our nation's fingertips (we're not alone). And yet, even though we "know" what they can do, we would be wise not to use them. Mutually assured destruction may destroy our enemies, but we get destroyed as well. Mutually assured destruction, whether actual physical destruction, or destroying another with our knowledge are both self-destructive. No wonder we have no trust in our politicians when they play the games they do. They seem to have such little wisdom. And then we often follow along doing the same thing to our opponents. Sadly, we can even do this with our friends or family if we're not careful.

The book of Proverbs is full of wisdom literature. Walter Brueggemann, a well-known UCC pastor and professor, wrote a most interesting article on Wisdom. It's based on Proverbs 8, not Proverbs 4 where we are, but Brueggemann states that, "the more specific, immediate, and practical instruction in the book of Proverbs gives substance to what it means to 'be wise.'" Thus, there is the teaching of wisdom concerning respect for the poor, the importance of generative work, the danger of careless speech, the risk of unpayable debt, the hazard of having the wrong kind of friends. These very specific forms of conduct will diminish the wellbeing of the community, whereas good work, good speech, good friends, and respect for the poor – all the counsel of wisdom – will bring

wellbeing to the community.” Later, in the same article, he’s referring to the 2016 election, but I think his words fit the rest of our lives as well, “a) wisdom, not foolishness, delights the creator, b) wisdom generates moral coherence that cannot be mocked with impunity, and c) that in quite practical ways policy and conduct can be more fully brought into line with the claims of wisdom.

***Foolishness is alive and well among us, promising short-term greedy solutions to big neighborly issues (emphasis mine).”***

What am I trying to say in all of this? I think the call for wisdom in our culture is clarion. Knowledge has led us in great ways to much of what we enjoy today. And there is still a place for, no, a need for knowledge. But wisdom is sorely lacking throughout our society. We’ve ignored eons of advice about knowing when and how to use our knowledge, and we’re paying the price for it. A “win at all costs” society is self-imploding all around us. While this is not the only cause, I’m sure, it is a major one. How do you and I apply the wisdom of our lives to make for “positive wellbeing” of those around us? When can our knowledge be destructive? When have you and I ignored wisdom and paid the price for it?

Brian McLaren talks about wisdom in this way in our chapter for this

Sunday (Chapter 44):

Wisdom helps us see how a hasty purchase of a desired indulgence can lead to the long-term pressure of debt. Wisdom reminds us that a one-night sexual liaison can lead to lasting tragic consequences for both parties, plus their spouses, children, parents, and many others – literally, for generations to come. Wisdom knows that a single ill-advised business shortcut to increase profits can ruin a reputation earned over decades – as can one careless sentence spoken in anger or dishonesty. Wisdom remembers that habitual overindulgence in alcohol, drugs, tobacco, or even food can greatly shorten your life. And wisdom warns that even one night of drunkenness or one outburst of anger can end your lives and the lives of others. Wisdom guides us to see beyond life's immediate pleasures to potential consequences that are less obvious and less pleasant.

On the other hand, McLaren reminds us:

Wisdom also helps us see how excessively denying ourselves pleasure can itself become unwise. For example, if a mom and dad are so exhausted from the work of parenting that they forget to keep their romance alive, they can drift apart even though they are sleeping under the same roof...The same goes for someone who loves his work and gets great pleasure from it. If he works too much, his life will fall out of balance...and soon he will hate his work. So, a wise person learns that he must find pleasures outside of work so that his work will remain pleasurable rather than addictive. A wise person in this way practices self-care, sometimes stepping on the brakes and sometimes stepping on the accelerator of pleasure.

We all need wisdom to know our limits and keep our balances, to know when to say yes and when to say, "That's enough" or "That's unwise" or "this isn't the right time." We need wisdom to know when to ask for help – from a friend or from a professional – when we are in over our heads. We need wisdom to keep different kinds of pleasure in a healthy and

sustainable balance. As a wise teacher once said, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life (Proverbs 4:23).

We have so much, individually, and collectively, that can destroy us or be destroyed if we are not wise about how we use our things, including our knowledge. Wisdom may decree that even though we have knowledge of something, it doesn't mean that it's in our best interest or anyone else's to use that knowledge when destruction of another may occur. I believe the world needs many things right now, but perhaps chief among them is a healthy dose of wisdom. May we be, as Jesus stated, "wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.