

“Front Porch Wisdom”
Rev. Andrew Harris · August 15, 2021

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

Then David lay down with his ancestors and was buried in David's City. He ruled over Israel forty years—seven years in Hebron and thirty-three years in Jerusalem.

Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his royal power was well established.

Now Solomon loved the LORD by walking in the laws of his father David, with the exception that he also sacrificed and burned incense at the shrines.

The king went to the great shrine at Gibeon in order to sacrifice there. He used to offer a thousand entirely burned offerings on that altar. The LORD appeared to Solomon at Gibeon in a dream at night.

God said, “Ask whatever you wish, and I'll give it to you.”

Solomon responded, “You showed so much kindness to your servant my father David when he walked before you in truth, righteousness, and with a heart true to you. You've kept this great loyalty and kindness for him and have now given him a son to sit on his throne. And now, LORD my God, you have made me, your servant, king in my father David's place. But I'm young and inexperienced. I know next to nothing. But I'm here, your servant, in the middle of the people you have chosen, a large population that can't be numbered or counted due to its vast size. Please give your servant a discerning mind in order to govern your people and to distinguish good from evil, because no one is able to govern this important people of yours without your help.”

It pleased the LORD that Solomon had made this request. God said to him, “Because you have asked for this instead of requesting long life, wealth, or victory over your enemies—asking for discernment so as to acquire good judgment— I will now do just what you said. Look, I hereby give you a wise and understanding mind. There has been no one like you before now, nor will there be anyone like you afterward. I now also give you what you didn't ask for: wealth and fame. There won't be a king like you as long as you live. And if you walk in my ways and obey my laws and commands, just as your father David did, then I will give you a very long life.”

Proverbs 9:1-6

Wisdom built her house;
she has carved out her seven pillars.
She slaughtered her animals,
mixed her wine,
and set her table.

She sends out her female servants; she issues an invitation
from the top of the city heights:

“Whoever is naive turn aside here,”
she says to those who lack sense.

“Come, eat my food,
and drink the wine I have mixed.

Abandon your simplistic ways and live;
walk in the way of understanding.”

Ephesians 5:15-20

So be careful to live your life wisely, not foolishly. Take advantage of every opportunity because these are evil times. Because of this, don't be ignorant, but understand the Lord's will. Don't get drunk on wine, which produces depravity. Instead, be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;

All our scripture readings today approach the topic of “Wisdom,” and in all of them, Wisdom is not mentioned without also referencing its opposite, foolishness. Wisdom and foolishness are connected like paths diverting in the woods. We come to a decision point and we choose to go one way or another. Solomon asks God for a “discerning mind...to distinguish good from evil.” Wisdom is not a final destination, but an ongoing process of discernment. Down the path of wisdom there are an infinite number of further forks, where we are called to make wise and discerning choices again and again, to choose good instead of evil, wisdom instead of foolishness, life over death.

In Proverbs, Wisdom prepares a feast and calls out to travelers inviting all to participate in the feast and walk in the way of understanding. Wisdom is not hidden. It is not a buried treasure accessible only to those with the map. It is not like a truffle underground we must sniff out. Wisdom is hidden in plain sight. Wisdom announces her presence. She has prepared a feast. She calls to us and invites all people to her table.

However, only a few verses later we are warned of Wisdom’s nemesis - a foolish woman who sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the high places of the town, and similarly calls out to travelers. “To those without sense she says, ‘Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.’ But they do not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol”. The challenge it seems, is not finding this secret and hidden wisdom. It’s out in the open and all who so choose are welcome at the table. No, the challenge is discerning which is the table that produces good, that leads to life, when both call out invitingly.

Wisdom says, “Abandon your simplistic ways.” Wisdom can be complex. The answers aren’t simple. There are exceptions to every rule, and exceptions to the exceptions. Nuance seems to kaleidoscope infinitely like expanding fractals.

It’s tempting to turn to simple answers; to accept ideas that conform to our prevailing opinions as truth; to reject anything that obscures, or complicates, or challenges our preconceptions. It’s tempting but it is not wise, and it calls to mind the famous Dunning-Krueger effect, which basically states that people think they’re smarter than they really are because people with low ability in an area lack the skills to recognize their own incompetence. For example, let’s say one day you come across an interesting rock on the ground. For whatever reason, you find it captivating. So, you look it up on the internet to identify it and all of a sudden, you’re exploring the amazing field of geology. You check out books at the library. You start identifying samples around town. You go to museums and quarries. And now you start to think, “Wow, I’m pretty knowledgeable about geology.”

So, you sign up to audit a graduate level course on geology. You’re required to purchase a 700-page textbook that weighs 28 and a half pounds. The moment you pick up that hefty book of rocks you think to yourself, “Gee, maybe I don’t know all that much about geology. This is more complicated than I first thought.”

Wisdom is complicated. It’s tempting to stay at the first stage, where we think we know everything. It feels good to think yourself an expert on something and it can be discouraging, even embarrassing or shameful, to acknowledge that we don’t know much of anything at all. After all of your digging, and reading, and museum visiting, you’re still only on page 1 of that 700 page, 28-and-a-half-pound book. But this is a

major step on the path to wisdom: humility, admitting that you don't know it all, and realizing that knowing what you don't know is a path forward.

The Dunning Kruger effect is a human cognitive bias. It applies to all of us. It's not like there are some people foolish enough to trick themselves into thinking like this. We all do it. We all can fall prey to this simplistic understanding of things that puts ourselves on top and refuses to budge at the risk of realizing we're not as smart as we think we are.

The more we learn about something, the less we seem to know. It's tempting to turn from the path of wisdom once the complications threaten our sense of superiority. It's tempting to choose foolishness so as to maintain the false sense that we know it all. Wisdom asks us to admit that we don't, that we can't. Wisdom seems to say, the more you know, the less you know. Wisdom requires a humble heart.

A different translation of that same passage from Proverbs says, "Lay aside your immaturity." Immaturity, like hubris, is an obstacle on the path to wisdom. This seems obvious, but it reveals an important insight about the path of wisdom: wisdom is found through experience. The very act of living breeds wisdom, so long as we're wise enough to embrace change. As long as we continue to grow, to seek, to explore, and to experience all that life has to offer, we will naturally mature along the path of wisdom. As long as we don't plant our feet in immaturity and refuse to be moved, God will guide us along the path. Walk faithfully and fearlessly, with open hearts and minds, and the wisdom of maturity will lead you toward God.

The courage to continue on, the will to keep seeking, is more important on the path to wisdom than intelligence, or natural abilities, or God-given talents. Wisdom

requires the will power to descend into the valley of unknowing, to abandon the false belief that we're right, or that we're superior; to recognize that we have never finished maturing, and that, in God's eyes, we're all little children struggling to understand.

Scripture tells us that the marks of wisdom are humility and maturity, not intelligence or achievement. Wisdom is less about knowing things, and more about knowing what you don't know.

The humility and patience required to cultivate wisdom is in short supply. Too often, the temptation towards simple answers and our own internal sense of being right win out and we give in to the feast at the foolish woman's table. Quite simply, we need more wisdom in this world. Just this week in the news we've heard at least two appalling crises born from choices made with a distinct lack of wisdom. Decisions where we as a human people chose death over life, violence over peace, hatred over love.

Last week the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change presented a new report to the United Nations. It's more of the same we've been hearing for the past 20 years: unless we dramatically change our behavior immediately, then we will face an inevitable climate breakdown resulting in unspeakable suffering. There's no longer anything we can do to stave off climate catastrophe. It's already happening right now in the form of extreme weather events, droughts and the destruction of arable land leading to mass migration from parts of the world that are quickly becoming uninhabitable for human beings, leading to destabilization of countries that would otherwise be relatively protected from the worst of the climate crisis.

The only real news of this report hinges on the word unless. We used to say, unless we change, all this will come to pass. Well, we didn't change, and some level of

climate breakdown is now inevitable. Unless we change immediately and dramatically, the relative comfort and peace of life as we know it will come to a shattering halt in the near future. By the time my son is an old man, the world we live in will be unrecognizable because of human caused climate change. This is a fact.

I don't doubt that the people that led us to this point are smart people - the ineffective and uninterested leaders of the past, the ineffective and uninterested leaders of the present, the CEOs of the mere 100 companies that are responsible for 71% of greenhouse gas emissions, all the people who got rich off oil profits and the fossil fuel industry by burying damning reports and sowing seeds of minimization and denial. I know these are all highly intelligent people, but they are all clearly and gravely short on wisdom. They traded short term profits for the long-term sustainability of our planet. Given the choice, they chose death over life, evil over good, foolishness over wisdom.

We live in a society with a surplus of intelligence, but we are woefully short on wisdom. If we want to avoid the same mistakes as previous generations, we need to emphasize the cultivation of wisdom in the next generation. Like Solomon, we would be wise to ask God for wisdom over and above anything else, for a discerning mind to distinguish good from evil. Wisdom will guide us in all future decisions and endeavors, it will lead us down right paths and away from the death and destruction that awaits us lest we turn from our foolish ways.

To choose wisdom is to forsake the fast track to success that calls so tantalizingly and instead choose the path less traveled, winding through peaks and valleys, summers and winters, forest and meadow. It means embracing the complexity of life, all its challenges and contradictions, perplexities and paradoxes, even though

they sometimes make us feel small or stupid. It means proudly saying “I don’t know” with conviction, with curiosity, and with faith that, even though we can’t possibly know everything, God can. It means instead of covering up or hiding the gaps in our understanding, we should embrace them as places where the Holy Spirit resides.

If ever I have met wisdom in my life, as she is described in Proverbs, she was sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch of a dilapidated old trailer in South Carolina. There, as a high schooler, I met a 90-year-old woman who remembered going to church as a girl with former slaves; who lived through nearly a century of discrimination and segregation in the Jim Crow south; who never attended high school but worked and raised children and grandchildren and great grandchildren and took great pleasure in regaling some naive Yankees with homespun stories of times gone by. She possessed humility and maturity in spades. Her faith in the Word outpaced her capacity to read it.

Paul instructs us to live wisely. In Ephesians he says, “be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts.” I pray that today’s music invokes this sort of front porch wisdom. A wisdom that learns through living. A wisdom that embraces humility with dignity. A wisdom that calls out from unassuming places and everyday moments. A wisdom that invites you to a veritable feast with singing. Listen with open ears, walk faithfully with open hearts, and you will find her, if you choose wisely.

Amen.