

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 4, 2009
Lessons: Proverbs 3:1-12 and Luke 2:41-52

WISDOM AND STATURE

“Jesus increased in wisdom and in years,” with the alternate translation being “wisdom and stature.” The curious, precocious, and mildly rebellious boy we see questioning the teachers in the Temple grew up. It is not possible to live in this world without increasing in years; it is possible, however, to age without continuing to grow. It is not possible to gain wisdom without knowledge and experience; it is possible, however, to gain knowledge and experience without attaining wisdom. Time passes, pleasure and pain happen, but reflection on their meaning is optional, as is also that next step which for me is needed to turn understanding into wisdom – the step of sharing knowledge and enabling others to find insight.

Our culture tends to measure success by three commodities: wealth, power, and fame. We have a city to symbolize each: New York for wealth, Washington for power, and Los Angeles for fame – the three capitals of success. So, for example, we often hear people evaluate education in terms of money – earning power rather than either knowledge or wisdom. The idea that the purpose of education is to enable lifelong learning and contribution to the human community seems quaint and impractical. What is a degree for if not a paycheck? The paragon of American success is the one who can attain the most wealth with the least education and so be thought to have outsmarted the brainy people. Why waste time learning when you could be earning? And some even ask of the highly educated, “If he’s so smart, why isn’t he rich?”

Without denying that people need work that pays a living wage, I would argue that the purpose of getting an education is to learn how to keep learning and to develop, not only knowledge in at least one discipline, but the thinking skills, aesthetic sensibilities, and curiosity to process experience wisely, contribute to the wisdom and well-being of the human community, and serve God by serving people (as we say in our ordination vows) “with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.”

Wisdom, the optional part of aging, is also the hardest to define. Am I wise if I simply “know the ropes” through years of repetition, of trial and error? Is savvy the same as wisdom? There is surely some advantage to knowing the ropes, the drill, or the inventory, but the same experience that might make me wiser may instead make me dull, closing my

mind to new possibilities and creative thinking. A major part of wisdom is understanding people. But, am I wise if I read people well enough to get what I want from them without turning them against me? That's what the world often calls "leadership." Or am I wise if I read people well enough to share understanding respectfully that enables them to get over some of life's hurdles and move toward better places in their lives? Both possible achievements require some knowledge of people, but am I wiser if I use that knowledge to serve myself or to serve others? That choice we must make, you and I, and we make the choice far more frequently than we may realize, until it becomes an unconscious habit and our lives become oriented toward taking or giving, using people or enabling them, consuming life's goods or sharing them.

As I was writing the first draft of this sermon, a friend reminded me of another component of wisdom: *generational responsibility*. Those who have lived with a sense of responsibility to the human community and have wrestled with life's problems and gotten over some of life's hurdles have gained knowledge from a wealth of experiences, some joyous and others painful. So, what do we do with that knowledge? Die with it? Live long enough to forget it or just see it become outdated? Or do we pass it along, pay it forward to new generations? Does our knowledge not become wisdom when we share it with the next generations in ways that do not bind them but liberate them and enable them to go forward with greater strength and confidence in their own pursuit of ministry, service, and life?

Yes, I know I just used the word "ministry" in a way not limited to ordained, professional ministers. Jesus Christ calls every one of us to be a minister in some way, in some manner. As I continue to age and accumulate experience, the idea of generational responsibility intrigues me more and more. We worry about what we will pass along to our children in monetary wealth, if we have any to speak of, but as a society, we have not given the same kind of thought to passing along our much greater wealth in ways that will not bind or oppress but rather encourage and enable the up and coming generations of people.

We are all teachers, whether we know it or not. Of course, what we teach may be helpful, harmful, or merely useless, but we still teach. Younger generations of people see in us what it means to be an adult. The vision may or may not encourage them. For a negative example, one of the easiest lessons to teach children and have it stick is prejudice. They soak it up like sponges because it makes them feel included and special to be better than some other, nasty, bad people. But we can also teach them respect, openness, and the sense of fairness they will need to be truly wise.

There is something more. The wisdom we are talking about is that of Jesus. Life is not always a matter of mutuality, as Jesus certainly found out. The alternative to the pursuit of success is what Martin Luther called "the way of the cross." In this way Jesus took and

calls his church to follow him, wisdom looks like folly because it gives even without hope of receiving benefit in return. “Greater love has no one,” Jesus says, “than to lay down his (or her) life for — and the word for the recipients of this love is hard to translate. “For his friends,” but the word is *philo*, as in the name of Philadelphia, “city of brotherly love.” The way of the cross is to lay down one’s life for the people to whom one gives love far beyond what is received back from them. Most of us do not go very far down that road, but it is the way of Jesus Christ – to give much more than we expect to receive back. Parents may understand and hope that in time their children will *pay it forward* to a new generation. But there is nothing about physically being a parent that guarantees such love, nor is it restricted to those with children of their very own. More than a few teachers, mentors, and friends have given of themselves far more than they have received back.

We have among us people at a steep disadvantage in life, and they are every bit as much loved by God as we are. Some are the resident foreigners of whom the Bible speaks often – our new neighbors, however we may think laws need to be changed and national policies made workable rather than counterproductive. Because they are our neighbors, as Christians we love them, but as you know, they are not much loved in our society – used but not loved. Mutuality requires reaching across barriers of fear and suspicion. It would be foolish to romanticize immigrants as guileless innocents when, of course, they are as kind and loving but may also be as conflicted, flawed, and selfish as any other group of people in search of a better life. What does it mean to be Christ’s church for them? They dwell in the shadows of fear so their children may live in the light of freedom. What is our wisdom in this matter? How far are we willing to journey in the way of the cross?

That’s but one example at a time when more and more people will be living in fear and distress, some in shock and disbelief at the change in their circumstances. All of us face inward and outward threats to our well-being that could push us back into ourselves, isolating us from each other. Meanwhile, life keeps challenging each of us to learn and grow, not just to survive or even prosper. I had already typed “Amen” to the first draft of this sermon, when I saw that a teacher suggested in an online discussion asking her student teachers, not only “What are the children learning in this lesson?” (logically a standard thought-question for student teachers) but also, “What are *you* learning right now from your experience in student teaching?” The idea is to become reflective in order to gain wisdom and not just get through the trials of student teaching. I believe we can hear that same kind of question from Jesus Christ to us, if we listen. First, *What are other people learning from our being his church?* What do they learn from us about Christ? Then also, *What are you and I learning from being his church for our own sake and theirs?* How are we growing in Christ’s kind of wisdom, and how do we encourage reflection and growth in ourselves and each other? If we will keep asking such questions, we will have a good start toward making 2009 a year worth living and sharing. Amen.