

Wisdom! Wisdom! Let us be attentive.

11th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 15, Year B. August 16, 2009. (Text: Proverbs 9:1-6.)

In my new office downstairs, there are only half as many bookshelves as were in my old office. This has presented me with a problem. What am I supposed to *do* with this precious hoard of books? I can't take them home. Every bookshelf in the rectory is already full, and there's a stack of books over six feet high behind the door of my home office.

I've been asking myself, "Why do I have so *many* books?" And more to the point: "Why am I so reluctant to *part* with them?" I don't mean that there aren't some that it will be easy to dump, books that have never meant much to me. —But I still want to keep way too many.

I think the answer to my question is this: I want to keep these dog-eared, old books *because I see them as a treasure I haven't yet exhausted*. They're like one of those shut-down, closed-up silver mines under Aspen Mountain. (Tons of precious ore are still there, you know, under the ski runs, waiting to be hauled out when the effort can be made profitable.) In the last six months I've re-read some books I had already been through more than once over the years. But reading these volumes a third time, I've found *wisdom* that I somehow failed to grasp ten or twenty years ago.

Because I'm a book-lover, I never pass up the opportunity to investigate a new bookstore. And I've observed that one of the most prominent and popular departments in a big, new bookstore is usually the "Self-help" section. The popularity of "Self-help" books suggests that many among us are anxious about life and looking for help. Maybe they're not sure how to cope with the fresh challenges the world keeps putting in their path, so they're primed to buy the latest paperback that offers eight simple steps to working out life's problems.

We Americans tend to look at life as a series of problems to be solved. I think that's why so many businesses now include the word "solutions" in their name, like: "Bookkeeping Solutions." "Wastewater Solutions." Or "Pet Grooming Solutions." Maybe we should get up-to-date and change the name of our church to "Spiritual Solutions." Then people could tell one another, "*I got my life straightened out over at Spiritual Solutions, on the corner of 5th and North, just south of the Music Tent. Check it out!*"

We tell ourselves, "Knowledge is power," and we imagine that if we get some fresh information — the latest "how-to" book — we'll arrive at our own solutions to the problems of life. In some cases it is true that *knowledge is power*, of a kind. For example, if I secretly know that the stock market is going up three hundred points on Monday, and you don't have that knowledge, then I have more power to make money than you have. But answers to questions and anxieties about the meaning of life lie elsewhere —not in knowing the latest information, but *in the pursuit of WISDOM*.

Every civilization in the past looked for wisdom, though some searched for it more carefully and prized it more highly than others. In the Old Testament we're told that when Solomon succeeded his father David as king of Israel, the LORD appeared in a dream to Solomon and said, "*Tell me what you want Me to give you.*" Solomon didn't ask for greater wealth or imperial power, instead, he asked for wisdom.

Our first lesson today came from the Book of Proverbs. It's the invitation of Lady Wisdom to all who are willing to listen to her. She says, "*You that are simple, turn in here!*' To those without sense she says, '*Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.*'" To have wisdom is "to walk in the way of insight." We

want to live a centered and peaceful life in the midst of a fast-changing, culturally polarized, often confusing world. To do so, we need to accept the invitation of Lady Wisdom.

The Jewish tradition we find in the Bible, the tradition that shaped Jesus and trained Paul, understood wisdom as *inherently practical*. Wisdom taught how to live a good and meaningful life, especially in terms of our personal relationships —starting with God, and then moving down the social pyramid from the king to the aristocracy, to people superior to you, people subordinate to you, your spouse, your children, your neighbors, and your servants. Wisdom showed how to deal with people who were stronger than you as well people who were weaker than you. The Book of Proverbs was a wisdom textbook for school-boys in ancient Israel. (Alas, there were no “school-girls” back then, which is surprising since Wisdom was always portrayed as female. Maybe they thought girls came by their wisdom naturally, while boys had to be taught! The woman here would probably agree with that.)

The Book of Proverbs taught young Israelite gentlemen that the wise differ from fools in practical ways: the wise control their tongues and consider the power of their words; they also honor silence. They control their passions and practice moderation in everything. They learn how to work hard and be thrifty. They have a goal for their lives. (Very important!) Above all, wise people grasp the truth of their own ignorance; they are aware that they don’t “know it all.” And they understand that wisdom is usually acquired slowly, over time (which is why you can continue learning from old books you’ve read three times before).

Wisdom in the Bible means more than shrewdness, more than common sense, and more than the latest techniques in problem solving. Wisdom demands that we be patient with ourselves and with others. Wisdom teaches us to live with ambiguity, because we don’t live in a black and white moral universe where right and wrong are always self-evident. Wisdom teaches that there is much that can only be learned from pain and failure. Wisdom shows us that there are many different ways to experience success, and that sometimes what the world calls success is really the opposite — while what the world labels failure is, instead, victory... like the death of Christ on the cross.

Everybody has heard the Bible verse that says, “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” For the Hebrews of old, the only way to wisdom was through a relationship with God grounded in reverence and awe. (“Reverence and awe” is what the word “fear” really means in the phrase “*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*”)

We don’t practice “fear of the Lord” in order to win arguments or get an advantage over other people. Reverence for God opens the door to a practical understanding of how to live a deeply meaningful life.

Reverence for God, respect for God’s Word, dread of offending him, openness to his love, and eagerness to do his will are the starting points for human happiness. In a time when we’re anxious or edgy and looking for counsel, there’s no more practical help to offer either our children or our friends than to tell them to seek the wisdom of God. It’s more useful than the latest new self-help book, a cool new website, or the most recent “guru” to hit Aspen.

The Bible tells us that the wisdom of God was summed up and embodied in the person of Jesus, and was expressed in an amazing way through his Cross. Yes, through his Cross. His death. His apparent “failure” in the eyes of the world. Paul called Christ “*the wisdom of God and the power of God.*” He wrote to one community of believers, “*I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ crucified... a message of wisdom among the mature, but NOT the wisdom of this world.*”

The imitation of Christ, who laid down his life for those he loved, is the most practical wisdom anyone can share. But it's not the conventional wisdom of our age.

I have pointed out to you before that, in our church, when the priest offers a solemn blessing of the bride and groom at the end of the marriage service, that blessing begins with these words: "*Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life.*" Here is wisdom: THE WAY OF THE CROSS IS THE WAY OF LIFE.

Do you want to have a happier family life? ...*Walk the way of the cross!* Do you want to get along better at work? ...*Walk the way of the cross!* Do you want to have victory over the anxieties of this age? ...*Walk the way of the cross!* Do you want to move beyond your fear of failure and start living an abundant life? ...*Walk the way of the cross!*

In the Greek Church, before the reading of the Gospel at the Eucharist, the Deacon cries out, "*Wisdom! Wisdom! Let us be attentive!*" The Good News of Christ *is* wisdom... the best counsel anyone can ever get —or give.