

### **1 Corinthians 1:20-29**

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

**"How Ironic"**

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**January 2, 2011**

I recall when I was a child playing the piano at my grandmother's house, and when you played the piano there was a plaque that sat on the top of the piano, and it had a prayer written on it. It's a famous prayer. Many of you would know it as the Serenity Prayer, and it goes like this: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." This Christmas I was at my parents' house, and I was in their bedroom, and I had noticed that

since my grandparents have passed away, now that same plaque sits in their bedroom. I had never noticed that until just a couple weeks ago.

When I was in seminary was the first time I realized that famous prayer, that many of us probably know by heart, was written by not only a pastor, but a famous theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. He was popular and well-read during the time after World War II, during what we might call the cold war, in which his challenge, to both people who would consider themselves liberal or conservative, was for Christianity to find its voice, and to find wisdom that we could impart. That we could be part of the discussion that goes beyond just a personalistic view of Christianity and moves into the global He didn't mind pushing that issue, and therefore, probably, some people didn't like him. But for him, the idea was that Christianity, our faith, was one that could impart wisdom, could truly be about a part of bringing wisdom to change the world where we can, and accept those things that we couldn't. He advanced the ideas of what we call Christian Realism. In ethics, he helped put forward the idea of the just war theory. But for him it wasn't just about Christian knowledge, it was about praxis, about wisdom being about what we know, but how we live in the world.

I like that he was able to put together a prayer as simple as the one that we could recite and as complex as the things he put forward in his books to the world. Well today as we enter into another year, it is the tradition of the church to look at Epiphany at the same time as we look at New Years resolutions, as the wise men came, and they looked at a star, so too we have that as our metaphor, that the epiphanies of our life are those seeds of light that bring us insight, that help us be better people, to be wiser people. And Paul, the apostle Paul, says that those insights are ironic. They come to us in different ways, in situations that we least expect, through the voices of people that we may not even like, in situations that we don't see as sacred, and yet they speak to us.

As I prepared this, sometimes I realize that some things are easier to define apophatically, by saying what something isn't, before we can define what it is. And so I wrote down a few things that wisdom is not. Wisdom is not knowing all the answers. Know-it-alls do know all the answers, but it doesn't make them wise. Sometimes it is in not having the answer that we bear wisdom. Wisdom is not the possession of education or a degree, though certainly that's important. It's not the possession but it's the application. It's the way we use our education and degree and couple that with compassion and kindness and the laws of Christ. It's not just following the rules, it's going beyond the rules, or going beyond situations in which there are no rules. It is not just following the guru or the expert of the day, but it is in developing out own philosophies of life. It's not in being critical and telling other people what our wisdom is, but sometimes it is accepting that our viewpoint is different.

Paul liked this irony that he put forward to us, that in this story of a baby comes the great wisdom of the world. The irony of shepherds and an infant, and people that you least expect. Even these scientists that you least expect what they do. Even the word "wisdom" that comes from the Greek, and is a female in the language, the irony that wisdom, Sofia, would be the word for wisdom in the midst of a culture at the time that was male-

dominated. Those are the ironies. That's what wisdom, I would say, is not. But quickly I want to put forward three things that wisdom is.

As I've already said, wisdom moves beyond our knowledge. Classic philosophy says that wisdom is the best use of knowledge. So there I appreciate education and science and observation. And yet it seems that wisdom in our faith tradition says that wisdom goes beyond that, it moves beyond that.

When we had our first son, he didn't sleep. Some of you can appreciate having a child that didn't sleep. Well, we had a lot of advice. In fact, I remember a couple who gave us a book and said, "If you read this book, your baby will sleep." And we read that book. We had that book memorized, and we talked to neighbors and friends and family and guess what? Our baby still didn't sleep. He just wouldn't sleep. It didn't matter what we had read. It didn't matter the formula. We were required to go beyond our knowledge. We were required to work it out ourselves. in the great line of working out our own salvation. Indeed, wisdom is when we are pushed to move beyond what we may know to be true.

We live in a culture that loves gurus and experts to tell us just exactly how to do it, and they can provide us with good guidelines. And yet sometimes that doesn't work for our situation, and so we have to work out that relationship that's crumbling, and it may not be the way that conventional wisdom or experts have told us. The word "knowledge" in the Greek is gnostic or gnosticism. We get the word "agnostic" from no knowledge. But in the third century, by the third century, I should say, there was a rising group of people who called themselves Christian Gnostics, and for them they believed that having this knowledge of Jesus caused them to be elite, allowed them to have a special knowledge or insight that nobody else had.

Now, I'm not big on declaring people heretics, but in the third century, these people were declared heretics, because the early church leaders saw that making one's wisdom based solely on a knowledge that "we have Jesus and you don't" went contrary to the teachings of Jesus himself that we are universal. That our wisdom is not just something that we hold or possess, but it's something that we share. That we apply it, that it comes sometimes from people who aren't Christian, from situations that seem un-sacred, and yet they speak to us the deep wisdom of God's love and compassion and forgiveness.

Secondly, for me wisdom is about seeing a bigger picture, just as the children's story speaks to, often, our own insight is limited. I don't know about you, this probably isn't the case for you, but occasionally I get into disagreements with, oh, my husband, or children, and occasionally, on rare situations I will realize that what they say is making sense. Maybe I'm wrong. They were in the 8:00 service, so don't tell them I said that. But sometimes we sit in that moment where we realize that we need to surrender the position that we have taken, because our eyes have become narrowly focused and we can't see the big picture. I don't know about you, at Christmas time, but we always have a puzzle out, and it's the only time I do puzzles, because they frustrate me. Now, we have a couple relatives who like to go for the hardest ones, and there's probably some of you in this group that like to have all the puzzle pieces the same shape and the same color, and for

me that would just be insanity. I like my puzzles to be all different colors and large pieces, so it doesn't take long and it's fun.

But you know, we all have that experience of doing a puzzle where we just can't get it. We can't see what's happening in front of us, we don't see where this piece goes, and it's a wonderful metaphor. Often, we hold that one piece. But our one piece doesn't let us see the big picture. It's in dialogue, it's in really hearing that person who has said something we really, profoundly disagree with. It's in staying with the puzzle, being determined to work it out, so that the reward is that bigger view. In literature, especially in children's literature, it's the owl who's the wisest. The owl is that metaphor of the one animal that bestows great wisdom. One of the reasons is because the owl has big eyes and can see, but more particularly, the owl can see at night. How good is that for us, to have a bigger picture, even when things are dark, that we can see something broader. God's eyes, through ours.

And thirdly, as I've already kind of mentioned, wisdom is about self-awareness. Be willing to change, be willing to be open to hear that we might not always have it right. I don't know if you've heard the story of the woman who goes into the doctor, and she has two rather swollen red ears. He goes, "My gosh, what happened to you?" She says, "Well, you know, I was at home and I was ironing, and the phone rang, and I thought the iron was the phone." He said, "That's awful. But that only explains one ear. What happened to the other ear?" She says, "Well, they called back."

We need to learn our lessons. There are many lessons before us. Sometimes we're not always willing to learn them the first time. My father always had a phrase he would say to me - "Some people live and learn, and others just live." Well, there's truth to that. We're called to live and learn. We're called to open to the lessons before us. Paul invites us to move beyond rules, move beyond the convention. If our wisdom comes out of the observations of nature, or in the liturgy of a service, or from a neighbor that we talk to that we don't know, the truth is that it's still God's wisdom, and it comes to us bearing insight. May you go, knowing that Christ's light brings to us wisdom in our world today. Amen.