

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Proper 15B 2009

In the Name of our One, ever living, ever present God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our readings today move us from our examination during the past few weeks of power to an examination of wisdom. It is a logical progressing since the two are related. The valuing of and search for wisdom is one of the great Biblical themes. We see it in all three of our readings. One of the best reasons for reading the Bible is that we get to see life and our relationship with God through the eyes of a people over a period of more than two thousand years in all sorts or situations. Our modern search engines might give us an equally broad coverage, but I doubt if they would yield the depth of understanding that the Bible seeks to give us.

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures concludes our David saga as he dies after 40 years on the throne of Israel. We move on, apparently seamlessly, into the story of Solomon in the 1st Book of Kings. The lectionary editors have left out the political conniving of Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, to obtain the throne for her son, the fight for the throne between David's eldest son Adonijah and Solomon, and Solomon's subsequent execution of Adonijah and his allies. They didn't teach me that in Sunday School . Solomon was obviously no innocent school boy! Knowing this definitely paints a different picture of life in those times and its similarity to life today – 3,000 years later.

In today's reading, Solomon has gone to one of the "high places" –the old places of Canaanite worship now dedicated to Yahweh – to offer sacrifice. He has a conversation with God in his dream. When God asks what he desires, Solomon, knowing his inexperi-

ence and the daunting task ahead of him, asks for wisdom. “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people.” The Lord is pleased with this response and give him not only what he asked for but also the long life of riches that he could have asked for but did not. God responds to Solomon’s request with abundant generosity.

God’s question perhaps is the greatest test for Solomon and for each one of us: What can I give you? What do you really want? This account of Solomon at the beginning of his reign tells us some basic biblical truths. God’s presence is everywhere – even in our deepest subconscious as we sleep. God desires relationship with God’s creation and calls it always to its best result. When we respond affirmatively, God gives more generously than we ever could have expected.

Our Psalm today says, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Most scholars agree that “awe” would be a better translation than the word “fear”. Awe connotes a moving out of the self and an opening up that results in the ability to perceive what exceeds our experience and our intelligence. It is like going out to look at the stars we see night in and night out but suddenly being moved beyond our knowledge of physics and astronomy into a sense of wonder and grandeur at the order and extent of the heavens. That happened to me once on Lana’i. It is place where our knowledge only enhances the sense of awe. Music sometimes does this.

So, what does the Bible have to say about wisdom? I read around a bit, and this is what I came up with:

1. Wisdom comes from asking hard questions. What is important in life?
2. Wisdom comes when we ask for it; when we know our limitations and reach out to seek God’s help.

- 3. Wisdom is everywhere and so we listen to our dreams and moments of inspiration if we are indeed open to faith.**
- 4. Wisdom is everywhere and we can find it in unexpected places – even among people who are different from us.**
- 5. The search for wisdom requires us to be alert and living in the present moment.**
- 6. The search for wisdom calls us to mindfulness – to being aware of how things truly are – not what we wish them to be nor what we are afraid of them becoming.**

Lastly, Wisdom comes when we consciously seek to engage it. The Eastern or Greek Church has a long history of recognizing the presence of Divine Wisdom as ordering Creation and as existing and accessible at all times. This leads their theology to focus on a trusting faith in an ever present and generous God. The first great Christian basilica was built in Constantinople around 350 and was named Hagia Sophia – Divine Wisdom. Even today, at a certain time in the Greek Orthodox mass, the priest will call for Sophia to come enlighten her people and the ushers will fling the doors open. This requires an open spirit willing to engage the will of God that exceeds our understanding. The wise not only pray. The wise know that they are heard and listen when they pray.

You will notice that Jesus sought relationship. He sought to move people beyond what they thought they wanted into a deeper understanding of God and God's abundant generosity. Our Gospel lesson today is yet another lesson about the Bread of Life from John. John is very theological and his language is difficult – intentionally so. Here he has Jesus speaking on two levels. Taken literally, his words would be repulsive to the crowd of Jewish listeners. For Jews, blood represented life. To consume blood was totally forbidden. Animals to be kosher had to be bled before they could be consumed. To eat human flesh was cannibalistic. The temple animal sacrifices were intended to replace the human sacrifices of

ancient days.

The crowd “Disputed among itself” what Jesus meant. Dispute is a mild translation.

What was going on here was a raucous shouting. Jesus was asking them to look beyond what they knew, beyond the need for animal sacrifices. Most preach on this text as pointing to the Last Supper and Holy Communion. But that is not found in John’s Gospel.

What Jesus might have been pointing towards is the cross. The consumer of flesh is death. Jesus is pointing towards his coming from heaven and dwelling with the Father as ensuring his victory over death. Whoever partakes of his body and blood abides in him and will also have life everlasting.

Wisdom in the Bible teaches us that God wants to give us more than we can conceive of let alone ask for. We move in faith to abide in Christ when we receive communion. It is not something we earn or can be worthy of. It is a free gift, a promise of eternal life that we are called to embrace.

We are bombarded every day by the media seeking to arouse feelings of inadequacy that can only be cured by the purchase of this or that product. We live in a culture of poll-driven policies, of misinformation whether intentional or not. We live in a society with almost immediate access to unbelievable amounts of information and our learning is increasing exponentially.

But has this increased human kind’s wisdom? Have our leaders become more principled, more concerned with the common good? Have we? Do we demand that of them or have we just lost heart?

We have plenty of information and lots of knowledge. But are we living in a better world? Will we leave a better world to our children? We need wisdom, but that takes work, listening, openness. It takes living mindfully – a willfulness to engage reality rather than life as we want it to be and asking ourselves and one another: “What do I really want? What do

I truly need?" What does our community need? What are our priorities? I think church, at its best, has much to contribute to bringing wisdom into our communities. When news has been replaced by sound-bites, when shouting and fearful anger replace discourse in the public square, church may be one of the last institutions that can promote wisdom. On the other hand, church or organized religion, can also be one of the first to chase Wisdom from our midst.

As Seneca remarked in the first century, no one has gotten wise by accident.

Amen.