

Wisdom

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“Wisdom.” The word feels *different* from other words, doesn’t it? It feels like a warm spring day after months of rain —yes, Virginia, there *will be* a spring—where the sun is high in the sky and birds are gossiping with each other at your feeder. There are pearls of wisdom, wisdom teeth, and a mother’s wisdom. Many of us wish our political leaders would show a little *more* wisdom. On the campaign trail each candidate is shoving the others aside to convey the message that she or he is the *most* wise. It’s like a wrestling ring of wisdom.

As we pursue discernment and calling, obviously wisdom is what we use. And discernment may be thought of as the personal application of wisdom.

Wisdom is often conveyed via stories, like this one. There was a woman who entered an artist’s shop and asked her to create a drawing for a rooster. “I’ll pay you half now, and half when you’re finished,” she said. To this the artist agreed and told the woman to come back the next day. The next day the woman came back, but the artist said she was not finished, and to come back in a week. In a week she came back, but the artist said, come back in a month. Even in a month the drawing was not finished. In six months, the buyer came back and demanded either the drawing or her money back. At this, the artist took out a large piece of paper and her paints, and soon created a drawing of a rooster that was absolutely beautiful. She handed it to the buyer who said, “I don’t get it. If it was so easy for you, why didn’t you just create the drawing on the first day I came into your shop?” The artist said, “Come down to my cellar.” And in the cellar, all along the walls, were dozens of drawings of roosters.

In the story, the buyer learns that a great end comes only through great work. That, honestly, there are no shortcuts to any kind of success. We have instant oatmeal but no instant wisdom.

“Wisdom is the right use of knowledge,” wrote Charles Spurgeon, and I think we’d agree that wisdom and knowledge are connected. And likely a connection between wisdom and humility. “The doorstep to the temple of wisdom,” said Benjamin Franklin, “is a knowledge of our own ignorance.”

So these three go together: wisdom, knowledge and humility. And to this list, we’ll add two more: secrets and mysteries.

There was a boy in a class making a drawing. “What are you drawing?” asked his teacher. “God,” he answered. “Well...” objected the teacher, “no one knows what God *looks like*.” “They will in a minute,” the boy answered.

It’s an adorable story but it points out the occasional partners of wisdom and knowledge: secrets and mysteries. And the potential for us to have secret knowledge and knowledge of mysteries. The boy knows what the rest of us do *not* know.

We may think that in discerning our calling we are trying to learn God's *secret* about us, and about his mysterious desire for us.

And we love secrets, don't we? "Listen (doo da do), do you want to know a secret (doo da do)? Do you promise not to tell? (doo da do)?" (as the Beatles sang in 1963). Only in the case of *discernment*, the secret is not so much that "I'm in love with you" as much as it is the answer to the question, "Does God want me to join the Altar Guild?" Or "Is God calling me to be a deacon?" Or "Does God want me to use my organizational skills to bring together a study group to learn about the books that didn't make it into the Bible?"

And now that we're speaking of books that didn't make it into Bible, let's put our finger into one of them, as it's relevant to one of today's passages. It's the book of Enoch, finished about 100 years before Christ. In it is a brief myth about Wisdom. It helps to know that the Greek word for wisdom is *Sophia*. The myth goes like this. Wisdom lived in heaven. When she left heaven and descended to earth to make her place among humans she found no place to dwell, and she returned to her place in heaven and took her seat among the angels. When sin broke out on earth, she found those who did not seek her—only a select few—and came down among them, as welcome as rain in the desert and dew on a thirsty land.

Now we, like the painter in our story, have all the paints we need to draw a picture of the Corinthian church, and Paul's struggle with it. Scholars believe that the Corinthians were familiar with the story from the book of Enoch—and it was in other books as well—and they developed the idea of a "wisdom Christianity." Like the classroom boy—adorable and yet likely rather annoying—some of the Corinthians *knew secrets that others did not know*. Like in the myth of Sophia who descended from heaven but was known only by a select few. They knew the mysteries—true wisdom—that were hidden others, so they thought. They were *special*. They were *empowered*. So empowered they weren't so sure that they *needed* Paul as their apostle.

It was a belief system widespread across the ancient world in the first and second centuries. You may have heard of books like the *Gospel of Thomas*, which come out of the same system.

The background, then, of these beliefs was a redeemer who descends from heaven through the realms of the rulers of the universe, a redeemer whose true form is concealed from almost everyone and known only to His own people who were redeemed by Him. Then He rises again and returns to heaven.

Sounds a little like Jesus, doesn't it? You can see how it wasn't a big leap for the Corinthians to *depart* from the gospel that Paul had delivered and moved into this other belief system. Especially as it was so *empowering*. And knowledge and wisdom *are* empowering.

For the Corinthians, the Holy Spirit was a sort of a secret fairy god-mother of Wisdom, who had tapped them on the head and made them spiritual and given them knowledge and made them wise, so that *all* things—the world, life, death, the present and the future—all were open to them. They didn't need Jesus to return to earth and start the new age where He would reign, because they already *lived in* the new age. They understood the *mystery*. They were empowered to judge others, because they had the double authority of knowledge and wisdom.

And in the book of Corinthians we see how Paul acts when his back is up against the wall. He does not let the congregation go its own way. He is their *pastor*. He sees their beliefs as a threat to the kingdom.

When Paul's an adversary, he takes the vocabulary from his opposition and does a sort of verbal *jujitsu*, using their own language against them, including all the words we've used so far: wisdom, knowledge, secret, mystery. He writes, "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the *mystery* of God in lofty words or *wisdom*." He stares down the Corinthian idea of wisdom and its empowerment. "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

This, then, is Paul's gospel. And *our* gospel. This, then, is true wisdom, is reliable wisdom, is the wisdom that leads to our discernment, is the secret to understand our calling, is the wisdom from which we *dare not deviate*. There are competitors to this wisdom to be sure, both in the first century and in our own. There are temptations that will appear to empower us. But we should call upon our great 21st century powers of skepticism and use them to be very, very skeptical of any wisdom other than this.

It is the *wisdom of the cross*. You see, we *like* the secret of the infant in the stable, visited by wise men who were guided by a star; we *like* the wunderkind in the temple teaching mysteries to the elders; we *like* the miracle worker healing the blind; we like the crusader who empowers the oppressed and the downtrodden—and all those mysteries of Christ *are important*—but we're not so keen on Jesus the *crucified* one being the wisdom of God. Jesus is the wisdom of God not *despite* the cross but precisely *on* the cross and *because of* the cross. And when the Corinthians—and when *we*--move to *another* wisdom, as Paul wrote in the previous chapter of Corinthians, the cross of Christ is "emptied of its power" (I Cor 1:17). Such is the *threat* of this other wisdom. You see, in the Sophia myth from the book of Enoch, where Wisdom comes down from heaven and saves a select few, there's no *cross*. There's no suffering on Wisdom's part. In this belief system, a god suffering in a *real* body on a *real* cross is an *embarrassment*. It's *foolishness*.

In contrast to *human* wisdom—which the Corinthians erroneously thought *had come* from God--Paul proclaimed the real wisdom with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power. While it *was* true that only a few people understand God's wisdom—but they are not the select few chosen by Sophia--those who understand are the mature, not the wise of this age or the cultural big shots or the rulers of the realms of the universe, because *those* were the people who had *crucified* Christ. Yes, it was true that God's wisdom was secret and hidden—like the secret of what God looks like, known only to the adorable boy in the classroom—but it is, according to Paul, revealed "to *us* through the Spirit."

And what makes "*us*" different? *It is the cross*. All of us who want this real wisdom must begin to grapple with the fact that real knowledge—whether we call it wisdom or scientific knowledge or empirical knowledge or a college education or street smarts or political savvy or discernment about your calling in a congregation—real knowledge is our embracing the cross. They belong together, like the sun and its heat. And you cannot separate wisdom and the cross without emptying the cross of its power.

To the Corinthians, Paul will assert in the next chapter, this wisdom, the wisdom belonging to the cross, will seem like foolishness. And so it will seem to many in this city. Because there is no personal wisdom, that belongs to me. That's tough medicine. Like the Beatles sang, there *is* a secret. It's that God has chosen the weak, not the strong. That the weakness of Christ on the cross will need someday to be reversed by the power that will be shown when He comes again, and that we should orient ourselves to *that* coming.

The place to begin, then, in discernment, is not with ourselves, but with Christ and him crucified. Not to learn a secret but to learn that we have been captured by a secret. For we have, indeed, “the mind of Christ.”