

“Wisdom”

When my daughter was in college, I was amazed at what she is learning in school. They blended together different disciplines like geography and sociology into one class. I always asked her for a copy of her reading list and have read a few of her assignments over the years. I guess curiosity is in my family’s DNA. My father and my sister were both teachers and I think my mother, who did not finish college, was actually a great teacher in her own way.

I remember going to college and being so excited to learn new things. I was so full of knowledge – and not afraid to share with whomever would listen. I felt that the more I learned, the more I could take on the world. I didn’t bother with necessarily stopping and asking “what does this really mean?” I could quote authors or ideas but did I really know on the deeper level of what these ideas really meant.

My mother was what some would call street smart, while others would say she had a good dose of common sense. Whenever I would come home from college spouting the latest new theory I learned, she asked what book I had learned it from. It was not because she wanted to read the same book as I do from my daughter’s assignments. No, my mother was encouraging me to think for myself, to turn inward and think critically. Luckily, critical thinking skills are taught more nowadays in schools than when I was in school. With so many sources of information at our fingertips, it is easy to get lost in it all and come out of an exploration not quite sure what we learned. This activity is sometimes referred to as going down a “rabbit hole.” We keep finding more and more and more information but what does it all mean when we put it all together? Sometimes it is clear and other times, it is not so much.

So, when I was a young adult, I did not take kindly to this challenge by my mother but as I have gotten older, I now see the wisdom in what she was asking. She was asking me to discern, to think critically and to not only remember facts but to understand them and integrate them into my understanding of the world. It has been with time, experience with the realities of life and meeting so many wonderful yet different people over the years that I have begun to really

understand what some of my early education now means to me and to those around me or how it connects to the larger understanding of life.

In our modern world, wisdom is often confused with intelligence. I have known some people in my life who are quite intelligent from book learning. They have a lot of knowledge but seem to be missing something and I believe it is wisdom and by that I mean that they are good with facts but not as good at understanding and discerning these facts and integrating them into their life.

In beginning the exploration into what wisdom is or what it means, let me begin with the dictionary definition of wisdom. It goes like this, wisdom is “the ability to discern inner qualities and relationships or insight as well as good sense or judgment.”

An example is the serenity prayer, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” We can learn many things, in other words but it is wisdom that guides us to where we need to go.

I like to call wisdom our rudder. It combines what we have learned from books, other people and our own experiences and then helps direct our thinking and our actions in a reasoned and thoughtful way. It is like an internal guide in our lives and accumulates as the years go by. It combines the head with the heart.

Wisdom has been with us since the beginning of time – literally. In the first part of today’s reading, wisdom introduces herself in an address to all of humankind. Then, later into the reading, we learn of where and when wisdom comes. Wisdom was created as God began God’s work. Wisdom was set up ages ago, at the first, before even the beginning of the earth.

According to theologian and biblical scholar Marcus Borg, “the most fully developed female biblical image for God is in the wisdom literature of ancient Israel—in Proverbs and in two books of the Apocrypha [books included in the Catholic and Episcopal Bibles, but not in most Protestant versions], namely The Book of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. In these, “the wisdom of God” is often personified as a woman. Scholars now commonly refer to this personification as “Sophia,” the Greek word for wisdom.”

With wisdom by God's side, theologian Ralph Klein writes that verses 30-31 in today's passage, "speak of the mutual joy experienced in each other by YHWH and Wisdom. YHWH delighted in Wisdom and Wisdom in turn always rejoiced in YHWH's presence. Wisdom and therefore YHWH always rejoices in the created world and especially in the human race."

Mutuality – wisdom and God; book smart and street smart; teacher and student. We are all always learning from each other but the ultimate tag team here seems to be God and Wisdom. What a pair! Worlds have come into being, lives have been called and given direction.

Going back to the beginning of the passage, we hear "does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: to you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live." The challenge, like my mother's challenge earlier in my life, is how do I or how do we take what we have learned and let it become wisdom? How do I or we answer Wisdom's call?

The questions sound daunting but the good news is that all of us possess wisdom. Theologian Douglas Donley writes "We all have human wisdom. Call it intuition, call it life experience – we all have wisdom. Wisdom often exists beneath our consciousness. In a secular sense, wisdom is the sum of our experiences, the perspectives and insights that are part of our core being."

Donley goes on to ask "Why can't this form of wisdom be seen as an aspect of God's presence in our lives? Well, good question and it may answer back to where is Wisdom and where is God calling us? It is not always clear based on facts alone. Sometimes we need to listen to our gut, listen to the wisdom of others or maybe quieting ourselves so that we can hear that still, small voice of God calling us.

As we all age, life's gift to us is the wisdom gained from living. In a society that values "book learning" or should I just call it learning from something printed on a book, tablet, computer, website, etc. accessing our wise brains is so important these days to make sense of it all. As we engage in the discerning work of God calling to us, may it become clearer as we listen more deeply.

Personally, I enjoy retreats into the woods while I stay in a one person cabin called a hermitage. It is a quiet time for reflection and prayer and connection to the Spirit. It is a wonderful time to integrate all that I had learned up to that point and to find meaning and understanding. It is a wonderful time to listen for God's call. Now, being alone in the woods for a weekend may not be everyone's cup of tea. Others may find God in nature while hiking with friends or at a house party or while visiting with someone over coffee. Whatever manner in which you seek to listen for and to God, is as individual as you are.

Remember that, according to Donley, "Wisdom often exists beneath our consciousness. In a secular sense, wisdom is the sum of our experiences, the perspectives and insights that are part of our core being." It is a way to connect with God in our busy world and an important practice in a world overflowing with experiences, learning opportunities. We all possess wisdom – no matter our age. With that in mind, may the old share their wisdom with the young and may the young recognize their wisdom and share it with those of us who are old. It is in that sharing and in that mutuality that we find God. Amen.