

Milestone Sunday
1 Kings, selected verses; Ps 111; Ephesians 5
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This day when we honor milestones in our children's lives
faith is one of my favorite services.

I love the bulletin set up for children to easily to understand.
It's easy to forget that when we're small, every day brings challenges.
So it matters for adults to recognize when children reach new stages.
Staying in the worship service, that's what it is for the first graders,
having your own bible, your own bookmark, a special book for prayer
are steps toward growing in faith, and growing in wisdom
and who among us does not hope to be wise?
Yet what makes for wisdom differs according to who you talk to.

One man I know says silent people are wise;
they keep their thoughts to themselves and get the job done.
A woman friend, on the other hand, thinks quiet people are spooky.
The wise person in her book is the one who speaks up
so you know just where he or she stands.

All three scriptures we heard today have things to say about wisdom.
In First Kings, Solomon has just succeeded to his father's throne.
He has everything a man could want,
so he asks Yahweh to grant him wisdom,
so he can be a wise ruler.
The request pleases Yahweh, and is granted.
It makes a great story—so great, in fact, I bet you money
it was written by someone on Solomon's payroll,
or one of his descendants still living on the family pension plan.
Especially because by rights Solomon should not
have been the one to sit on David's throne.
There has been plenty of judgment on David's family,
the kind of ruin that deceit in families often brings:
rebellious children, estrangement, upheaval and,
in the case of this particular royal family, revolt, treachery
and the death of the favorite son, Absalom.
If you are someone whose adult children do things
that make you weep at night when the lights are out,
go home tonight and re-read the story of David's family.
You will find a right mess there.
Having our messes named and recognized in scripture
can be its own kind of consolation.
No, Solomon is not a reward for good behavior.

He is God's new beginning in David's line,
a promise that God is going to maintain, to be gracious enough to keep.
What we tend to remember about Solomon
is that his temple was rich and splendid and that he was wise,
two things that actually don't go together.
He may have been wise in his youth, as in the story today,
asking Yahweh for wisdom, but later
he over-taxed and overburdened his people with building projects,
so much so that the nation split in two the moment Solomon died.

The character in this story who is *truly* wise is not Solomon,
despite the great PR job done by his writing staff.
The wise one is Yahweh, who keeps the covenant he made
with David against the odds, who forgives and hopes
and longs for a good outcome for Israel,
who is still working, at least at this point in the story, for that good outcome
with whatever shallow material the people provide.

The psalm for today is a product of the Wisdom school,
an intellectual movement that flourished during Solomon's reign,
both within and outside of Israel.
Wisdom was more than a class of writings,
it was a way of life, an understanding of the world.
The wise person was the one who sought
to look deeply into the meaning of things,
one's neighbor, the stars and the planets,
animal behavior, the natural world in all its fullness.
The fundamental belief of the Wisdom school
was that the world makes sense;
that if you look beyond the injustice and disorder of daily life,
which was just as apparent then as now,
you could find an ultimate pattern,
which was itself called "wisdom."

To live according to wisdom, then, was to believe
that despite appearances to the contrary,
all things happen according to God's plan.
So take the long view, and trust
that the righteous and innocent
will triumph and the wicked will fall.

Psalms 111 is a perfect piece of wisdom literature.
Its theme is that the world is perfectly ordered,
reliable, symmetrical, and guaranteed by God.
It's one of a pair of psalms, 111 is paired with 112.
The writer of Psalm 111 is trying to show
how ordered is the life lived under the wisdom of Yahweh.

The psalm and its sister are acrostic, which you can't see in English,
each line begins with the Hebrew letter
of the alphabet in alphabetical order.

The singer/poet is both saying and *showing*
that Yahweh's world is well-ordered,
tightly determined, and highly-styled.

Once you get past the ABC shape of the poem,
the message is just as tight and true: Keep God's Covenant.
It's not just a good idea, it's God's command.
God feeds those who fear God, and maybe no one else.
Fear God, therefore, and be wise.

If you are nodding off a little, there is a reason.
This psalm, though beautifully structured, is really bad poetry.
It's as flat and static as, well, anything you have to
rattle off in alphabetical order.
And it probably reflects something very real
about King Solomon's court,
where it was likely a good idea to be very quiet
about anything that wasn't perfectly orderly under the surface.

Maybe you know all too well what that's like.
Maybe you work in an office where it's not a good idea
to tell the whole truth; or a business that has a culture
of sweeping messes under the rug;
Maybe you grew up in a family where appearances
mattered more than feelings, or hurts, or fairness.

Sometimes order is a sham,
and it can lead to great destructiveness.
Psalm 111 is a piece of wisdom literature
that offers the over-simple advice:
"Trust in God and everything will be fine,"
and says it in alphabetical order, no less,
leaving no room at all for those times in every life
when trusting in God did not stave off disaster.

Like the story from Kings about Solomon rising
to his father's throne and starting off with all the right intentions,
the psalm signals us by its own narrow point of view
that there is more to fearing God
and keeping God's covenant
than has just been said out loud,
just as there is more to raising wise children
than handing them prizes.

Solomon is going to end up a tyrant who is not at all wise.
He will not keep the covenant, and will contribute
to the end of David's house, not its continuation.

Beloved, scripture always tells the whole truth
if you are willing to look for it. Voices in the Living Text are not silent.

Wisdom that strives to keep everything messy under wraps
is not going to turn out to be wise.

The psalms we love, and mutter to ourselves in the dark,
are not acrostics about how orderly life is under God,
but psalms with words in them like:

“When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”;
“Out of the depths I cry to you...”;
and “Create in me a clean heart, O God...”

The final text on wisdom that's been given to us today is the one that Ben read for us
from the writer of Ephesians, who was a follower of Paul.

Just like the court historian and the Wisdom poet,
he has his own point of view about what is wise.

Last week we heard him telling the church
that being a community takes work
that it calls for particular habits of talking and doing.

This week's advice is about how to live.

It's full of sharp contrasts, sounds that are easy to hear and
see in Greek, but a lot harder to get in English.

The words he uses are opposites
that begin with the same sound.

The closest we can get to it in English is, in essence:

“Live not as **un**wise people, but wise people,”

“Be **un**foolish, not foolish,” “Don't be **un**sober, be sober.”

The sharpness of the contrast in both sound and meaning of the words really matters;

The author wants to tell us that living a wise life
means living in sharp contrast with conventional wisdom:

The world says that autonomy, the “self,”
matters more than anything—but the gospel says “love your neighbor.”

The world says its only common sense
to hang on to your money—but the gospel says
your life will be transformed completely
if you give generously of all that you are and have.

The world says do whatever it takes
to get the corner office, the best table;
but the gospel says be the servant of all.

The wisdom of God is not going to line up
with the conventional wisdom of the day.

The days are evil, says the writer, very concisely.
If you want to be wise, understanding, and Spirit-filled,
you're going to be in conflict with what CNN
or the *Wall Street Journal* call savvy and smart.

A story about wisdom being out of step with the rest of the world
is told by pastor Franklin Golden
when he was pastoring a church in Durham, NC.

One time Franklin invited a woman
to help serve at a meal his church provided
once a week for the homeless.

The woman was not a member,
but someone who was curious about church.

Franklin described her as middle class,
one of the people who knows that when you have been given
more than enough in life, it is your responsibility
to give something back. "It's not the Good News," he said,
"But it's Okay News, and that was what she knew."ⁱ

So she showed up on the appointed night to serve dinner.

They fed about 40 homeless people,
and all the food had been put away by the time she remembered
that she had forgotten to eat herself.

She was just going to go home,
but another volunteer in the congregation,
noticed that she had not eaten.

Suddenly the church member got out the rice bag and the pot,
the chicken and the bread, and she prepared from scratch
that whole meal again, for this one volunteer.

Ever since, the woman told Franklin,
"I can't stop thinking about how it felt when I was fed."ⁱⁱ

The world is hungry, said Franklin,
for the backwards wisdom in which givers get fed—
and which makes use of whoever shows up to feed one and all.

Tonight, our Session meets to begin the new program year.
The newest elders will all be there,
so it's really a new Session with new folks to incorporate
as the year goes along.

We have a lot to do.
It's going to be fun.
It's going to be hard work,
and there's bound to be some mess.

Because as a session we try hard not to base our decisions
on sensible things like our own strength or ideas.
We want to be wiser than that.

We want to do what we say we teach our children.
We want to rely on the hidden, mysterious,
 infuriating, backwards power of our wise and wondrous God,
 who keeps faith when we cannot,
 who fulfills covenants no matter what.
Because who doesn't want to be astonished,
 to be unable to stop thinking about how it feels
 to start out serving others and end up being fed.
I hope the new Session year goes so well
 that we end up singing about it.

Singing about it is the final word from Ephesians today
 about how to be wise. Rely on God, and God alone,
 then sing about what happens.

The rest of the world may go around singing
 "I Did It My Way," complete with violins and brass,
 but our song is a counter theme.

Ephesians has gotten us started
 by providing some lyrics:
 "...giving thanks to God the Father at all times
 and for everything in the name of Jesus Christ."
It won't ever top the charts, but it's catchy, don't you think?
 And it is oh so very wise. Amen.

ⁱNEXT Church Conference, keynote presentation, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC, August 18, 2012.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*