

“True Wisdom, Part 2: The Knowledge of God”
March 5, 2023

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7
I Corinthians 8:18-25

During Lent this year we are turning to the “Wisdom Literature” of the Hebrew Scriptures—the Psalms, Proverbs, and especially Ecclesiastes—to help us as we live with one another and before God.

Wisdom is the ability to live optimally in a world that is confusing and never completely understandable.

If you joined us for worship last week—either here in person or online, you will recall John Calvin’s famous words from the beginning of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “All true wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.”

Calvin suggests that the more we know of ourselves, the more we know of God. And as our knowledge of God develops, we come to know ourselves better as well. When we know our own finitude, we come to better recognize the depth and breadth of wisdom and goodness and love that are found in God. In the same way, as we grow even in our limited, human knowledge of God, we begin to better understand who we are as human beings—finite and fallible, yes, but also created with an ability to create, with the freedom to choose, with the need to love.

It is not easy to discern which brings forth the other, but self-knowledge seems to lead us to seek and, to some extent, even to know God. At the same time, we can’t really have a clear understanding of ourselves unless we also have some knowledge of God.

Last Sunday, we considered our knowledge of ourselves, which is always incomplete. This morning, let’s think about our knowledge of God, which is even more limited. Yet even with its great limitation, our knowledge of God helps us to grow in wisdom.

There’s a story told about the great twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth. He is one of the giants of theology in not only the last 100 years but also the last 2000 years. His *Church Dogmatics* is some ten thousand pages long and fills fourteen volumes. Near the end of his life, while lecturing in the United States, he was asked by a student if he could summarize all of that theology in one sentence. It’s said that Barth paused for a few moments and then said, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

This story is sometimes repeated as an anti-intellectual tale. All of this theologian’s study and thought only amounted to what any Sunday-school child could tell you. It’s like the old “Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” poster. The moral, we are told, is that our knowledge is sufficient at an early age, so don’t think too much, don’t work too hard. Why bother with all that reading and writing?

Barth, of course, did not stop his intellectual pursuits. Nor did he urge the seminarian who asked the question to drop out of school. Serious study, probing thought, and rigorous research make important contributions to the good life whether or not one is engaged in academic work. Barth knew this.

But he was pointing to something that was beyond study, thought, and research. He was pointing to the deep wisdom that finds its source in the knowledge of God and in the knowledge of ourselves. Barth was pointing toward the knowledge of love that God has for all creation and for each one of us, a love that is shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Such an awareness is indeed a source of wisdom.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Second year students are called sophomores—a word that at its roots means “wise fools.” Unlike freshmen, who presumably have *no* knowledge, they are considered having just enough education to be a threat. My apologies to any here today who *are* sophomores—and to the rest of us—all of us who are *wise fools*, whatever our educational level.

Here on our little corner we are surrounded by people engaged in the pursuit of knowledge. They seek the knowledge of disease and of its cure; the knowledge of making beautiful music or writing that touches the heart and mind; the knowledge of how cities work, how people work, what makes us tick. Because a little knowledge is a dangerous thing people seek to expand their knowledge and their understanding of all manner of subjects.

And we pray that in the end we will all be a little less dangerous and better able to contribute to the common good. Because one thing that we *do know* in our contemporary world is that we do not always gain wisdom simply by the pursuit of knowledge.

There is a similar problem in our churches. People get a little knowledge of the love of God and begin to act as if that’s all there is. They use that “knowledge” to build walls between people, deciding who’s in and who’s out; they draw lines to mark who’s loved by God and who isn’t. The claim to know becomes a claim to special knowledge. And the claim to special knowledge leads to a sense of an exclusive relationship between the one who knows and God. Because they have a little knowledge, they think they know everything.

A little knowledge—even the knowledge of God—is a dangerous thing. As Marilynne Robinson once suggested, we need to assume our fallibility. But often we don’t.

This is where we get some help from Ecclesiastes. This difficult book constantly reminds us of how little knowledge we have and how limited our wisdom is.

Right in the middle of that meditation on words and deeds, of vows and sacrifices we hear: “God is in heaven, and you upon earth.” There is a distance here that we cannot cross. There is a distance here that we ignore to our peril.

And might I say as an aside that many in the Iowa Statehouse have been doing just that lately. You might have heard about the proposed amendment to our state’s Constitution that would prohibit same-sex marriage, justifying it as contrary to “the laws of nature and nature’s God.”

Love is love is love is love. But some people will not stop talking nonsense because, as we heard: “A fool’s voice comes with many words.”

Paul also helps us sort out the wise from the foolish when he tells the Christians in Corinth: “The message about the cross is foolishness for those who are perishing, but to use who are being saved it is the power of God.”

The “message about the cross” that Paul announced to the Christians in Corinth is an important message for us in these days of preparation for Easter. Even so, I want to recognize just how disturbing this message about the cross can be to us when we first hear it.

It sounds like a “Good Friday” message—doesn’t it?—and it’s the kind of message that we Protestants tend to avoid. We recoil at Christ crucified. The crosses in our sanctuaries or around our necks are empty, inviting us to look beyond the death of Jesus to his being raised in glory. We recoil at Christ crucified—and with some justification. For we have seen that an emphasis on suffering and death seems to lead only to, well, *more* suffering and death. If we have a choice, we’ll prefer the message of the empty tomb to that of the cross.

This is the choice that those early Christians in Corinth made as well. They went from the cross to exaltation. But here Paul reverses the direction, going from exaltation to the cross. As the German New Testament scholar Hans Conzelmann put it: The result of the resurrection is not that the cross is superseded, but rather that it becomes possible to speak of it.

And when we listen as Paul presents his “message about the cross,” it slowly dawns on us that the Cross here is not about some blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. The Cross is that place where God is bringing a new creation into being.

Please listen, because there is some actual knowledge of God here that might help us to grow in wisdom. The message of the cross tells us certain things about our lives and this universe. It tells us that God is present in the depths of human suffering. It tells us that we come to some knowledge of God in weakness, anguish, and despair as much as—if not more than—in victory and strength. God is making something new even in the midst of great suffering.

The message of the cross does not invite us to wallow in suffering. We know weakness, anguish, and despair, but we do not need to seek them out. Always the way of Christ is the way of life. But the way of weakness and suffering is also the way of God with us. This is the God who takes away all reasons to boast in our wisdom, might, or wealth, stripping away all that we might choose to exalt ourselves. Yet this is also the God who acts with steadfast love, delighting in creation, delighting in us.

The message of the cross is our wholeness, our life, the salvation that we desire.

Knowing Jesus *only* as crucified *is* incomplete. We need resurrection for our knowledge of God and of life to be complete. But not knowing Jesus crucified is also incomplete. For in Jesus we see neither tragedy nor triumph, but gospel—the good news that God has come to us, shared our common lot, and invites us to be new people in the new creation that began with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

With this knowledge of God, we arrive, as Calvin would suggest, at a deeper knowledge of ourselves as well. We are people who are, as Paul puts it, “being saved.” If the Cross is that place where God is bringing the new creation into being, then we recognize that this new creation is an ongoing process. The old order is passing away and we are part of what has been called the not-yet-completed character of salvation in Christ.

It's been said that “The search for wisdom is a lifelong journey, fraught with bitter disappointments and unexpected delights.”

“Jesus loves me, this I know...” is the starting point on that journey. It is, perhaps, also the end point. In between we seek to comprehend “the breadth and length and height and depth” of that love. This Lent let us continue that journey together in the hope that we might find wisdom for the living of these days.