

The Spirit's Wisdom

Proverbs 8:1-7

John 16:12-15

This has been a great week at Central Presbyterian. The Deacons and Session met Wednesday evening. We had Vacation Bible School during the mornings, and Paul and Corinne Foree presented their animal show to the children on Friday. The building was *full* of the sounds of laughing children—and of adult volunteers struggling to keep up with them. Our Christian Educator, Ellie Templeton, really stepped up to plan and run her first VBS. She drew in perhaps 15 to 20 different adult volunteers. We used videos and electronic displays, sang along with a CD recording, and played old-fashioned games many of you will remember from your own childhood. I had forgotten how many variations there are of the song Deep and Wide.

At session we had to have a difficult discussion. It would be improper to explain why from the pulpit, or even in private conversations with those not currently on the board. I can say that at one point when we had gotten well into our conversation, one elder spoke. In a voice saturated with compassion, this elder helped us move toward a resolution. When the elder finished the room fell silent for a few moments. The words we had just heard were **wise** and I think we all knew it immediately. They did not solve the issue before us, but they helped tremendously. I raise this episode before us today because it perfectly illustrates this sermon's theme: the Spirit

empowers our discernment. The Holy Spirit helps us have the wisdom to tell right from wrong, to find the best available path, to see God's will for us and for our church. The Spirit empowers our discernment.

Wisdom is a major theme of both Old and New Testaments. The book of Proverbs contains more sayings about it than any other topic. Chapter eight opens with the author imagining a personified Wisdom calling to humanity. In passing I will note that in every language I've ever studied personified Wisdom, Wisdom as a character, a person, is always female. Just sayin'. In Proverbs 8 she takes her stand on the high paths, the trails that led to the altars of ancient Judaism before the construction of Solomon's temple. (Another passing note: Solomon himself asked the Spirit of the Lord for wisdom above all other possible gifts.) Wisdom poses at another important place, before the gates of the city. That was the place for any public pronouncement. And what does Wisdom have to say? "O simple ones, learn prudence." Wise up. Get it figured out.

"All the words of my mouth are righteous," Wisdom continues. It is difficult to separate wisdom and righteousness in Hebrew thought. All wisdom is righteous. All righteousness is wise. In a word, wisdom is **godly**. The wisdom we heard last Wednesday night at session certainly felt godly. It felt like we had been stuck in a raft amid rising white water, but those words broke us free to move forward. They felt like, and they were, a gift from God. Jesus called the Holy Spirit itself a gift from God. In turn the Spirit gives us a whole range of gifts like peace, forbearance—and wisdom.

Lists of these gifts of the Holy Spirit appear throughout the epistles of the New Testament. Today we focus on the gift of discernment. The word does not appear in our verses from the Gospel of John, but the concept permeates them. Jesus said, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.” Truth also gets wrapped up with righteousness and wisdom in Hebrew thought. Many Christians seem to confuse truth with The Truth. Some theological traditions believe the Holy Spirit has made The Truth plain in the words of scripture. It is unambiguous and applicable to all questions and issues. We belong to the Reformed Tradition, which does not have this view. Our view more nearly resembles the Hebrew mindset, in which truth, righteousness and wisdom, all intertwined, guide us toward a more perfect understanding of the Word of God. On some issues the truth is plain. Jesus taught us to pray his prayer in his Sermon on the Mount, where he uses the words “debts” and “debtors”. So churches which use “trespasses” or “sins” are just plain wrong. I mean is it not obvious?

It is in truth unwise and unrighteous to presume wisdom and righteousness. As a matter of fact, every word churches use for “debts” and “debtors” is a translation from Koine Greek into modern English. As it so often does, a little humility keeps us from needing to ask forgiveness for our pride. Yet this emphatically does not mean we should not seek wisdom. The caution is against trying to appear wise, not gaining actual wisdom. Jesus told his followers the Spirit of truth would declare to us “the things that are to come.” Our brothers and sisters who believe in The Truth also tend to believe this is a reference to the end times. But scholars almost unanimously agree

it refers instead to gaining the wisdom to become ever better at predicting the outcomes of all the shifting and twisting of events currently in play.

Weather forecasting has gotten better in the past few decades. This has happened because of increased computer capacity. Meteorologists use input from previous outcomes to predict the weather. They look at wind direction and speed, temperature, air pressure changes and other variables, then compare this input with past events to make their guesses at what might happen. For example, this week they predict that conditions foretell we will experience historically high temperatures. We can give their predictions greater trust because they rely now on computational power that dwarfs earlier capacity. This means we can have greater confidence than ever before in weather forecasts. But as we all know, we cannot bank on them.

Wisdom is, at its core, the ability to guide future behavior on the basis of past and current events. How does what I know guide my choices in the near and long term? Last Tuesday I drove to the Indianapolis airport. Three Afghan women were due to arrive at about 6:00pm. I had the task of meeting them at the arrivals archway, shepherding them to baggage claim, loading them all into my car, and delivering them to their new home in Terre Haute. They did not emerge from the archway. I waited for maybe two additional flights of arrivees. No groups of central Asian women. I searched the terminal. I connected with the baggage claim guy from United Airlines. He was terrific. Using his walkie-talkie he essentially helped me conduct a terminal-wide search. Nothing. I texted our Church World Service contact Katie Randall. But

neither she nor anybody else in my world knew where these three women were.

Eventually Katie Randall realized her boss was at the airport in Newark, New Jersey where the three women were meant to transfer from their initial flight to the one to Indianapolis. She texted her boss. Her boss realized she was sitting one gate away from where the three Afghan women were supposed to have transited. She approached the gate agent, explained who she was and why she was asking and said, “Can you possibly tell me whether three Afghan women came through here today?” The gate agent immediately said yes, they did, but their flight arrived too late for them to make their connection to Indianapolis. So we put them on the next one. They should arrive about ninety minutes later than their original itinerary. Katie's boss texted her this information. Katie texted it to me. Meanwhile, the delay made it possible for me to greet another Afghan family whom Andrew Conner had hoped to greet. But he ran into the delays on Interstate 70 and could not arrive in time. I met that family. Then Andrew arrived. I went back to meet my initial group. They appeared right on their new schedule and we got to their new place here.

When I told Linda this story she immediately responded, “That's a God thing!” In the space of reading one text I went from not having a clue about where to find three Afghan women—and worrying about human trafficking, or poor language skills perhaps leading to unknown destinations—to knowing they would appear through the arrivals archway in a few minutes. And they did. In the 1980's Whitney Houston sang “How will I know?” I love that song. But its answer, “trust your feelings”, is often not

particularly helpful. The best answer is, “Ask God.” Because the Holy Spirit has a track record of giving us the answers we need.

The Spirit empowers our discernment. It gives us the wisdom to grow better at predicting future paths and outcomes based on our experiences, our reading of scripture, our prayers, our intuitions, our thoughts. The Spirit declares to us the things that are to come. Do you have a relationship that matters to you that is experiencing friction? Ask the Spirit to show you how to make peace.

Do you struggle to see what to think about thorny issues? Ask the Spirit to show you which positions and actions will lead to resolution.

Do you feel confusion about your work, do you wonder whether to change jobs or careers? Ask the Spirit to show you more clearly what your heart and head really want. Ask the Spirit to guide your choice.

Do you fear that you do not understand the Gospel—or any other important topic in the Bible? Ask the Spirit for clarity and faith.

The Spirit empowers our discernment. The Spirit guides us into truth. The Spirit helps us to see Jesus, and his will for our lives, more clearly. The Spirit comes to us as a gift from God. Accept it and thank God for it.