

August 18, 2024

Proverbs 9:1-6

Sermon Title: Seeking Wisdom

Wisdom has built her house;

she has hewn her seven pillars.

² *She has slaughtered her animals; she has mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.*

³ *She has sent out her female servants; she calls
from the highest places in the town,*

⁴ *“You who are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,*

⁵ *“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.*

⁶ *Lay aside immaturity and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”*

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking.
God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

Wisdom, as it turns out, is not an easy word to define. The book of Proverbs is categorized as wisdom literature in the Bible. The book contains many one or two line proverbs, some which contradict each other, that require discernment to be applied appropriately. The first nine chapters, however, is an appeal to the reader to seek wisdom rather than her seductive sibling, folly. Wisdom is personified as a woman, and she cries out in these first chapters for people to seek her above all else. To do so is to find life in all its fullness.

In our passage for today, she has built her house and prepared a feast. The image of the seven pillars is not entirely clear, but it is possible that it correlates with the seven days of creation. Wisdom was with God in the creation of all that is and knows well the ways that create life and sustain it. Her invitation is to all who will receive her invitation to share in the feast. Come and eat. Lay aside immaturity and live, walk in the way of insight.

If we were to read on, we would read about folly. She is the foolish woman who is loud, and ignorant. She calls out to those who pass by, offering stolen water and inviting her guests to eat her bread in secret. And the next verse reads: But they do not know that

the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. (9:18)

In other words, at folly's table, one tastes death. She serves up selfishness, greed, injustice, arrogance, violence, and complacency – to name a few of her dishes.

We learn from these first few chapters that wisdom is the way of life and human flourishing. It is like a river of insight that flows through history and for those willing to listen and learn from creation's rhythms and human inclinations, it can be found. People in ancient times and indigenous people were able to tap into wisdom's current by observing and learning...something we don't do as well because we are hurried and distracted and restless.

The earliest Christians understood Jesus as an embodiment of wisdom – calling out to us – inviting us – to a feast – leading us in the way that leads to life in all its fullness. Each week we are invited to wisdom's table – ready and willing to receive the bread and wine, recommitting to seek insight and understanding for the choices that shape our lives, and our collective life together.

Both wisdom and Jesus invite us to a table that connects us to the river of life.

There are several passages in the New Testament that speak of wisdom and being wise. In James 3:13-18 we read:

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

James asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" Is there anyone here you would consider wise? What about yourself? Are you wise? How do you know if someone is wise?

Starting around 1970, wisdom began to be studied academically. In 2017, geriatric psychiatrist Dilip Jeste, and his team from UC San Diego, developed the San Diego Wisdom scale; seven-questions that indicate whether one is wise. The scale came out

of his work studying the science of wisdom. His end goal is to see if there are ways to increase wisdom. People were asked to rate these questions based on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

1. "I tend to postpone making major decisions as long as I can." (Decisiveness)
2. "I avoid self-reflection." (Self-Reflection)
3. "I avoid situations where I know my help will be needed." (Prosocial Behaviors)
4. "I often don't know what to tell people when they come to me for advice." (Social Advising)
5. "I remain calm under pressure." (Emotional Regulation)
6. "I enjoy being exposed to diverse viewpoints." (Acceptance of Divergent Perspectives)
7. "My spiritual belief gives me inner strength." (Spirituality)¹

Science shows that wisdom correlates with health and longevity. "The scale was also found to strongly and positively correlate with [resilience](#), [happiness](#) and mental wellbeing and strongly and negatively correlate with loneliness, depression and anxiety."²

Jeste agrees that wisdom is not easily defined. He has spent years studying both modern science and ancient philosophy and that led him to identify six components of wisdom.³ Later, he added a seventh, spirituality saying, "Our findings show that spirituality is significantly associated with better mental health and well-being and may add to an individual's overall wisdom."⁴

1. One is 'Social decision-making.' This is the concept of the 'village elder', or 'Solomonic wisdom.' When people have a debate going on and they don't know what to do, they go to the wise person and the wise person makes the right choice. That's social decision-making.
2. The second one is 'Emotional Regulation' – control over one's emotions. A wise person has relatively stable emotions; not the *absence* of emotions, but having control over the magnitude and the variation in emotions.
3. The third one is 'Prosocial Behaviors' – these are things that we do for others rather than for ourselves – compassion, empathy, altruism. (Jeste believes) this is probably the single most important component of wisdom.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/202112/fast-way-see-if-youre-wise>

² <https://eliteagent.com/how-wise-are-you-find-out-in-just-7-questions/>

³ <https://evidencebasedwisdom.com/wisdom-profiles-dilip-jeste/#OnTheSixComponentsofWisdom>

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/202112/fast-way-see-if-youre-wise>

4. Then comes 'Insight' – knowing yourself. It includes self-reflection; you analyse yourself and understand yourself.
5. The fifth is 'Acceptance of uncertainty', which also means 'acceptance of diversity of views.' I may have strong feelings about something, but I understand why somebody else might have different feelings about it.
6. The sixth component in that list was still being 'Decisive', in that you accept uncertainty, you accept diversity of views, and yet you don't sit on the fence all the time. A wise person doesn't get stuck thinking about the pros and cons of everything. That needs to happen initially, but it needs to then end at some point with a decision. Even after making the decision, a wise person might continue debating internally, but action is taken.
7. The last component is spirituality, which I already mentioned, though this is not as strong of an indicator as pro-social behaviors.

Dr. Jeste, who was raised in India, went back and reviewed the ancient Indian text the Bhagavad Gita, written around 500 BC. The Gita is a treatise on the wisdom of life, from a religious/philosophical perspective. He discovered five of the six components matched perfectly.

Had he surveyed the wisdom literature of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, I believe he would find the same correlations.

In 1 Kings, the Old Testament tells us about Solomon, King David's son, just after he became king of Israel. Solomon was doing what he was supposed to do, trying to be faithful. One day when he went up to a high place to make his offering to God, God spoke to Solomon. God asked Solomon what he wanted. "Ask what I should give you?" (1 Kings 3:5). It's tempting here to interject a genie granting three wishes joke here, but I will resist the temptation. The way the story is told, Solomon can ask for whatever he wants, and it will be granted. So he asks for wisdom. This pleases God greatly, and because he didn't ask for riches, or a long life, or the lives of his enemies, God decided to give him a long life and riches anyway.

Immediately after Solomon asks for wisdom it is tested by two women who come to him to settle a dispute. These two women share a house, and each had babies at about the same time. One baby died because the mother laid on it. The mother of the deceased baby took the living baby from the other mother while she slept and left her with the lifeless baby. They came to Solomon fighting over the remaining child, each one saying the child was hers.

Solomon asks for a sword and saying the answer is to just chop it in half and give each mother half. One woman, seeing what Solomon is about to do, stops him saying, "Give her the baby, don't kill it." The other woman says, "Neither one of us shall have it! Kill it!" Solomon orders the child to be given to the first woman. "She is his mother," he declares. It was a defining moment for Solomon as began his reign.

He could have asked for anything, and he asked for wisdom. The Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are attributed to Solomon. If you read proverbs about wisdom you start to recognize some of the traits of a wise person. According to Solomon the beginning of wisdom is to want it. "Though it cost you all, get understanding." A wise heart accepts instruction. With humility comes wisdom. A wise person listens to advice. A wise person uses words with restraint and is even-tempered. "Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end." And Solomon also says that wisdom makes the face shine; wisdom changes the hardness of one's face. (See the end of the sermon for a list of the proverbs used to derive the list above.)

The reading from James says there are two types of wisdom. Wisdom from above, God's wisdom, is what we desire. In the first chapter James writes, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you." (James 1:5)

The other wisdom is worldly wisdom, which really isn't wisdom at all – it is akin to folly in Proverbs. Worldly wisdom is characterized by arrogance, selfish ambition, jealousy, and conflict.

James characterizes wisdom from above as: pure, ready for peace, considerate and gentle, reasonable and willing to yield, humble, full of mercy, decisive, and sincere. Wisdom helps us to regulate our desires. Wisdom is very much a part of the Christian tradition. Jesus talked about the wise and foolish builders. Paul talked about the fruits of the spirit as the fruits of choosing wisdom.

In my reading this week on wisdom this is what I learned and what Christianity affirms:

- Wise people are open-minded and don't rush to judge. They ask questions and get curious rather than making generalizations and assumptions. *(It is wiser to find out than to suppose. [Mark Twain](#))*
- Wise people recognize the interconnectedness of all life.
- Wise people don't pretend to know things they don't really know. They don't quote half-truths or salacious facts just to pontificate on a subject.

- Wise people learn from their experiences, especially their suffering, because wise people are reflective, always looking within. (If suffering brings wisdom, I would wish to be less wise. William Butler Yeats)
- Wise people are concerned about all people and are able to see the bigger picture from different vantage points.
- Wise people are compassionate.
- Wise people tolerate ambiguity and can admit they might be wrong. (Wisdom and deep intelligence require an honest appreciation of mystery. Thomas Moore)
- Wise people practice self-control and are not reactive.
- Wise people are peacemakers.
- Wise people seek out diverse experiences and knowledge
- Wise people are good listeners (Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens. Jimi Hendrix)
- Wise people laugh often and enjoy humor (The most certain sign of wisdom is cheerfulness. Michel de Montaigne)
- Wise people are non-violent
- Wise people are not afraid of their own mortality

We are all invited to wisdom's table.

A story...

A wise woman who was travelling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation.

The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime.

But, a few days later, he came back to return the stone to the wise woman. 'I've been thinking,' he said. 'I know how valuable this stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me this stone.'

Proverbs 3:13-18 says, "Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

May we feast at wisdom's table. Amen.

Proverbs on Wisdom

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

~ Proverbs 1:7

For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

~ Proverbs 2:6

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

~ Proverbs 3:13-18

Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or turn away from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Cherish her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will give you a garland to grace your head and present you with a glorious crown.

~ Proverbs 4:5-9

The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin.

~ Proverbs 10:8

A person of understanding delights in wisdom.

~ Proverbs 10:23

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

~ Proverbs 11:2

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.

~ Proverbs 12:15

Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.

~ Proverbs 13:10

Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.

~ Proverbs 14:29

Wisdom's instruction is to fear the Lord, and humility comes before honor.

~ Proverbs 15:33

How much better to get wisdom than gold, to get insight rather than silver!

~ Proverbs 16:16

The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered. Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.

~ Proverbs 17:27-28

An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.

~ Proverbs 18:15

The one who gets wisdom loves life; the one who cherishes understanding will soon prosper.

~ Proverbs 19:8

Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.

~ Proverbs 19:20

Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge, for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, if all of them are ready on your lips.

That your trust may be in the Lord, I have made them known to you today, even to you.

~ Proverbs 22:17-19

By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory. Wisdom is too high for a fool; in the gate he does not open his mouth.

~ Proverbs 24:3-7

Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.

~ Proverbs 29:11

Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

- Ecclesiastes 8:1