

*From our Call to Worship:* The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.  
[Psalm 111, NRSV]

Hebrew Bible Lesson 1: 1 Kings chapter 2: verses 10-12; and chapter 3: verses 3-14

Some time after the revolt by Absalom of which we read last week was put down, David is succeeded by Solomon, his son to Bathsheba, who prays to God for “an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.”

2:10 So David rested with his fathers, and was buried in the City of David. 11 The period that David reigned over Israel was forty years; seven years he reigned in Hebron, and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty-three years. 12 Then Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

3:3 And Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David, except that he sacrificed and burned incense at the high places. 4 Now the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the great high place: Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. 5 At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask! What shall I give you?" 6 And Solomon said: "You have shown great mercy to Your servant David my father, because he walked before You in truth, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You; You have continued this great kindness for him, and You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. 7 "Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 "And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. 9 "Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" 10 The speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing. 11 Then God said to him: "Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, 12 "behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you. 13 "And I have also given you what you have not asked: both riches and honor, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days. 14 "So if you walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days."  
[New King James Version]

Hebrew Bible Lesson 2: Proverbs 9:1-5

*A number of the Proverbs are concerned with the virtue of “wisdom,” which is personified, personified to the extent that some of the Feminist theologians of the 1980’s and 1990’s argued that “Wisdom” was a fourth “person” of God. Ah, well, let us appreciate the passage for its message, but please note the opening verse with its expression, “seven pillars,” which was incorporated into T.E. Lawrence’s autobiographical account of his life as “Lawrence of Arabia,” Seven Pillars of Wisdom:*

1 Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn her seven pillars. 2 She has prepared the feast, Mixed the wine, And also set the table. 3 She has sent out her maids to announce On the heights of the town, 4 "Let the simple enter here"; To those devoid of sense she says, 5 "Come, eat my food And drink the wine that I have mixed; 6 Give up simpleness and live, Walk in the way of understanding." Tanakh Jewish Bible]

God works in mysterious ways, so I have no difficulty standing in awe of God. *Awe* is a word, by the way, that the “Dismal Dane” and really difficult-to-read philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, particularly liked to use for our proper attitude toward God.

God works in mysterious ways, for I had not lit upon what my comments would be today, when I mechanically selected our Prayer for Illumination:

That is one of just a few prayers I use by that same Søren Kierkegaard.

While his was a name I knew, it was actually a recording by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra probably, thirty years ago, that drew me toward him and made me aware of his prayers. The recording was music of the late American Composer, Samuel Barber, and if that name is not familiar, you would certainly recognize his “Adagio for Strings” if you heard it; it has been featured in several motion pictures. But the piece that matters for what I am saying is called, “Prayers of Kierkegaard.” Not a well-known piece, I do not believe, and though part of a prayer of confession we sometimes use is included in the piece, our “Prayer for Illumination” is not.

But doesn't our prayer fit well with our Hebrew Bible lesson, and as you I hope shall agree, our Epistle lesson that I shall read as our charge before the benediction.

. . . bend the ears of our hearts to hear your voice speaking to us through Scripture and its interpretation, so that we might perceive your will for us in its clear purity, *free from false worldly wisdom and not trivialized by expressions of insincere passion*

Now, on the one hand, it is unfortunate that Kierkegaard chose the word, *wisdom*, but he does not condemn wisdom in general, but rather that to which the modifier, *false worldly*, applies.

One of the imperatives of my sense of ministry is that we never dismiss the importance to our faith of *reason*; reason is not for the purpose of overcoming *faith*, but as one of the first great archbishops of Canterbury, Anselm, expressed almost one-thousand years ago, *Faith seeks understanding*, and without reason, there is no understanding, and without understanding, there cannot be wisdom.

I packed a lot there, but I think I am correct: *without reason, there is no understanding, and without understanding, there cannot be wisdom.*

*Wisdom* — and here I am taking about wisdom so acquired through reason and understanding, not the false worldly wisdom the avoidance of which Kierkegaard prays, but real wisdom — *wisdom* is not a substitute for *faith*, it is, take your pick, a *fruit* or a *chosen* companion. We can choose to ignore wisdom through, well, *trivialized expressions of insincere passion*. Being *zealous* is not necessary for either wisdom or faith; *blind faith* by definition lacks wisdom.

Our Biblical reading about Solomon and his prayer for wisdom is not so well known as the story of the exercise of that wisdom when two women came before him, each claiming to be the mother of a certain child; I believe you all know the rest. But why was that considered wisdom?

Well, because Solomon *reasoned* — and let me emphasize that word again — Solomon *reasoned and understood* that the real mother would not accept the idea of death of her child, and the *use of that reason and understanding* manifested itself as *wisdom*.

Allow me to suggest again that *without reason, there is no understanding, and without understanding, there cannot be wisdom.*

I am grateful that this church has accepted the description that we have both on a banner we occasionally hang outside and on our website and on my slide:

*Faith, reason, humor and fellowship*

I believe all go together to making ours a very special “small ‘c’ church,” as I like to distinguish from our concept of the “Capital ‘C’ Church,” which is the universe of believers in Jesus Christ. I suppose I should say, “followers,” not “believers,” but because of that term I keep forgetting, *humility*, I can safely say that I am a *believer*, but only that I *aspire to be a follower*.

I often express dismay that people do not apply reason to asking of what faith promises, and while I love the joke I tell too frequently about “two boats and a helicopter,” an even more troublesome belief, not among any of you, is that when someone succumbs to an illness, it is because one “did not pray hard enough.” To the extent *wisdom* contains aspects of knowledge, the person believing that does not get — does not know and *understand* — what Jesus promised, which is not of this world.

I know I have shared before how I was astounded on the one hand by how few Christians there were in Rome toward the end of the first century of the Common Era, yet how Christianity was growing because it seemed more *reasonable* — *rational*, if I might substitute — than the pagan religion(s).

Perhaps part of that was due to the writings and work of the Apostle Paul (who, though he most likely did not write Ephesians, from which we shall read at the close of worship, very much influenced and is reflected in the writing of whomever did write it). Though Paul’s reasoning sometimes is unconvincing, he uses reason to present the faith *and how it is of service to us!* For example, as we read Romans, Paul in exasperation states how he cannot always do what he wants to do or avoid doing what he hates — a veiled way of saying that like all of us, Paul sinned. In this exasperation he asks, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 7:24 (NRSV)

And he answers, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, use of Paul’s mind and reason in pursuit of understanding of his faith leads to . . . well, I would call it, *wisdom!*

We are not Solomon. While in special cases our prayers for wisdom — or patience or understanding — might be granted for the moment, to possess useful *wisdom* we must with faith pursue understanding, exercise reason, then wisdom may be attainable for us.

*Reason* is of course an exercise of the mind; using the mind does not conflict with faith.

When Jesus is asked the greatest commandment, He quotes almost verbatim the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Almost verbatim, but Jesus interjected a phrase, such that what he said reads thus:

Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, *with all your mind*, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment.<sup>3</sup>

As I have said on other occasions, when I mentioned this seeming “conflict” to a professor, he asked, “Do you not think it was intentional?” — meaning on Jesus’ part.

---

<sup>2</sup> 7:25 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:29b-30 (NRSV) Italics added

And while I do not know, if this is what Jesus said it provides support for what I have been saying, per the great Anselm — a “saint” of the Roman Catholic Church, by the way: —*Faith seeks understanding*, and I add, the understanding that can lead to wisdom.

And my point is, just as Socrates said that, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” the un-thought-about faith is not worth holding, but equally importantly, faith without reason will not lead to wisdom, nor, I suspect would reason without faith. To live as Christians, we can no more live thinking we are marionettes, expecting that somehow God will pull our strings and avoid all ill or evil on our behalves, than we can live as valueless, faithless rationalists.

We must live as thinking Christians; individuals whose faith acts as an evaluator of what we think, not as a substitute for thinking.

God gave us minds for a reason; guided by the values of what our faith in Christ teaches us, let us use them — for the glory of His Church and the benefit of the children of God who live in this world God has created.

That would reflect wisdom.

In Jesus’ name. Amen..