

16 August 2015 (12th Sunday After Pentecost/20th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Our Common Wisdom”
John 6:51-58

I have always appreciated the distinction between wisdom and knowledge. A person can know many things, and study widely on a range of subjects. But knowing many things does not equate to being wise. What, then, is it to be wise? The Bible appears to have a complicated relationship with wisdom. In Proverbs, for example, wisdom is personified as a woman who calls people from senselessness to life, from simplicity to insight, by eating of the bread and drinking of the wine she has prepared. It sounds like a kind of intellectual communion service, a call to eat and drink of a higher life of the mind and basic common sense. It doesn't seem to be in keeping with 1 Corinthians Chapter 1, in which the Apostle Paul elevates the foolishness of the cross over the wisdom of the Greeks. But it does fit with Ephesians Chapter 5, in which Paul summons his hearers to set aside foolishness in order to live wisely. And so, if we are just a little confused as to the role of wisdom in the Christian life, it is with good reason. The Scriptures give us mixed messages about wisdom, and mixed messages about knowledge. Not all knowledge brings wisdom, and not all wisdom leads to life. What, then, are we to make of the Bible's understanding of wisdom, and the relation between wisdom and Jesus Christ?

Over these first four weeks in August, we are moving slowly through John Chapter 6, and each successive passage in that chapter more and more insistently emphasizes the same message: Jesus is the bread of life, the bread from heaven, the bread that brings life, the bread given for the life of the world. Jesus is challenged repeatedly on this message because his audience doesn't understand how he can talk about himself in this way. It sounds offensive and, frankly, gruesome to hear someone say, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.” And as Jesus has become more and more insistent in the course of this chapter, it is as though he is inviting confrontation and scandal. Why would he do this? Why would he place himself in such a physical way at the center of God's plan of salvation? And, if this physical Jesus indeed gives life to the soul, could this be what the Bible progressively means to point to as true wisdom, albeit in somewhat mixed and confusing terms?

Now, some people are so put off by this kind of personalized religion, by this call to believe in flesh and blood bread from heaven, they adopt instead a code of ethics or a philosophy of life, a set of values and standards that they try to live by. They cite Christianity's doctrinal absurdities, the Church's corruption, and the perpetuation of ignorance through the centuries. And they say that if we could live by standards instead of by faith, the world would be far better off. This is hardly a recent phenomenon. The Apostle Paul's failure to establish a foothold for the Gospel in Athens is well known. In Acts Chapter 17, we learn that he argued in the marketplace with the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, and that he quoted Epimenides of Crete in the hope of establishing belief in the one God who cares for and judges all people: “In him we live and move and have our being, for we are indeed his offspring.” But Paul had limited success. For the most part,

Athens' rich tradition of the marketplace of ideas found the notion of a personal God and the resurrection from the dead to be completely ridiculous.

Even so, as a way of life, the Gospel has prevailed over philosophical systems and standards of ethics. Could it be that the flesh and blood of Jesus has more power as humanity's common wisdom than any set of ideas ever could? For, the faith that unites us is not in its essence a philosophy, a code of ethics, or even a set of doctrines. At its heart, the wisdom Christ imparts is himself, a person. At its heart, the Christian Gospel is rooted in love, divine sacrificial love that took on flesh and blood in order to be felt and experienced. Look at it this way. Which is more satisfying: A virtual kiss on Facebook, or a real kiss in the flesh? We are embodied creatures, and God has given us an embodied Redeemer, a man of flesh and blood who placed himself—body and soul—at the center of God's plan of salvation.

But this Gospel given to us by God that derives its identity from the flesh and blood of Jesus requires something of us. When we believe in Jesus and take him into our being, we are challenged to a life of continuing transformation. We are given a makeover, a new life that calls us to look more and more like the one we serve—and that's the major difference between faith in Jesus and the adoption of a philosophy. You can't look like a philosophy. But you can certainly look like the one you believe in. That is why it is so important to choose well the one to whom you sell your soul. Will that choice lead to life, or to death? In many and varied ways, the Bible teaches that choosing God's path and the way of the Gospel leads to wisdom and life. Ultimately, the Bible bears witness to the fact that wisdom and life find their fullest expression in Jesus Christ.

Earlier this year, I saw on television the HBO documentary, *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief*, based on Lawrence Wright's book of the same name. Scientology has been under scrutiny for a long time, but it has been just within the last six years that key figures at the top of the organization have found the courage to leave. While it is certainly not the only self-described religion that victimizes people, Scientology seems to me to stand out for how long many of its key figures stuck with it—20, 30 years devoted to a kind of questionable science fiction based theory of wisdom and enlightenment. Such devotion required not only suppression of normal intellectual skepticism, but also a willingness to subject oneself to physical abuse and emotional humiliation. Part of the reason people could do that was because their sources of information were so restricted: they were never allowed to read anything critical of Scientology. But the other reason was a phenomenon observed by Lawrence Wright: "After a while, the longer you remain in Scientology, the more you look like L. Ron Hubbard." Hubbard's sickness became that of his followers. And so, even when subjected to humiliating punishments and abuse, they believed they deserved it, because L. Ron Hubbard's demons had become theirs.

The phenomenon of cults and cult behavior is nothing new, but what we are learning about the inner workings of Scientology's organization reminds us of the power of personal faith, for good or for ill: after a while, the longer you remain in any faith-based religion, the more you become like its founder. That being the case, given the

choice, wouldn't you rather look like Jesus than L. Ron Hubbard? Wouldn't you rather look like Jesus than Jim Jones, or any other leader with a pathology? What is the way of wisdom? What is the path to enlightenment? Is it the way of any self-styled body of knowledge, or is it the way of love?

If there is one thing we can observe in the world around us, people are desperately seeking wisdom and discernment, and sometimes they look for it in all the wrong places, and from all the wrong people. The challenge for the church as the Body of Christ is how we can faithfully live the Gospel in the world. How can we embody the wisdom that finds its ultimate fullness and expression in Jesus Christ? In Ephesians Chapter 5, the Apostle Paul urges his hearers to shun foolishness and understand the will of God by replacing bad behavior with the evidence of the Holy Spirit. He explains that the days are evil, and that believers need to make the most of the time. To put it another way, we don't have time for foolishness. The world doesn't have time for foolishness. Therefore, given the choice, shouldn't we be choosing and demonstrating wisdom instead?

Churches are not always places of wisdom. Sometimes we can get into the most ridiculous squabbles that the rest of the world looks at with a combination of amusement and disgust. And then, when we try to explain what all the fuss is about, the squabbles don't make all that much sense to us, either. And yet the fact remains that at times we are not at our best in the way we handle disagreements over issues, perceived personal slights, or just the way we communicate—or don't communicate—with each other. To put it plainly, there will be times when we won't look like Jesus at all. But we must remember how important it is for the life of the world that we invite Christ into our hearts and minds so that we can embody Christ as our common wisdom. Time is short and the days are evil. Many people will follow the nearest loud voice that speaks with conviction, even if it's wrong or makes no sense or leads to death. Many people will sell their soul in exchange for what they think will bring them immortality, enlightenment, or love. And when they finally limp away from those misguided sources, wounded and bleeding, who will be there to offer them the bread of life? Who will offer them love and wisdom? What body other than the church has the capacity to pick up the pieces and transform broken lives? It all depends on how much, day by day, we are looking more and more like Christ, and how much, day by day, Christ is becoming our common wisdom.



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