

Sermon: The Wisdom to Choose God

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Sep. 22, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is wide gap between what one wants and what one needs. This following story on knowledge and wisdom illustrates that gap.

A proud young man who came to Socrates one day, asking for knowledge. He approached the wise (and surprisingly well-built) philosopher and said, "O great Socrates, I come to you for knowledge." Socrates recognized a pompous fool when he saw one. He led the young man through the street, to the sea, and waded chest deep into water. Then he asked, "What do you want?" "Knowledge, O wise Socrates," said the young man with a eager grin.

Socrates put his strong hands on the young man's shoulders and pushed him under. Thirty seconds later Socrates let him up. "What do you want?" he asked again. "Wisdom," the young man sputtered, "O great and wise Socrates." Socrates dunked him under again. Thirty seconds passed, thirty-five. Forty. Then he pulled him up. The young man was gasping. "What do you want, young man?" Between heavy, heaving breaths the young fellow wheezed, "Knowledge, O wise and wonderful..." Socrates jammed him under water the third time. Forty seconds passed. Forty-five, fifty. Finally Socrates let go of him, asking "What do you want?" "Air!" the young man gasped. "I need air!" The wise Socrates then spoke, "When you want knowledge as you have needed air, then you will have wisdom."

In the Ancient Greco-Roman world, it is virtuous to pursue wisdom. This pursuit of wisdom is not the exclusive domain of philosophers, but of commoners as well. Often, the degree of one's want or desire determines the quantity and quality of wisdom obtained. The more one wants it, the more and better one gets. This commodification of wisdom stands in stark contrast to the biblical portrayal of wisdom.

In the Old Testament, notably in Proverbs 1-9, the most familiar picture of wisdom is that of a personified woman. She is the commanding presence who summons people boldly and loudly in the most public places of a city—the street, the market, on top of the walls, at the city gate. She is the alluring woman who builds a house and sends out her female servants,

inviting all to a lavish banquet of bread and wine. In response, her children are urged to love her, to not forsake her, in order to get insight and acquire wisdom. Once wisdom is obtained, prudence, knowledge and discretion follow also. All good things.

The bulletin cover this week has an image of a mural painting in the Library of Congress, in Washington DC, depicting wisdom personified, as a strong, lovely young woman, seated on a throne, while holding what appears to be a book.

This image echoes the apocryphal text of Wisdom of Solomon, which is not part of the Hebrew Bible but is included in the Septuagint. Listen to this startling passage starting in chapter 7 verse 26, *"For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior, for it is succeeded by the night, but against wisdom evil does not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well."*

In the New Testament, this personification of wisdom seems to have gravitated towards Jesus, for he is, according to the prologue in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John, the Word of God made flesh. *"He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it."*

However, in the Epistle of James, wisdom is not seen to be commodified nor personified. The focus (or shall I say foci) in James are the two types of wisdom, namely earthly or heavenly. The earthly kind of wisdom, which James calls it unspiritual and devilish, leads to all kinds of trouble—such as envy, selfish ambition, disorder and wickedness of every kind.

The problem here is not the desire or the want of wisdom, but the desire and the want of the wrong kind of wisdom. It is a situation that the Apostle Paul also touches on and calls out in 1 Corinthians 1:20, *"Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"*

This reminds me of another story: An angel appears at an university faculty meeting, and informs the dean that God is looking down at him, favourably, for his unselfish and exemplary conduct. So the Lord will reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, infinite beauty, or infinite wisdom. Without hesitating, the dean selects wisdom. "Done!" Says the angel, and promptly disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning.

Now, all heads turn toward the dean, who seems to be surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispers, "Say something." The dean looks at them and finally says, "I should have taken the money."

It's just a silly story, I know. Of course the wisdom from above or from heaven, according to James is so much better, as in verse 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.*" And in verse 18, "*the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*"

Early in my previous tenure in Montreal, as the minister of Taiwanese Robert Campbell Presbyterian Church, some of you may know that I got myself into a pretty serious conflict with the Session. That conflict eventually led to a mass exodus of a large number of members of the congregation. I won't go into details, but suffice to say it was a very challenging time in that ministry. Though the Presbytery did send a special committee to investigate the conflict, and pretty much cleared my conduct, I was not able to reconcile with the departed group, which in term formed another Taiwanese congregation.

I recall during the conflict, two particular individuals played a key role in making peace: Jonathan, who did not say much, nevertheless, made his presence known by attending worships at both congregations. He would from time to time, organized meals, either at his home or in restaurants, with guests from both sides. He did not force the issue, nor regurgitate the points of conflict, but simply blessed all with his generousities and gentle smile.

Jack, the other peacemaker, took a more proactive approach, in helping me to reflect experientially and theologically. I still remember the conversations we had, after the dust had somewhat settled, where he asked me pointedly what I have learned from the whole ordeal. For indeed, wisdom can be acquired through experiential learning. As the saying goes:

A wise man learns by the experience of others, an ordinary man learns by his own experience, and a fool learns by nobody's experience.

Heavenly wisdom, is not something abstract being bestowed from above, but rather, it is acquired and learned from faithful examples of those in the Holy Scriptures, from disciples and apostles, such as Peter, Paul and James. Most importantly from Jesus Christ himself, his teachings and the example he set, most notably his submission to God, and always pointing to God.

In the same way, James teaches also, in chapter 4, verse 7-8, *“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”* I love that phrase, draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Ultimately, wisdom is a choice, a choice to choose God, to draw nearer to God through the decisions one makes, day by day.

I'll leave you with this final story. The captain of a battleship looked out into the dark night, and saw a faint light ahead, approaching. Immediately he instructed his signalman to radio a message, “Alter your course 10 degree south.” Promptly, a return message was received from the light: “Alter your course 10 degree north.”

The captain was annoyed that his command had been ignored. So he sent out a second message: “Alter your course 10 degree south—I am the captain!” Soon after, another message was returned: “Alter your course 10 degree north—I am seaman third class

Annoyed and angry, the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke: “Alter your course 10 degree south—I am a battleship.” The reply came back: “Alter your course 10 degree north—I am a lighthouse.”

Isn't it so true that in the midst of this dark and foggy time, all sorts of voices are shouting orders into the night, telling us what to do, how to adjust the courses of our lives. Out of this darkness, one voice signals something quite opposite to the others—something almost absurd. But that voice happens to be the Light of the World, and through it we find not only wisdom, but life eternal.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**