

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 12, August 19, 2012, dedicated to Emma Elaine Dean on her baptismal day, to the memory of Marian Whitney who at 95 ½ entered eternal life July 2, 2012, and was celebrated with love August 18, and always to the glory of God!

“The Lamp of Wisdom”

***The Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-25
Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58***

***Part IV of VI in the sermon series
“Shining God’s Light
on Hidden Christian Virtues”***

The Christian virtues that we are exploring in our sermon series this month are love, hope, faith, wisdom, justice and courage. We call these Hidden Christian Virtues because they are unseen to us from our sanctuary, hidden for these past 40 years by the beautiful Beckerath Organ in our Gallery. I invite you to see the windows after worship this morning. Rick Sayre, our archivist and resident wise man in knowledge of First Church’s art and architecture (and so much more), will be offering tours of this glorious window high above Broad Street. The gallery is open to you following worship today.

Before sharing our reading from the Wisdom of Solomon, let me say a word about this text. It is a poetic discourse composed in Greek and written by a Hellenistic Jew, most likely from Alexandria, Egypt. It was written during the first persecution of the Egyptian Jews during the reign of Emperor Caligula, A.D. 38-41. The writer assumes the identity of Solomon to speak in praise of wisdom and

righteousness and to warn against the folly of oppression and idolatry.

The book has survived as part of the Septuagint or Greek version of the Old Testament. While not recognized by Protestants as part of the 66 canonical texts of the Bible, it is included in the Deuterocanonical Scripture used by the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Thus it is included in their texts of extra-biblical readings.

Listen for God's inspiration found in The Wisdom of Solomon.

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

Today we come to "The Lamp of Wisdom." Wisdom may be the most hidden of all the hidden Christian virtues in our times. We live in a cyber-age which delivers information at high speeds across billions of miles of wires and blasts information (and blasé gibberish) from satellites high above earth's atmosphere faster than we can turn our heads to receive it.

Beyond information coupled with a constant stream of nothingness continuously communicated, we, at best, treasure knowledge. But in the grasping question of T.S. Eliot in The Rock (1934), the poet cries to us, "*Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?*" Adding my voice to Eliot's cry, I contend that wisdom has lost not only its real, but also its intentional existence. We moderns are simply not interested in wisdom.

If wisdom is a stranger to contemporary minds, it was not so to more ancient ones. To the worlds of Plato and Aristotle, of King Solomon and St. Paul, of St. Augustine and St. Thomas, wisdom was not a conceptual outcast, unknown and unwelcome, wisdom was the heart of the matter (paraphrased from Kieran Conley, *A Theology of Wisdom*, The Priory Press, Dubuque, Iowa, 1963, p.vii).

Wisdom was for the ancients the Lamp of God that lit the pathway of spirituality and faith.

Speaking of Socrates, Plato writes that when he first met the young Theatetus (ThE-a-tE-tus), a young mathematician of brilliant promise, Socrates asked him if he had “thought” a great deal. The boy answered – *“Oh no – not that. But at least I have wondered a great deal.”* Socrates smiled and said, *“Ah, but that shows the lover of wisdom, for wisdom begins in wonder.”* How true! The beginning of wisdom is wonder. How many of us nurture wonder in our children and ourselves in this generation? Remember - the seeds of wisdom are planted in the fertile soil of wonder.

The ancients who wrote the Hebrew scripture marked their wisdom literature with significant traits. Here are a few: There is an absence of typical salvation beliefs in wisdom writing. The writers do not refer to patriarchal promises, or the Exodus, or the Sinai covenant. The purpose of the Hebrew sage is to transmit the lessons of experience so that one may learn to cope with life. They seek to input certain goals such as self-control, honesty and diligence. To follow the wisdom of the sages brings life. To turn away from such wisdom brings destruction. Wisdom is often set up over and against folly.

In this teaching from the Midrash we see this:

“A fool and a wise person both have seven traits. The wise never speak before the wiser. They do not interrupt their companions; they are not afraid to reply. They ask to the point and reply as they should; they speak of first things first and last things last. If they have not heard, they say, ‘I have not heard.’ They acknowledge the truth. The reverse of all seven is true of fools.”

Wisdom comes to us in the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and is often presented in pithy, simple sayings. Or it is set up, like Job, in disputation speeches between the protagonist and his three friends. Solomon is presented as the wisest of the Old Testament writers as he is presented as the author of many texts of wisdom sayings (not always the case however).

In the Christian Scriptures, Matthew, Mark and Luke present Jesus as a wisdom teacher - the wisest of all sages and rabbis. Luke and Mark write that “the wisdom of Jesus is greater than Solomon.” (Luke 11:31, Mark 6:2) As we know, Jesus’ wisdom teachings were best seen in the parables. When people sought to corner him with interpretations of the law, Jesus would turn attacks and questions into story and thus guide the questioner into the one finding his or her own answers.

The sign of a wise teacher is to guide the student to find the answer – not to dispense with it as though it was candy popping out of a vending machine. Jesus was one who gently turned a question (foolish or wise) into an opportunity for self-discovery and growth in wisdom. This trait alone made him the Lamp of Wisdom in our faith!

Beyond the Gospels, wisdom is a serious concern for Paul. He speaks often of the wisdom of the world juxtaposed (which is ultimately foolishness) to the wisdom of God in Christ Jesus (which is true wisdom).

So much more can be said of wisdom in an age where wisdom’s light is burning low. Perhaps, the most important thing is this: Wisdom can be gained from experiences in life – particularly those that wound us most – if we are only open to learning and healing from these wounds.

God willing, we learn from our experiences in life. In fact, if you have never made a fool of yourself in this life, then you have also never been wise.

In the spirit of the ancient sages, here are a few quotes and guiding lights from wise ones throughout time offered as a Lamp of Wisdom for us to consider.

“The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.”
William James

“To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step on the road, to live the greatest number of good hours: this is wisdom.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

“We do not receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us. For our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world.” - Marcel Proust

“The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the remarkable in the common.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Wisdom is knowing what to do next. Virtue is doing it.” - David Starr Jordan

Since wisdom cannot be taught per se, but must be absorbed into the human spirit, and since wisdom is best brought to us through story, I will share one of my favorites from the Chasidic writings of Judaism.

It is said that Rabbi Nachum of Tchernobyl was a friend of the poor. One day, a rich Chasid asked the rabbi, *“Does not the Talmud teach (Shabbat 92a) that the Divine Presence rests on the one who is wise, strong and rich?”* Rabbi Nachum smiled and said, *“Do you really believe that God values what is external? The one on whom the Divine Presence rests is the one described elsewhere in the Talmud, in Pirke Avot.”* (4:1) It says, *“Who are wise? Those who learn from everyone. Who are strong? Those who control their passions. Who are rich? Those who are content with what they have.”*

Who are wise? Those who learn from everyone.

So much more can be gleaned from the light of God’s Lamp of Wisdom. But since this is Emma Elaine’s baptismal day, let us end with a word of wisdom from Proverbs 22:6 – a word for her parents, grandparents, family and all in this place who have made vows to raise Emma Elaine in faith and wisdom – *“Train children in the right way, and when they are old, they will not stray.”*

Emma, and all who have ears to hear, "*May the Lamp of God's wisdom light your path from here to eternity.*" Amen.

Copyright 2012, First Congregational Church, UCC