

Wisdom

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Sermon for August 7, 1997

Lessons for Pentecost 13 in Year B

Proverbs 9:1-6,
Psalm 34:9-14,
Ephesians 5:15-20,
John 6:51-58

Wisdom. One of my favorite words in the Bible. One of my favorite concepts. One of the things I desire most...for everyone. But if I can't have that, I'll settle for the winning lottery numbers.

Wisdom and intelligence. Being **wise** and being **smart**. **Wisdom** and **smarts**. Even though we tend to use the terms interchangeably in English, they really are two separate ideas, two different concepts. And interestingly enough, they are in Hebrew and Greek too.

Greek has **sophia** and **gnosis**. In English we have **wisdom** and **intelligence**, or their adjective forms **wise** and **smart**.

Okay, so enough with the English lesson already. What's the big difference? Well, the difference to *me*, and I'll admit right up front that it's not one that's consistently followed in the Bible, is what you do with the information you have. The **smart** kid knows how to break into everyone else's computer account without being caught or even leaving any signs of the break-in. The **wise** kid has the exact same knowledge, but also knows that she shouldn't do it.

The smart person knows how to get The Disney Channel or HBO for free by building a converter box out of parts from Radio

Shack. Again, the wise person knows not to. But not only that, the wise person also understands *why* he shouldn't do it.

The smart CEO knows that cutting employees will reduce costs and raise the company's stock price. The wise one understands that there are other implications and that there may be better ways to do this than a massive bloodletting.

It seems that intelligence is only half the equation. Wisdom is so much more. Wisdom is intelligence with a conscience. It's intelligence with a knowledge and intimate understanding of the consequences of using that information. Wisdom, or at least *my* definition of it, includes a feeling of responsibility for the proper use of the knowledge you have. Wisdom is intelligence used in the service of God.

Proverbs says that wisdom has gone out and invited people to feast at her table. Calling in those who lack understanding so that they may gain wisdom and live. Ah, but how many of us who lack understanding realize it. Or how many of us who realize it really want to admit it? How many of us are wise enough to realize that we're fools?

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says to walk not as fools, but as wise. He says "don't be unwise, but understand what the will of

the Lord is." This seems to fit in with my definition of wisdom...learn God's will and use the other knowledge you have in accordance with it!

The psalm doesn't mention wisdom specifically at all, but if you look at it carefully, what is it that the psalmist is talking about but a wise person.

And then there are the people in the Gospel reading. They were no idiots. They knew that Jesus couldn't give them his flesh to eat...that is where flesh is strictly defined as the epidermis, the dermis, and some muscle tissue. But maybe they weren't wise enough to see past the literal meaning to something different that Jesus meant. Perhaps they weren't *wise* enough to say, "Excuse me. I'm confused. I really want to understand this, so could you go over this again for me?"

And yet, in this world true wisdom is often not its own reward...at least not in the short run. One need only look at Jimmy Carter to see this. This poor guy has been saddled with the title "the best former president the country ever had," a title he really hates. People only began to really appreciate his wisdom *after* they voted him out of office. And yet I can safely say without tipping my hand as to my political affiliation (and I'm not dogmatic on either side) that most people now would prefer Carter to anyone we've had since. We are now, almost 20 years later, able to recognize the wisdom in some very unpopular decisions he made. We are also now able to recognize the foolishness in some very popular decisions made by subsequent presidents.

Wisdom says, "Come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness and live." Jesus says, "I am the living bread from Heaven...and my blood is

drink indeed." What is he telling us here? He is our wisdom. If we seek him we seek wisdom and understanding. If we seek to do his will, then we seek to do what is truly wise and not merely smart, what benefits everyone and not just ourselves.

I said at the beginning that I want wisdom...for everyone. And I think that now that you understand my meaning, and what I think the Bible's meaning is, you'll understand when I say that I want this wisdom even for...and maybe even *especially* for...my enemies and those who hate me. After all, if they are wise, truly wise, and not just smart or shrewd, can they hate me or hurt me?

And so I ask God to grant wisdom not only to those whom I've entrusted to look out for me...people like Roy Bernardi, George Pataki, Bill Clinton, Pastor Paul, and Pastor Seibert to name a few...but also for those who are my sworn enemies and enemies of those I hold dear; Saddam Hussein, Moamar Gaddafi, members of the IRA, and all manner of zealots and terrorists.

And yet, asking for wisdom for those who hate me or merely drive me crazy doesn't just mean converting them to my point of view. Because you see, what is perhaps most important is that I ask God to give me wisdom too. The wisdom to be able to see when someone else is right, and to be able to accept correction even from them.

And so what I want perhaps more than anything else in the world is wisdom for everyone, because I believe that from wisdom comes love, comes peace, comes sharing, comes understanding.

But like I said before, if I can't have that, I'll settle for this week's winning lottery numbers.