

Wisdom

A Sermon by James R. Newby

Text: Ephesians 5:15-17

In this Scripture Reading, the author is writing to the Church at Ephesus, encouraging fellow Christians to order their life together in wise ways. The author understands wisdom as *a practice of faith*.

There are many ways that we learn wisdom. Wisdom finds meaning and purpose in everyday routines that may seem small when compared with the major issues the world faces...Rearing children...learning to become a true friend...conversing with your neighbor...giving your best in your chosen profession...preparing meals...paying the bills, and even thanking the bank clerk when you make a deposit or a withdraw. Wisdom distinguishes the significant from the trivial. It sees the extraordinary in the ordinary. It finds the sacred in the otherwise mundane practices of life.

Wisdom can also be gleaned from a particular place...the contours of the landscape in which we live. There is, I believe, such a thing as

Spiritual Geography. In Pat Conroy's classic novel, *The Prince of Tides*, the autobiographical account of Conroy's boyhood in the lowland marsh of South Carolina, he begins like this: "My wound is geography. It is also my anchorage, my port of call. I grew up slowly beside the tides and marshes of Colleton. Because I was a Wingo, I worked as soon as I could walk. I was born and raised on a Carolina sea island and I carried the sunshine of the low-country, inked in dark gold, on my back and shoulders. The boy in me still carries the memories of those days when I lifted crab pots out of the Colleton River before dawn, when I was shaped by life on the river." We are shaped...we learn wisdom from the places that we inhabit.

Wisdom is also learned in the painful places of life. A friend of mine who lost a loved one, once told me: "I used to think of life as a roller coaster with some high times and low times and steep inclines and declines in the middle. But that is no longer an adequate description. Roller coasters are found in amusement parks, places of fun and games, and when the ride ends you simply get off in the

same place that you began. *No*, he said, “life is more like being on a boat in the middle of the ocean with only one oar, and you rise to the top of a wave and get a glimpse of the horizon and then you go down into an abyss of the deep, from which you wonder if you will ever surface...and then somehow, by grace, you do.”

My personal definition of wisdom is simple...It is knowledge, to be sure, but it is more than knowledge. *Wisdom is knowledge coupled with a child-like innocence and openness.*

I was taught this definition by observing the life of my mentor, Elton Trueblood. At mid-life he shared in his diary the wisdom he had gained during a lifetime in academia: “For many years I have been conscious of a tension in my life,” he writes, “On the one hand I felt the need, with strict loyalty to logical consistency, to explore erroneous and shoddy thinking, particularly among students. On the other hand I have felt the demands of compassion for these same persons. The difficulty is that loyalty to the former conception sometimes gives the impression that the latter is lacking. In some

cases it seems necessary to choose, because insistence on logical rigor will have at least the appearance of a lack of love. At this point in my life I have determined that I shall try to err, if I err, on the side of tenderness. Perhaps I have done the service requested of one in maintaining sharpness of mind, and my future role is that of being obviously loving as well as really loving.”

Elton Trueblood’s wisdom came to him through a deliberate effort to be more loving in the world of academia. This shift was most notable in his lectures and sermons. The last message I heard him deliver was focused on “love.” He pointed out that “love” is used forty seven times in the Gospel of John...20 as a verb, and 27 as a noun. In John’s First Letter he noted that “love” appears 25 times. In conclusion he said, “I want to use the time that I have left to care for as many as I can.” Toward the end of his life the wisdom of his message of love was most profound.

I am reminded of Karl Barth, perhaps the most influential protestant theologian of the last century. Shortly before he died he

was giving a lecture to a group of academics, at Princeton University. When he finished his lecture, someone stood up in the back of the room and asked, “Dr. Barth, you have given your life to the church...you have written thousands of pages of theology...what is the one thing that you want me as a disciple of Jesus Christ to know?” Karl Barth responded simply, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” *Perhaps a profound and simple wisdom is the fruit of arduous study that passes through the maze of complex thought.* This seems to be the case in the life of Elton Trueblood, as well as Karl Barth.

I close with these beautiful words on wisdom from Eckhart Tolle, words which sound as if they could have been written by a practicing Quaker: “Wisdom comes with the ability to be still. *Just look and just listen.* No more is needed. Being still, looking, and listening, activates the non-conceptual intelligence within you. Let stillness direct your words and your actions.”