

“Why Be Wise?”

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Text: Proverbs 1: 1 – 7, Ecclesiastes 1: 12 - 18

Rev. Peter Coutts

For me, I will take wisdom from where ever I can find it! Perhaps you are the same. One of the best bits of wisdom I ever stumbled upon is Robert Fulghum’s “Everything I need to know I learned in Kindergarten”. “Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some. Take a nap every afternoon. And when you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.” That is helpful, wise.

Wisdom helps us live. That passage we read from Proverbs affirms this, providing a litany of benefits that come from having wisdom. Wisdom brings prudence, shrewdness, skills, insights. Wisdom helps one be righteous and just. As it says later in Proverbs, wisdom helps you understand the best, or the worthy path forward for living. In Proverbs, there is this general assertion, that wisdom results in the good life. For example, Proverbs 1:33 says, “those who listen to me (that is, wisdom) will be secure and live at ease, without dread of disaster.” In other words, the Book of Proverbs asserts wisdom will make things better for you. I think most of us affirm this general idea and believe wisdom benefits us in life. So it is wise to be wise.

The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, however, thought “if only that were true.” Ecclesiastes is the oddest book in the Bible, and why that is so is found in our reading. The author is a philosopher. He is not a prophet, sharing a word of God revealed to him. Instead, he was working all on his own. We read, “I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.” He said of himself, “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” He was saying, so far in history I’m the wisest! No small claim. That little phrase, “when I was king over Israel” implies that the author of this book was King Solomon, who is remembered in the Old Testament for his exceptional wisdom. Biblical scholars today think it’s unlikely Solomon was the author. So when I talk about the author of this book I use the attribution the author gives himself. He calls himself “The Teacher” —Qoheleth...and it is unclear whether Qoheleth is a title or a name. But over this series on this book I will call him Qoheleth, for he indeed has much to teach us....so much so that I call Ecclesiastes “a gospel for the 21st century.” This book’s concerns are very pertinent today.

The method for gaining wisdom is timeless. Qoheleth knew it, the Greek philosophers knew it, we know it. It is clearly illustrated in chapter 24 of Proverbs. "I passed by the field of one who was lazy, by the vineyard of a stupid person; and see, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down." Wisdom starts with an observation of life. The writer goes on, "I saw and considered it": one reflects on the observation. "I looked and received instruction." One learns from the reflection. The learning here, according to this author in Proverbs, was this: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior." Laziness results in poverty. I think we'd all agree: there is some truth to that. So this is how Qoheleth conducted his pursuit of wisdom. And he pursued wisdom because he believed it brought advantages—what he called "profit." So in Ecclesiastes he writes that wisdom brings strength (7:19), provides one with the right words when speaking (10:12). It protects you and enhances life (7:11-12). To Qoheleth wisdom was intrinsically valuable, so much so that he could write "it is better to be a wise pauper than a foolish king" (4:13). But there is an assumption underlying Qoheleth's motives for pursuing wisdom: wisdom will help me profit, help me be better than others, help me control my future. For Qoheleth, wisdom provides an advantage for living and he wanted that advantage. This author accepted the presumption of Proverbs: one can depend on wisdom to help you. I think the same assumption often undergirds our understanding of wisdom as well.

I think it's pretty likely that Qoheleth was surprised by what he had learned at the end of his journey to grow in wisdom. He learned that the pursuit of wisdom "is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings be busy with." He was disappointed, disillusioned. He said that pursuing wisdom is like "chasing after the wind": it's there, but you can't catch it. Throughout this book he made different observations about the shortcomings of wisdom. It doesn't matter if you are wise or a fool, he wrote, for we are all subject to chance. Wisdom cannot prevent disasters. He wrote that increased wisdom brings more worries. It does not help you discern the actions of God, nor does it help you glimpse your fate after death. In other words, he learned that there are real limitations to wisdom. Consequently, Ecclesiastes has this steady theme of despondency and futility because wisdom did not live up to expectations. Qoheleth's conclusion was that it is an act of vanity to think that we can be so wise as to guarantee control of our future.

Years ago, like all Canadians, I watched the stock price of Canada's tech darling Nortel drop from \$127 a share to \$20...then \$8...then \$4. What is the common wisdom about playing the stock market? "Sell high, buy low." I thought, "\$4 is low!!" and even if the stock price only goes up \$1 I would still be making 20% on my investment. That sounded wise! So I bought 100 shares at \$4 – my first foray into buying stocks. In the following weeks I learned that true wisdom is appreciating when "low" has actually arrived....and trying to figure that out is like "chasing after the wind." My financial advisor tells me that my 100 shares now hold a total value of one cent. It is vanity to assume that wisdom guarantees control over one's future. As the humourist Will Rogers once said, "Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment."

So a big part of the wisdom Qoheleth shares with us is that wisdom has its limits. And when we sit back and reflect on that notion, I think we'd agree. In part it's because wisdom is contextual. When I was a child you could still hear people say "spare the rod and spoil the child". But over the decades times have changed, we've learned a lot about developmental psychology in children. Consequently we don't think that idea is wise anymore. Wisdom can also be limited in that some truisms are true only as far as they go. It is said, "a bird in hand is worth two in the bush." In other words, it's better to hold onto something one has already than to risk losing it by trying to attain something better. That can be true, but if we all always lived by this notion then we would not have innovations, entrepreneurs and advancements. How about this saying, "It is better to get them before they get you." We can think "that's not right" but when you hear that this is a bit of prison wisdom then, in that context, it may be wise indeed.

Still, despite having his confidence in wisdom challenged and shaken, Qoheleth still thought it was helpful, valuable, all the same. So he wrote, "The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness" (2:14). In other words, the wise can see what's going on. But Qoheleth's wisdom is: but be cautious about it. Don't rely on your wisdom blindly. Going back to the process for how we come to wisdom that is inherent in Proverbs: it starts with observing life, reflecting on one's observations and learning from it. Remembering Qoheleth's caution we can acknowledge that we don't always see things fully, free from preconceptions. Our reflections are not always nuanced enough. Our learnings may be skewed and incomplete. So that's Qoheleth's first bit of wisdom for us: don't be overconfident about your own wisdom.

Qoheleth also had a second bit of wisdom for us. The only one who has dependable, certain wisdom is God. In chapter 3 we read, "I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe of God." The Book of Proverbs is even more direct about this idea. There in chapter 2 we can read, "For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones" (2:6-8). When we think about Jesus our default idea about him can be that his teaching ministry was about revealing the nature of God and the character of the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus was also a teacher of wisdom, and many of his sayings are really wisdom sayings. Perhaps the most familiar one is "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It is a simple truth—wise words—that is an excellent guide for living. And there are many others. How about, "Can worrying increase the length of your life by as little as a single hour? No? Then why worry?" Or how about this: "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Don't let anger become chronic resentment. One of the reasons we are all encouraged to read scripture and reflect on Jesus' teachings is that there is wisdom to be found there, that can guide our living, that can be (in Qoheleth's words) "profitable."

It is in this vein that James in his New Testament letter provides this encouragement, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you" (1:5). Our wisdom can be imperfect, incomplete, not dependable, even though we might think it is. That's because we're human. But if we believe that God is so, so much more than we could ever be, then we can draw from God a wisdom that is more sure. According to James, "Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor" (3:17-18). That sounds wonderful. It seems wise to seek that kind of wisdom.