

“Who is wise and understanding among you?” James asks that question of us in a reading we will have from him in two weeks. We will be reading wisdom literature for the next three Sundays as part of our Lectionary so I want to focus on what wisdom was and is; in history, in the Biblical tradition, and for us today. The familiar words of Psalm 51 come to me: **For behold, you look for truth deep within me, and will make me understand wisdom secretly.** (51:7)

So, what is this secret wisdom and what does it have to do with the Good News?

From the earliest recorded writings that we find in Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, there was an understanding that the gods gave certain primordial sages wisdom that in turn was to be passed to the rulers who in turn passed it to their sons. Education of young ruling class males in ancient times always included learning wisdom. Practical, ethical, theological – wisdom has always incorporated these three elements with a good dose of humor and irony.

So, it’s no surprise that our Biblical tradition includes Wisdom and that it shares some similarities with the wisdom history of the civilizations that surrounded Palestine. The traditional Wisdom Books in our Holy Scripture are the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs in the Old Testament, and the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Ben Sirach in the Apocryphal Writings or that “odd” section found in many Bibles between the Old and New Testament.

For the Israelites, wisdom had been reserved for Kings and their sages. But after the Babylonian exile, things changed for God’s Holy people. They began to realize that what held them together was God’s Word which included God’s Wisdom, and that was meant to be revealed to all the Jews no matter where they lived, or their station in life. Most wisdom was learned orally from the traditions and experiences of the elders passed down from generation to generation.

Learning wisdom orally still goes on today. I encountered that most recently in Honduras where church is an oral and aural experience. There are many small Episcopal congregations in the villages there who worship in houses and in little concrete block churches. The congregations in the villages are summoned to church by the bell, not by their clocks. The service starts when the priest can get there, whatever time that is. There are no bulletins, few Bibles and BCPs are scarce. When you want to hear God's word you come to church and listen. If you want to know what the church family is doing in the next few weeks you come to church and hear the announcements. For the most part there are no newsletters, parish lists, no websites and very little email communication. Wisdom is still learned orally.

So, today, just as people have for thousands of years, we hear a passage the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs. It is traditionally attributed to Solomon, but it is fairly certain that many of these short sayings, including one from our reading today, go back to 1100 BCE - to the Instruction of the Egyptian sage Amen-em-ope. There are really five proverbs here rolled together with some common themes. Put in today's words the themes might be expressed in more modern proverbial statements that we're more familiar with. You can't take it with you. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. You reap what you sow. Share and share alike. In fact, it turns out that one of the great themes of the Wisdom literature is that God deeply loves all of his creation and expects us to humbly do the same.

So, how do WE learn wisdom? Most of us do not spend our days poring over the Book of Proverbs. But it's actually kind of a fun thing to do. One of the primary ways we learn wisdom is as it's always been; from our parents and grandparents, those elders whom we love and respect; Who is wise and understanding among you?

I can think of one person right off the bat that both you and I consider to be one of the wisest persons we know - Aaron Manderbach. The reason I have been thinking of Aaron recently is that it was here at Trinity Church that I remember a remarkable sermon

of his...one of many. Since Aaron was a well known priest to us at Christ Church Sharon for many years too, my family and I too benefitted from his steady gentle wisdom.

For those of you who are too young or are new to Trinity to remember Aaron and his wife Judy, he has been a priest in this diocese for over 70 years. In his retirement he was the interim priest twice here at Trinity, and at several other area churches as well. He has had a huge influence on my faith, and the faith of many adults and children here in the NW Corner. He had been teaching Sunday School here at Trinity, and on the Sunday I attended I was thrilled that he would be preaching using his easel and pastels.- one of his familiar and beloved chalk talks.

I settled comfortably into the pew as Aaron began his sermon. He told us that one of his students in church school had asked him a difficult question. With that he drew a couple of strokes on the sheet of paper. As usual we were all engrossed, not only in what he was saying, but in how those funny colored squiggles were going to have anything to do with the message he was giving us. He went on to say that a boy had asked him if he could prove that God exists. A difficult question indeed, but somehow it's the question we all wanted to hear Aaron answer. What would he tell the boy? What wisdom could he share? What was he drawing!?

Aaron quietly and gently went on to say that he explained to the boy, that he could not prove that God exists. Shock! Really?! He was going to admit that some of our Ancient Church Fathers were wrong? There is no proof of God's existence? Meanwhile, on the paper a split rail fence began to appear. What does a fence have to do with proving that God exists. I listened more closely than ever.

Aaron patiently told us as he told the boy that although he couldn't prove that God exists he **knows** that God does, in fact, exist. He explained that through his experiences, through the holy people he has met who have imparted their wisdom to him, through the Bible, the Word of God, and through our worship and sacraments, that he has experienced God without a doubt and he told the boy that if he kept an open mind and an open heart, open eyes and ears, that he too would experience God. And as he said that, his pastel

drawing came into focus as a rooster crowing on a fence. He never mentioned the rooster in his sermon but we all understood that it is by proclamation that we learn that God exists. We learn the Good News and the wisdom that God wants to teach us – sometimes secretly and sometimes right there in the congregation.

God is not just wise. God IS Wisdom. Because God loves his creation so, he sent Wisdom to us in human form, Wisdom Incarnate is Jesus. That is why there are no Wisdom books in the NT. Wisdom itself walked among us for a time. For Christians it is ultimately Jesus who teaches us all wisdom, and who tried to impart that wisdom to the people of his faith, in his day.

James, for his part, does a wonderful job of succinctly restating the wisdom of Jesus in a way that is just like the wisdom writers of the OT. He points out the contradiction in keeping the law but not showing mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment he reminds us. That is the Good News. Jesus, who is our Wisdom, cuts through all the overblown tradition and judgmental wisdom and shows mercy. It's only a secret because some just don't hear it.

OK so let's take this a little further in our Gospel reading from Mark. If Jesus is Wisdom and Mercy itself, why does he say words that seem so cruel to the faithful Gentile woman in today's Gospel story. He basically rebukes her in her coming to him. It's hard to believe that Jesus would be cruel to a desperate woman with a sick child. Where is the mercy? But was Jesus was rebuking the Gentile woman, or was Jesus trying to make a point? We must look at the bigger picture, the context of the Gospel of Mark, to understand this strange story better. First of all, remember that Mark's Gospel was written for Gentile Christians primarily. This whole Gospel, and this story in particular would have been another demonstration to people like you and me, to show that Jesus is the savior of all of us, the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Jesus has already healed a Gentile man in chapter 5, the demoniac from Geresene who tended pigs, clearly not a Jew. And then take the fact that Jesus went to Tyre for this sojourn. Why would he go to a Gentile land if he wanted nothing to do with Gentiles. So,

it is much more believable that Jesus began the exchange with this faithful woman in the spirit of Rabbinic argument. He's making a point. That the woman has the gumption and faith to not just meekly listen, but join in the argument is a surprising and wonderful element. It's almost like Michael Feldman on NPR's *Whad'ya know* asking the contestant, "And why do you think you should play the quiz this week?". The potential contestants sometimes come up with banal and sometimes very witty answers to this question. I've never heard Feldman turn down anyone for their answer.

And I've never heard Jesus refuse to heal anyone who asks for healing. But can't you just see Jesus in your mind's eye as he listens to the faithful woman answer him right back at him. I can just see him start to smile, look her right in the eye and saying, "For saying that you may go...the demon has left your daughter."

God, grant us the fortitude, perseverance and patience of this woman so that you may find in us hearts and souls, bodies and minds ready hear your wisdom, ready to be healed and made whole.