

Title: “Until”
Date: 1/2/2022
Proverbs 1.1-7 Luke 7.31-35
Series: Tools For New-Year Living
Dr. William M. Smutz

When I graduated from seminary, I knew a little bit about the church as an organization and I knew a little bit about how to serve a congregation of church folks as their pastor. But beyond these little bits of knowledge there was so much I didn't know. In fact, I didn't know what I didn't know. I was as green as they come; and if it hadn't been for church members and other pastors who took an interest in me, and were patient with me, and loved me along the way, I would have never grown to understand ministry as an art form, that requires creativity, and a willingness to learn new things all the time and requires discipline and practice –lots and lots of practice! And it is only in hindsight, 34+ years into this adventure of ministry, that I have slowly –sometimes painfully, often times joyfully.....only in hindsight do I grasp that I have accumulated something I did not anticipate needing, but desperately required.....I have accumulated a degree of wisdom about being a pastor. Wisdom that helps me be more grace-filled, and helps me be a better listener, and helps me provide some level of leadership for a church amidst the competing spiritual and organizational and cultural complexities of today. I believe all of us are working on developing similar wisdom as we journey through life. Wisdom that is personal. Wisdom that is professional. Wisdom that hopefully helps us be and continually become a better person, a more faithful person, an asset to those we love and to the world around us!

Krista Tippett, who is the NPR host of the show “On Being”, wrote a book a few years back on the growth of wisdom over the course of her life and why she believes paying attention to the accumulation of wisdom in our individual lives, and as a nation, and as a world community, is a vital and necessary quality for living in the 21st Century. For the 21st century, says Tippett, is throwing open for debate and fresh decisions, question we thought we as a culture had answered in the 20th century. Questions about the nature of democracy that our country has slowly been trying to perfect over the past 246 years. Questions about race and identity, and the unequal distribution of wealth. Questions about the nature of truth, and the rule of law. Questions about the role of faith in the public sphere, and America's welcome of all others.

Tippett believes that the question of what it means to be human cannot be separated from questions of who we are to each other, and how we care for those considered to be different, the stranger, the other. In order to pursue wisdom today, Tippet encourages listening for the voices not shouting to be heard. Such listening, she believes, takes those at the margins as seriously as those at the noisy center. And listening to the margins is important because change always happens, change gets its start, in the margins.

An example of margin change, which is important to us, begins in a stable on the margin of the marginal town of Bethlehem, and then continues in the margin of Nazareth. A little hamlet in the middle of nowhere that was home to the itinerant holy man and preacher to whom we have pledged our lives. Jesus did not come from the power-center of Jerusalem and impose change from the top down. Rather, he invited his friends and neighbors on the margins of political power and faith power to imagine that they were a priority to God and that God desired to care for them in practical and tangible ways – food to eat, and fair taxes, and access to healing and health care.

Jesus continues to invite us today to imagine similar ways in which all God's children are valued and cared for and Jesus further expects us to turn our imagining to practical and tangible caring and compassion, especially for those who exist at the margins.

Jesus stood on the shoulders of and was deeply influenced by Judaism's wisdom tradition. The value and importance of wisdom is sprinkled throughout the Hebrew scriptures, but is particularly focused in the books of Ecclesiastes & Proverbs as well as the apocryphal books of The Wisdom of Solomon and The Wisdom of Ben Sirach. These apocryphal works will perhaps be familiar to those of us who have been influenced by the Roman Catholic tradition. In recent decades, biblical scholars have come to better appreciate the important impact of the Apocryphal writings on the teaching and preaching of Jesus and so, they should be important to us as well!

Our Proverbs lesson is a pretty straightforward declaration about the value of wisdom, and why learning wisdom is a faithful use of one's time. Verse seven sums it up well – "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." I think a better translation of the word 'fear', is a sense of awe and respect. Be in awe of the Lord. Have respect for the Lord. For a child of God, for a disciple of Jesus, the foundation of all wisdom and knowledge, is when we embrace God as God, God as Creator, and understand ourselves and our role as those God created. In our very brief Gospel lesson Jesus lifts up the faulty thinking that occurs when wisdom is not embraced; when human beings have no awe, no wonder, when it comes to God. John the Baptist, says Jesus, lives a life of extreme piety; and he is accused by the unwise, as well as those un-awed by God, of being a demon.

The same critics also point to Jesus, and accuse him of drunkenness and gluttony, when he tries to engage people in faith conversation around the table. Jesus tells the critics that they can't have it both ways that they can't keep themselves ignorant and un-wise and be faithful at the same time. And then he concludes with such a great line – "Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children. In essence, Jesus tells his critics, your lack of respect and awe for God does not taint everyone does not taint those who seek to learn and grow in wisdom, and thus grow in faith!

As we begin our journey through 2022, the sermons this month are going to help us explore how to become wiser disciples, both individually and corporately and so grow our Art of faithful living...for we all need to continually grow in wisdom if we want to survive and thrive and be useful in our world and so that we can be the people that God created us to be, and the disciples Jesus invites us to be.

Our world is filled with an abundance of beauty and courage and grace and we need these gifts for our lives, and together for our church; in order that we may glean the wisdom that will allow our present and our future to be purpose-filled and meaning-filled and caring-filled.

For our spiritual homework this week I like us all to spend some time thinking about the wisdom we have accumulated to this point in our life, you don't have to be older to have accumulated wisdom, so, this is homework for everyone. I'd also like us to spend some time pondering how we are doing when it comes to holding God in awe, and respecting God as God. For until we honestly and searchingly know ourselves, and our relationship to God, wisdom is denied us and our personal history and our cultural history will just repeat itself and God has created us for more, and Jesus calls us to so much more! And, in 2022 our world desperately needs all the wisdom humankind can bring to the table. Our future depends on it!

Pray with me.....Amen!!!

Copyright 2022 William M. Smutz

Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into The Mystery and Art of Living*