

8-15-21  
Pentecost 12  
Ephesians 5:15-20

## Being Where the Wisdom Is

I can think of several times when I have heard wisdom. I can maybe even think of a few times when I've dispensed some. Our older son, Blake, will be forty-three in a few weeks. Way back when he was a Webelo Scout—I think I remember that that's what you are when you're too old to be Cub Scout and too young for Boy Scouts—when he was one of those, he and I were part of a group who got to break in a brand new camp facility in Kentucky. It was just about this time of year, maybe a week or two earlier, just before school started for his fourth grade year. We got all our gear together and drove up to the new Scout Camp which was pretty near Bernheim Forest, a beautiful spot if you're ever up that way. We got all unpacked and set up and joined the other dads and sons from several places around the region. We had some kind of camp supper and some activities someone had planned, and then we got ready to bed down for the night. We woke up the next day to a day so full of activity that it had to be planned by either Scout leaders or Christian educators. The camp facility was new and the Scout District had worked hard to make it everything it was supposed to be, and they were happy for this hundred or so folks who came so they could show it off. After breakfast, there was a full day of opportunities to earn merit badges. Just about anything a Scout could do, he could find an opportunity to do that day. Knot tying. Native plant identification. Rope climbing. The dads were glad we got to stay on the ground and watch that one. We moved in a predictably orderly way from one activity to another throughout the morning. We made our way all around that new camp facility. We gathered in the mess hall for lunch, and then we lit back out to earn more badges and

do more activities. The archery activity was just on the other side of the lake. If the boys could swim across the lake, then they could dry off and go shoot some arrows. It was mid-afternoon by then, and as hot as it's been there and in these parts recently. That's when all that predictably orderly business began to suffer. The lake was full of boys, and the archery range was empty. I wasn't in charge of anything that day and was loving it. If you've ever been a Scout or had a kid in them, you know there is always someone in charge. That guy was doing the best he could to get those boys out of the lake and onto the archery range. But it wasn't happening. The lake grew more and more full of boys and even a couple of dads. I promise I wasn't one of them. But the archery range was empty. The bottleneck was the lake. That guy in charge was doing the best he could to empty the lake, but the boys were having none of it. "C'mon, guys!" he said with all the authority he could muster. "Come on out of the lake, do you paperwork and move on to archery!" Nothing doing. Finally, one of the bravest of the Webelos, not Blake, I promise, spoke up. "We're not getting out of the lake. It's too hot!"

"C'mon, guys!" the leader persisted. "The guys behind you need to get their swimming badge, too. C'mon. There's plenty to do on this side of the lake."

"We're not getting out of the lake," several of the other boys joined in. "It's just too hot. I can see the thermometer on the mess hall. It says it's 106 degrees! 106!"

"C'mon, guys! You know you can't pay any attention to that. That thermometer is right out in the sun. C'mon!"

"Yes, sir," one of the kids spoke for all of them. "You're right. That thermometer is right out in the sun. And so will we be if we get out of this lake!"

That child, my friends, spoke wisdom. The leadership team caucused, and as I recall, the boys spent the rest of the afternoon in the lake before we finally got them out, dried them off, and took them home.

Blake's Scouting career didn't last long after that. Basketball took up most of his time, but neither he nor I have ever forgotten the wisdom shared with us that hot, August afternoon.

Two of the wisest people I have ever known were a husband and wife pair of professors I had in both undergraduate and graduate school. You all had teachers like them sometimes. Intimidating. Rigorous. There was never much middle ground about them. Students either loved them or hated them. Those two people probably did more to broaden the mind of this green kid from Kentucky than anyone every had back then. I started out being scared to death of them, but once I got some success under my belt, I discovered that they knew things I needed to know and that they were willing to teach me those things if I was willing to learn them. I finished one degree with her as my academic advisor and then began another one with him guiding the way. When I sat for my oral exams at the end of my Masters, they were both on my committee, and they wanted me to tell the rest of the department all they had taught me. I breezed through that exam, and everyone in the room was impressed with my wisdom. Especially my two teachers.

I was teaching when I finished that degree. My department chair had done her masters at the same school where I did mine, but she was not a protégé or a fan of my teachers. She had let me know early on that she was no fan of theirs and that whatever they taught me probably wouldn't do me much good in her department. So one of the wisest things I did while I taught for her was keep my opinions about my teachers to myself.

It seems there is wisdom, and then there is wisdom!

By the time we get to the place in Ephesians from which we read this morning, the writer has done all the deep thinking and theologizing he wants to do. In this last part of the letter, he gets down to some practical conversation about how the people to whom he writes are supposed to carry their faith into their lives—what does faith in Jesus have to do with what happens at home, at work, and all the other places we are when we're not at home?

Come to think of it, those sound like things we still want to know after all these years. What difference does it make whether we believe that Jesus was the One God sent into the world to redeem us, and, if we say we believe that his death and resurrection all those years ago have some connection to our lives, then what is it?

Most of us believe that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter. Paul is a lot like those two teachers of mine. Not much middle ground. People tend to love him or hate him. People have been using Paul's words as weapons for a long time. So when he begins today's reading by saying, "Be careful, then, how you live!" there are all kinds of ways we can go from there. The easiest route, and the one I'm sure you've heard preachers take before, is to climb into the pulpit with Paul and tell people what they need to do and not do. Don't be foolish. Instead, understand what the will of the Lord is. Make the most of your time. Remember that these days are full of evil. If Paul thought that then, I wonder what he'd make of cable TV? Don't get drunk, but be filled with the Spirit. Debauchery! When's the last time you heard that word at a social event?

If that's the list of things we're not supposed to do, then keep reading to see what Paul says we can do. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make melody as a way to give thanks to God for everything.

Now most of you know I love to sing. And I know some of you do, too. But do you really think Paul thinks we're supposed to give up foolishness and idle time and drinking and replace them with a hymn book? Friends, if that's our plan of evangelism, I suspect we are in for some rocky days ahead.

But look at what Paul said again. Before that list of dos and don'ts. Be careful how you live---not as unwise people but as wise. Wise people know things the rest of us don't. That's why we want to learn from them. Wise people don't need Paul or you or me to tell them what to do and what not to do. Wise people are so attuned to the things that govern their lives that they make good choices; they don't run from one set of rules to another one.

Their lives are so grounded in whatever it is that guides them that they know what will help them and what needs to be set aside.

The people to whom Paul wrote were up against all kinds of opposition to being who God had called them to be. The Jews had the Law. The Greeks had their intellect. The Romans had a life based in pleasure and comfort. And all of them were good at being who they were. The Christian view of things is different from all those and any other system we compare it to. For Christians, then and now, knowing God's will for us matters most. And God's will for us is that we love God and love one another.

That's never as easy as it sounds, of course. Jesus came proclaiming this idea of love as the most important thing in life, and no one quite knew what to do with him. So they did away with him. But his people, including us, have been trying to do what he told us to do ever since then. With mixed results.

Over the years I've been doing what I do, I've lost count of how many people have told me they just don't understand our insistence on grace as the measure of faith. Why don't you just tell people what to do and what not to do, many have asked me. My response rarely satisfies them. That's not my job, I tell them. Conviction of sin is the Holy Spirit's job, not mine. We all lose sight of that once in a while. Paul did. You heard today's list: don't waste time; don't drink too much; don't be foolish! And, of course, all of us find ways around all those and all the other lists of dos and don'ts Paul gives us. But we can't find our way around the first thing he says: Be careful how you live. Live as wise people, not as unwise ones.

That call to be wise sounds a lot harder to me than any of those other things.

Like all of you, I know a lot of smart people. I try to spend time with them when I can. When I'm picking the classes I'll attend at Montreat every summer, I know I'm going to some of the same things every year. But I also try to find at least one new thing every year, something I don't know but need to. When I'm looking for the next book I want to read not for fun but to learn something, I try to find someone who knows something I need to

know more about and read that book instead of rehashing something I think I already know. There are plenty of smart people who will keep me busy as long as my eyes can read.

And then there are wise people. Some of them write books, too, but some of them are people God puts in our lives, people we can sit down with and explore things. Those are the people God calls us to be for one another. Not just smart people, not just people who know things, but people who have lived enough to know which ones of those things matter and which ones don't. Wise people are the ones who don't need lists to tell them what to do and what to avoid. They are the ones who are so attuned to God that they have things to share with the rest of us. If we will seek them. If we will listen.

Someone wants to know what you have learned. Probably not your kids. Maybe not your spouse. But someone is watching your life and mine to see if this stuff we say we believe makes any difference. Be careful, then how you live, not because someone is trying to catch you doing something wrong, but because someone wants to know how you make connections between what you believe and what you do every day. Someone wants to know those things just like you do. That's why God is calling and equipping us every day to be the wisdom that the world needs, whether it wants it nor not. Be careful how you live. It matters. Amen.

### Prayers of the People

Hear us, O Lord, as we pray about what we understand to be the needs of the world, trusting that you will hear our prayers and show us what to do and say.

We pray for your Church everywhere. We pray that you will confirm in the hearts of all who follow Jesus an understanding that to follow him means to love our neighbors, even those we don't much like, and to follow him means doing good and being kind, even when the world gives us plenty of opportunities to do different things. Let your Church, including us here, be a sign to the world of something different than we see elsewhere.

We pray for all who lead your Church, those who order the life of Christian communities everywhere. Strengthen those who lead so that they can be both faithful and humble and open to ways of being and doing that the world has not yet seen enough of. Especially in these strange and difficult days, Good Lord, show us how to lead so that people will follow not us, but you and change the world.

We pray also for those who led us in government and in politics, for those in authority over us all. Give them wisdom that comes not from opinion polls or the latest surveys, but from your will for us and for all people. Help them not to be afraid to speak when something needs to be said and to be silent when there has been enough talk. Help them to act on behalf of those who cannot act or speak for themselves. Give our leaders determination to do what's right instead of what's popular, what's good instead of what will keep them in power. Hear our prayers for mayors and governors, for representatives and senators, for justices and for the President, Vice President, and all who counsel and advise them. Show them a path which will lead us out of current confusion and bring us to hope and meaning and purpose together.

Good Lord, we pray for all who are sick, for the poor, those who have no power over their own lives. Stir up your Church to help the helpless, to feed the hungry, to be a light to all who live in darkness. Show us how to relieve misery and then live in joy together.

We hear the Scripture say that the days are evil, and we think we understand what that means, but these days are the ones in which you call us to live and to make a difference. Show us how, O God. Show us how to make a difference. Show us how to live lives that matter.

We believe, O God, that you are both the source of the answer to our prayers. Show us what you need us to do, Good Lord, we pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us all to pray when he said: