

"Wisdom"
Proverbs 8:1-11
Mark 6:2
March 11, 2018
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Once there was a woman who had a dream while traveling in India. The dream told her to ask a beggar for a gift. The woman found an old man in the street who reached into his gunnysack at her request and pulled out a diamond bigger than a golf ball. "This is all I have" he said "so this must be the gift." Sputtering, the woman asked the beggar if he knew what he was doing. "Yes, of course" said the old man. "I found it in the swamp just outside the city." The woman thanked the beggar for his gift and went to the swamp to meditate until dusk. Then she returned to the beggar, and handed him the jewel. "Instead of this diamond," she said "could you please teach me the wisdom that let you give me this gift?"

When we go looking for wisdom where do we go? We go to Jesus who taught a certain kind of wisdom: critical wisdom. Not critical in the sense of negative but critical in the sense of analytical or interpretative. To understand how to get more of Jesus' kind of wisdom, I'm going to start by contrasting critical wisdom – Jesus' kind – with conventional wisdom. Here's some examples of conventional wisdom:

Too soon old, too late smart.
A watched pot never boils.
You can't push a rope (I learned that one from Jerry Jackson).
The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.
If you want something done, ask a busy person.

Conventional wisdom is what you find in the book of Proverbs. As Mary Kate Morse of George Fox Seminary says conventional wisdom is pragmatic and helps us get along in life. The Book of Proverbs is full of conventional wisdom: "Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it. (Proverbs 15:17) ""Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin:" (Proverbs 18:24) "..... Like a city breached without walls is one who lacks self control." (Proverbs 25:27-29) "The human mind plans the way but the LORD directs the steps." (Proverbs 16:9) Our Hebrew ancestors imagined wisdom to be a woman. Lady Wisdom calls to all people: *listen to me; don't be simple minded. Don't be foolish. Learn prudence; acquire intelligence, listen to the truth.....If you follow me your lives will work better. I will help you conform to the way things are – to the order in the cosmos established by God at creation; because I wisdom was there with God when the world was made.*

Conventional wisdom is a good thing. The whole world would be better off if there was more of it. And yet Jesus has wisdom that goes beyond the conventional kind.

To cultivate Jesus' wisdom we need to use our imagination and think about his life. In the hymn 'O Sing a Song of Bethlehem' we imagined being in Bethlehem (where he was born), Nazareth (where he grew up), Galilee (where his ministry was carried out) and Calvary (where he died and rose again). To know Jesus' kind of wisdom we need to know him.

The people in his hometown wondered if they really knew who he was. Wasn't this was the carpenter's son, the son of Mary? The people of Nazareth knew Jesus' -- the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon. They knew his sisters too. " But now he's preaching in the synagogue with wisdom and power. This sure doesn't sound like the guy they knew. "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!" Jesus had to move on to do his work elsewhere; most people wouldn't or couldn't believe in him.

Jesus shared critical -wisdom; not the kind of wisdom that helps you get along in life. Jesus wasn't too good at that kind of wisdom. Jesus was constantly challenging the conventional wisdom. Take the sermon on the mount; he turns conventional thinking upside down over and over. In Matthew 5:38-44 for instance we read: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' (conventional thinking) But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor^[b] and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,...."

Jesus' kind of wisdom was counter cultural. In "The Science of Virtue" Mark McMinn says Jesus' Critical wisdom makes us "think outside the box." It points the way to justice and goodness. Jesus said "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." That's upside down thinking. Jesus' wisdom worked best in parables: very short stories pointing people in the direction of life in the kingdom of God. He never explained them. Instead parables ignited peoples' imagination, got them thinking for themselves.

There was a great example of Jesus' kind of critical wisdom in *The Upper Room* for February 28th. Stephen Bedard of Ontario Canada tells this story: "Although I was raised in church, I became an atheist as a teenager and did not regain faith in God until near the end of my university studies. However, while I came to believe that God existed and that Christianity was true, my skepticism did not disappear. If anything, as a Christina, I questioned even more. This made for some awkward moments in church. Whereas many of my friends could simply accept things on faith, I would ask questions that made people feel uncomfortable. 'Why can't you just have childlike faith?' they would ask. This caused me to wonder: *Am I a bad Christian because I ask too many questions or because having faith does not always come easily?* The answer came when I became a father. My children are very

curious and inquisitive. They want to know why things are the way they are, and simple answers will not do. The more answers I give them, the more questions they have for me. I realized that childlike faith has nothing to do with refusing to ask questions. In truth, no one asks more questions than a child. We are called to childlike faith – a faith that has room for questions. We can trust God’s goodness even as we wrestle with the mysteries of life.” Conventional wisdom says children are quiet, small, weak and powerless. Stephen Bedard turns that upside down: children are a lot like Jesus: not afraid to think critically, to question. That’s the way in which they are like Jesus.

Critical wisdom says things are not always what they appear to be. Instead of taking things on face value, Jesus wanted us to imagine the world differently. If you want to grow in this kind of wisdom, here’s one way you can put this into practice. You can tolerance for ambiguity. Ambiguity: that’s when a word or expression is ambiguous it can be understood in two or more possible ways. Tolerating ambiguity means living with uncertainty. Things are not always what they appear. Jesus’ followers are no strangers to ambiguity. Just take our central symbol of the cross. The cross reminds us of both death and life. We call the day we remember Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross Good Friday. We are told we are a divided nation. There are two camps: us vs. them. However you define the “us” or the “them”. Critical wisdom is needed in our world, the kind that refuses to see the other side as all bad or our side as all good.

I offer an image today to help you cultivate wisdom – tolerance of ambiguity. The cover of the bulletin today was chosen because it helps increase our tolerance for ambiguity, and may even ignite your imaginations. “The Lady and the Unicorn” is a series of tapestries in the Cluny Museum in Paris, France. They date from 15th century and the first five tapestries highlight the five senses: taste, touch, sight, smell and hearing. This is a picture of the sixth tapestry. It’s called “my sole desire.” It shows a woman holding in her hand the necklace she wore in the other tapestries. Its unclear. is she taking off her jewels or putting them on? Some say “our sole desire” refers to love. She is giving up her jewels to pursue her sole desire which could be divine love, or virginity (dedication to God). Another interpretation says human beings share the five senses with all other animals but only humans have a desire for material goods. The jewels represent this desire. Her taking off her jewels is an act of renunciation. Is she taking off the jewels, renouncing wealth or is she putting them on? The meaning is ambiguous. Critical wisdom – the Jesus kind of wisdom – is needed to interpret this piece of art. Is she renouncing wealth or is she making material goods her sole desire?

I started with a dream, a parable about a beggar in India offering a woman a diamond the size of a golf ball. What’s really worth more – the biggest diamond you ever saw or the wisdom to be able to give such wealth away?

The people of Nazareth asked a good question. People are still figuring out the answer: Where did that itinerant 1st C. Palestinian teacher get his wisdom anyway?

Stephen Bedard from Ontario Canada learned about wisdom from his children and their constantly asking questions. Who is wiser – an adult who thinks he has it all figured out – who knows the ways of the world -- or a child who keeps asking more questions?

And on this fourth Sunday in Lent, Jesus is still calling to us: come take up your cross, lose yourself for my sake and follow me. What can he mean that I should lose my life for his sake? He must be kidding, right?

Story of the diamond in the swamp is by Mally Cox-Chapman, author of “The Case for Heaven” “Women’s Perspective” by Rosemary Williams in “Ministry of Money” Newsletter 116th newsletter October 1998

The Science of Virtue by Mark McMinn Brazos Press