

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Vocabulary of Faith: Wisdom
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Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

This morning I want to test a hypothesis of mine, but to do so I need some polling data. So I want to begin this morning by asking you about some popular television shows. How many of you watch Dancing with the Stars? The Voice? Project Runway? Jeopardy? America's Got Talent? American Ninja Warrior? Your answers confirm my hypothesis that Americans love competition. We love to watch as people compete to be the best in whatever area in life it is in which they excel. What we need to realize though is that this is not only not just an American phenomenon, but it is a world-wide phenomenon. I say this because most of these shows have counterparts in other places in the world. What we also need to realize is that this is not a modern phenomenon. Almost all societies have had forms of competition in which people try and prove themselves to be best, including in the time of Paul in the Roman Empire. And if they had named one of the most popular competitions it would have been called "Who's Got Wisdom." It was a show in which philosophers from across the Empire tried to demonstrate that they were the ones who had more wisdom than anyone else.

What was wisdom? It was the ability to discern the fundamental nature of reality and to show people how they ought to live in harmony with that reality. Let me say that again. Wisdom is the ability to discern the fundamental nature of reality and to show people how they ought to live in harmony with that reality. In this game there were Stoics, Epicureans, Platonists, Pythagoreans and others who attempted to convince their audiences that their conception of the fundamental nature of reality was the correct one. They did so with incredible eloquence. They did so with erudite arguments. They did so through particular forms of argument. They did so at great length. Which is why, the Christians were in trouble. They were in trouble because it would be more than two centuries before they had someone who could compete, on Who's Got Wisdom. What about Paul, you might ask. Well, unfortunately his lack of conventional wisdom and ability to express it was leading the Corinthians to not only vote him off the show, but out of their lives. This Corinthian church, as we discover in this letter, which he had started, was looking for new leaders with a new message who would do more than, "preach Christ and him crucified."

The Apostle could have walked away and allowed them to abandon their faith, but he refused, and instead, made the argument, even if it was in a very sarcastic manner, that he, and not the arrogant Corinthians, or the local philosophers had true wisdom. This is how Paul puts it.

“God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” What Paul is saying is that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection demonstrated the fundamental nature of the universe. And that fundamental nature, as the Apostle will go on to say, was God loves the world. In other words, God’s sending of Jesus demonstrated that there was a loving God who so desired the restoration of creation that this God sent the only Son, in order that humanity could live in right relationship with God and each other as renewed human beings who are free from the power of sin. This is what he means by righteousness, sanctification and redemption. This world-wide transformation then would allow humanity to live together peacefully, as a single community, regardless of any differences in worldly conditions. And it would allow them to do so in peace and harmony. This was real wisdom.

If we were to continue reading this letter, we would see that Paul does not stop with the first half of the wisdom equation. He continues by telling them how they were to live in harmony with this fundamental reality of the universe, God’s love for the world. The way in which they were to do so was to respond with love of God and of neighbor. I realize that we spend a great deal of time talking about this love of God and neighbor, but its importance cannot be over stated, because it mattered to the Corinthians as it matters to us. It mattered to them because the Corinthians were a community divide by wealth, social station, education, freedom, religious background and citizenship. Each of these differences diminished the church’s ability to live wisely; to live in harmony with fundamental nature of the universe by loving one another. And this inability meant that the members of this divided community could not experience life in all its fullness. They would be less than the God of the universe designed them to be. This my friends, I would argue, is where we find ourselves. We find ourselves in families, communities and a nation divided in the same way. We live in a time in which the wisdom of God is not transforming us or the world. Thus, this is a moment when true wisdom from God is needed more than ever. The question is, will we listen to and be instructed by it.

My friends, we have been given a gift, true wisdom. We have been given the insight that true wisdom from God is the willingness to be loved by God and to love in God’s name. These two realities are what will allow this world to live fully into its potential as a recreated world. The challenge that I want to give you this morning is this, as you partake of the elements, ask yourselves, how am I living wisely such that I might help my family, my community and my nation live in harmony with God’s love for the world in and through Jesus Christ?