

Psalm 111
August 18, 2024

Beginning of Wisdom

Life is full of comical contradictions. Once such irony comes in the form of the scientific name for our species; *homo sapiens*. Sapiens is a Latin term that means, “wise.” It is not inaccurate to define this term that names us all, “wise person,” or, “thinking person.” I do not mean to be pessimistic or negative, but even just a little self-examination reveals the contradiction involved in the combination of these two words.

An oxymoron is when contradictory terms appear in conjunction with each other; cafeteria food, civil war, bittersweet, icy hot. Thus, “human,” and, “wise.”

In the plainest sense, the term, “homo sapiens,” refers to the ability of our species, in contrast to others, to learn from experience, to think at a high level, and to be aware of the learning and thinking, and to show good judgement.

Human beings have shown these traits throughout their time on earth in the sense of the ever-changing state of knowledge, what can only be seen as advancements in the way social and political relationships are ordered, or the use of technology, or the understanding of the world all around.

On the other hand, one is also forced to admit that we still suffer the tendency to show poor judgment. We might say it this way: human beings are wise because they can learn from mistakes, but unwise in the sense

that they are not able to stop making mistakes, sometimes the same mistakes over and over. Thus the contradiction.

I do not raise this judgment to be negative or provocative, and I admit my own failures to show good sense, but I don't think we can afford to be too easy on ourselves here, because the stakes are high and the record is littered with failures of all kinds.

Some of the failures are innocent, stemming from a lack of knowledge or experience. Others are more dangerous, coming from orneriness and pride and selfishness; from short-sighted thinking.

The psalm read for us this morning teaches us with the following sentence, “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” It turns out that the sapiential aspect of human life has a theological side, for throughout the bible are seen references to it, such as King Solomon's pursuit of wisdom; or the Book of Proverbs or Ecclesiastes, which are called Wisdom Literature.

In the Greek language the term for wisdom is also a beautiful name, “Sophia.” For some reason even in ancient times wisdom was thought of as feminine, maybe I shouldn't say that.

We see it also in the name for one of the foundational academic disciplines, Philosophy, which means, “friend of wisdom,” and is all about how people think and decide and judge. The question for the day is,

what does it mean that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord?

Last week and at other times I have mentioned the hesitance nowadays among people, of associating, “fear,” with God because it is out of vogue to think of God as being someone of whom we should be afraid. That kind of preaching, maybe, has been overused. So we soften the idea by thinking of reverence or respect. “Reverence for God is the beginning of wisdom.”

In this case, the idea of a healthy respect is good. There are analogies. We may think of the ocean, or a high mountain peak with sharp drop-offs, or a hurricane or flood or wildfire; anything in nature that is dangerous and bigger than we are, and should be respected.

Or we might think of human things, the family of nations, the collection of peoples that make up the world community; when they set up the structures, the institutions, the laws, even things like passport requirements, and security systems (you can see where my mind is, don't bring a knife or a gun on a plane). Taken together, it has created a large set of relationships that are much bigger than any of us is individually. These also command our respect, although we do like to complain about them.

Or the mystery of life, from whence did it come? How brief it is and how easily it ends. Our mortality is always with us and there isn't much sadder than a person who fails to respect it.

It is good to acknowledge the thousands of seemingly unrelated decisions and actions that must align in order for the power to come on when the switch is flipped, or the water when the knob turns, and then to magically drain away, or for there to always be food at the grocery store when we drive our cars on passable roads to purchase the necessities of life.

But it is not *enough*, because it is of human endeavor and even nature itself is not its own source. It is too little, merely, to associate what is bigger than we are and more powerful than we are, with God.

I would not be very interested in a religion merely because it instructs me to acknowledge and be a part of something bigger, some staggering but generic collection of life's realities and demands, even though it is healthy from time-to-time to come to attention before it all and salute it. *These things are not God.* But perhaps they do give us a place to start.

The fear of the Lord recognizes the creative power of God and the decision God has made to create and to redeem. So the psalmist makes a commitment to appear in the council of the upright and in the assembly. There he will bear witness to the great deeds of the Lord, for they are not random occurrences or lucky coincidences, and we do well to ponder them:

“The Lord is gracious and compassionate; and provides nourishment for those who respect him.

Remembers the covenant that has been made with all humanity;

Provides redemption for his people and has ordained his covenant forever.”

A covenant it is a sacred promise. Our presence, our very lives are the result of the gracious decision of God to create and to set free, and to forgive and to heal and to liberate and to sustain.

When we stand before the Lord we encounter that which is greater than any natural phenomenon; the ocean and mountain vistas; the vast reaches of interstellar space with all the unknown possibilities, or the mysterious depths of earth beneath the oceans; and we stand before that which is greater than all the accomplishments of human beings and their civilizations at their best and highest.

If we will linger there, we are led into an intimacy unimaginable outside of grace, and when respect for that relationship comes to order our lives, then we can be healthy and mature, and hopeful for the future, and *wise in our judgments*.

And this is just the beginning.

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