

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
August 19, 2018, Pentecost 15B  
1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; John 6: 51-58  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

How many truly wise people do you know? What does it mean when we say someone is wise? Wisdom is kind of an elusive quality, isn't it – we all decide on one basis or another if someone “has it” but it's hard to come up with a definition. Simple truth? Common Sense? Knowledge? Who is your life would you consider wise?

We've heard about the wisdom of Solomon so often – the stories of Solomon and his temple, of his kingship, when we were in Sunday School. Why Solomon? Why did God choose to give him this rare and profound gift? The passage this morning gives us some clues – he took his leadership role very seriously. But he was very different from many leaders of that time and I'm afraid from today as well: he prayed not for long life and riches, but for an understanding mind, for the ability to discern good and evil. Later on the Book of Kings tells us that God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore. That's a beautiful image, isn't it.

We do value knowledge in our culture. We live in certain communities, if we are able, because of the local school system. We want our children to learn – to gather information – we want them to continue that activity all their lives. And we don't stop looking for information, for knowledge ourselves too.

But I wonder – is knowledge the same as wisdom? I'm not so sure. Solomon prayed for understanding and discernment, not knowledge of facts. Perhaps wisdom is understanding, but a knowing in a deeper sense than what we usually envision when we think of knowledge. Maybe wisdom is touching the mystery, the deepest part of us where our faith resides – maybe wisdom touches what we might call truth.

Today we're in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of John's writings about Jesus, the Bread of Life. He gets pretty graphic with his imagery here – he says, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. John is different from the other gospel writers – there's no account of the Last Supper – and

so it is in today's reading that we don't hear about Jesus acting out the sacrament but we hear instead, Jesus teaching about its meaning: the Bread of Life.

Communion – as we experience it today – what do we understand about it? How much do we have to know to get it right? How old do we have to be to know enough? When is the moment when it all makes sense? Here's where the two passages connect for me: wisdom enters into, touches the mystery.

I am most often touched by the mystery of our faith in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. That visible sign of an invisible grace – a free gift to us. So very basic to our faith journeys.

Once upon a time a minister followed his bishop's directive to give communion only to children after they reached first grade and after both the child and parents had received adequate instruction. (By the way, this wouldn't happen in the United Church of Christ – each church has the autonomy to make their own decision about who comes to the Table.) Well, Sunday after Sunday this minister's 4 year old son came to the altar rail and lifted his little hands for the bread, but the minister smiled and touched his head with a blessing. One day, as the minister reached down for the blessing, his son pushed his hands away, and after his father continued to withhold the bread, he looked up at his father, so very angry. He wasn't able to articulate what he was feeling, but I'll bet it was something like this: you are giving out bread to everyone but me, and something is wrong about that!

You know, if he was able to understand being excluded, he was old enough to sense the importance of being included with those experiencing the feeding Jesus insisted will give to us not only spiritual health but also eternal life.

Participating in communion is not about us; not about what we do or initiate, but what God initiates and does for us. And honestly, who's to say that any of us understand everything about what Jesus meant when he said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life." Don't we all continue to grow in our own understanding of what this all means?

Years ago in Middlebury we had extensive discussion over when children should be included at the Table – and at a workshop we started by listing the whys and why nots. There were those who were in favor of including children at the table as you'd expect. But someone else said that children need to understand, not just to know, but to understand, what communion means before they participate. I asked, what do you mean when you say understanding? Intellectual understanding? Factual understanding? What does it mean to understand at all?

And, further, if we insist on rational understanding, what of elderly afflicted with senility or Alzheimer's disease – are they to be excluded from the Table because they no longer understand? It was an interesting, illuminating discussion for sure that night.

Not long after that, the Sunday School children gathered in worship for their own communion service. About 60 children were there, ranging in age from 4 to 6<sup>th</sup> graders. We'd had a class the month before where we'd introduced the concept of becoming part of God's family through baptism. When we reviewed that with the children, I think we were all a little surprised at how much they remembered and retained from that session.

They knew that baptism was a sacrament that brought them into the church family. The next logical question was: what does a family do when they gather? A four year old said right away, "They eat together." From there we talked about the special meal that Jesus invites us to share. We talked about prayer as a quiet time we each have to talk to and listen to God. We talked about how God wants us to care for each other both in prayer and action. We talked about confession – the need to say I'm sorry. And we talked about forgiveness. All of this was done in age-appropriate language to be sure, but we used the big words too: confession, forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation, thanksgiving.

Then we moved very quietly – yes quietly – 60 children moving to the tables which had been set by the deacons, complete with the silver communion service. We asked the older ones to sit next to the younger ones. We went through the liturgy of the communion service – we thanked God. We said we were sorry for what we'd done wrong. We heard the good news that we are forgiven. And we had profound intercessory prayer: the children were asked if there were things they'd like to include in prayer. And they quickly responded – they spoke up during our prayertime – for dad, mom, grandparents, their dog, their friends, for a grandma who was very sick. They named real issues in their lives.

After the prayer we served the bread and the cup. Did they understand? Oh yes! We told them that while everyone was being served, it was a good time to pray, to talk to God silently. 60 children were silent, some with their hands folded, most with their heads bowed – and there was not a sound. I saw a little one begin to wiggle and then watched the 6<sup>th</sup> grader sitting next to him put her hand gently on his. No words. But the wiggling stopped. There were no giggles. Surely these children were touched by what was going on. They understood.

By whose standards did they understand? I think by those standards which surpass human understanding. These children showed not just

understanding, but an understanding touched by wisdom – wisdom that expresses the deepest mystery of our faith.

And I've led worship at local nursing homes, assisted living facilities – sometimes we celebrate the sacrament of communion. I remember once when there were about 20 people gathered – some were alert and aware, some immobile, unresponsive, seemingly asleep, barely responsive. But as we proceeded through the liturgy and came to the Lord's Prayer, nearly every voice joined in – their mouths formed the words even if no sound came out. When we served the bread and the cup, everyone participated to the fullest extent of their capability. Those of us present were gifted yet again with a glimpse into the unknowable, the mystery of our faith. The part of our faith that reaches out, touches us, sustains us, deep within our souls. That part of our faith that connects us so very deeply.

As I reflected on that experience I was so struck by the similarities on both ends of the life span. Understand? By whose standards? Both the children and these adults were touched, were connected by something far deeper than knowledge. They partook of the Bread of Life. Perhaps they are the wisest of us all.

Knowledge informs.

Wisdom transforms.

So many folks express a feeling that something is missing from their lives, that there's a hunger that just isn't satisfied. It's not about stuff usually – it's hard for most people to describe what they mean. But there's a hole in their lives. We come to worship, I think, partly because we continue to search, to try to fill that emptiness. I wonder if somehow we realize that the knowledge is not enough, that something deeper is what will touch us and begin to fill that space. Maybe wisdom comes from a connection, the connection we yearn for with each other, with God.

Wisdom can change our lives. It is wisdom that gives us a listening heart. It is wisdom that deepens our understandings. It is wisdom that opens us to new possibilities, to new vision. It's wisdom that connects us to each other deep in our souls. I don't think we can learn wisdom as such – we have to listen, we have to be open, we have to take that step beyond the facts. If we're listening, really listening, not just with our ears, but with our eyes and hearts, we can't be preoccupied with controlling. We have to let go! We trust that God's activity is in our lives, of those around us. God's activity is not dependent on us, on our interventions. God, indeed, is present. And perhaps our wisdom, like our faith, is something that is caught not taught. That wisdom begins in us when we can look beyond the concrete, that we can begin to look to the mystery, the unknowable.

Let us, like Solomon, pray for understanding minds, to risk being transformed. Let us listen – but most of all, let us put God first. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Let us be careful how we live, not as unwise people but as wise.

Let's strive together to understand the will of God, giving thanks to God, at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. And the mystery will be revealed again and again to us – that's the promise. Let us be transformed, full of joyful thanksgiving to the God of life, the God of promise. And partake of the Bread of Life! Amen.

Let us pray:

O God, you have shown great and steadfast love to your children throughout the ages. And now, you have called us to be your servants in this time and place. Grant us your wisdom, your understanding that comes from a faith deep inside of us that you are, indeed, present first among us. Continue to enlighten us with your word, that we may ever be faithful to what you would have us be and do.

Spread your wisdom among us as we gather as your Body here and now and in the various arenas of our lives. Accompany us on our journey of faithfulness. Strengthen us with resolve, with courage to take new risks, and to put our trust in your will. Soften our judgment on others and let us come to you with the trust and wonder and awe of a child. All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our brother, Amen.