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**Psalm 111**; Ephesians 5:15-20

## THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Both our scriptures for today encourage us to seek wisdom and to live as wise people. But what is wisdom? What does it mean to be a wise person? Can you think of someone who you considered wise and why was that? What qualities made them wise?

There was a time when we considered a wise person as someone who knew a lot of information, someone who had accumulated knowledge like a scholar or college professor. But having a lot of information does not necessarily make someone wise. Think about the times in which we now live, when information is abundant. Never before have ordinary people had access to so much information—not all which is even accurate. So now we need wisdom just to sort through all the conflicting information we receive.

Or maybe what comes to mind when we think of a wise person is the cartoon image of a bearded guru sitting remotely at the top of the mountain to whom the unenlightened must trek to seek answers to confounding questions. That would match how dictionaries tend to define wisdom: as the ability to exercise good judgment or as the ability to discern what is true and right.

The Bible, however, has a different understanding of wisdom. The reading from the Psalms today makes a statement about wisdom which we find repeated in other places in the Bible as well: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Let's first unpack what is meant by the use of the word *fear*. The use of the word *fear* was not meant to imply "afraid." The writer of this psalm was not telling us that we need to be

*afraid* of God. God desires to be in an intimate relationship with us and I don't see how anyone could willingly enter such a relationship if they were afraid of the other party. Rather, the term *fear* is used to imply a deep reverence. We are to revere God, not in some casual off-handed way, but from a position of profound awe and respect. Wisdom, according to the Bible, begins by having a deep reverence for God.

Embedded in this concept of having deep reverence for God is lies the concept of *humility*. Reverence for God incudes this idea of standing in humility before God. And it is this notion of humility that has special significance to us modern Christians who are so accustomed to ideas of self-sufficiency and personal autonomy and the empowerment we find through technology and ingenuity. According to the scriptures, within the idea of revering God lies this notion of humility, which is an essential posture in the path toward wisdom.

Humility includes the recognition that one holds a lesser place of power—but not lesser power as in “you don't count” or “you don't matter.” Think about the times when you have been humbled in life. Were you humbled when gazing at the magnificence of the night sky, when looking up at all those stars you realized how very small you were compared to all that vastness? That humility comes from recognizing a difference in power and stature. Or were you humbled when someone did some extraordinary act of generosity or kindness on your behalf. Maybe you were humbled by the outpouring of love and care people expressed when your spouse was in the hospital or when your mother died--and you were humbled by the casseroles they brought over, the cards they sent, or the hours they spent by your side in the hospital waiting room. The humility we feel at such occasions comes when we recognize the strength and size and vastness of the power of love others have for us. And we are humbled. In such moments we recognize a difference in power—not that we are puny and unimportant but that we appreciate that we are in

the presence of something greater than ourselves. We are in the presence of something greater than ourselves.

Fear of the Lord, reverence for the Lord, implies humility before God. It implies our recognition of the power difference. It implies that we are in the presence of something and someone greater than ourselves. How differently might we appreciate the psalmist's words if instead of "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," we read it as "humility before the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"? We modern Christians have come to trust so deeply in ourselves and our abilities and our technology and our common sense that we could benefit from a dose of humility before our God.

The word *humility* comes from the Latin word *humus*, which means "earth." This implies that a humble person is one who recognizes one's earthliness, that one appreciates one's creaturely-ness. Unlike the classic cartoon of the wise guru lifted up on top of a mountain, true wisdom is actually acquired by the person who comes *down*, by the person who comes down to earth in humble recognition of their status.

Within the concept of our humility before God lie two elements. The first is a recognition of our status and the second is the recognition of our need.

Wisdom is first acquired when we accept our status. We are the creature and not the Creator. Wisdom comes from knowing that there is something greater than ourselves. The rapid rise in secularism in Western societies in particular attests to the every growing numbers of people who do not acknowledge that there is something greater than themselves. They regard humanity as the supreme entity. Such people look to human knowledge and human ingenuity to save us, to advance us, to improve us.

And such people with such ideas can be found right in the pews of our churches. We might not be atheists but many Christians could fit the description of a *practical atheist*. Practical atheists are those who profess a belief in God but who nevertheless live and behave as if God were incidental in their lives. There is little need for God because ultimate confidence is placed in social and political structures, economic institutions, and technological advancements to improve human life. Practical atheism often surfaces when people are comfortable, when there is money in the bank and they benefit from the status quo. In such circumstances, God just doesn't seem all that essential.

Practical atheism, however, negates the idea that there is One to whom we owe our existence and One to whom we are responsible in the way we live our lives. Without proper humility of our status, humans will live and act with a sense of autonomy—behaving as if there is no larger authority to whom we are accountable. And so humans will exploit and harm and abuse and act selfishly and consume without regard. Wisdom, however, abides with the one who understands that we are in the presence of someone greater than ourselves. Humility before the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

And humility before the Lord also includes a recognition of our need. The wise person understands our deep and desperate need for God. Despite our ability to put people into outer space, to find cures for diseases, and to create magnificent symphonies we are still incapable of saving ourselves. We humans, collectively and individually, act selfishly. We, collectively and individually, commit acts of unspeakable cruelty and bring about harm to others and our planet. We collectively and individually act in self-destructive ways. We collectively and individually are imperfect and flawed and in pain. We have great needs only God can meet—among which is the great need for God's healing love and saving way. We need God's love and grace. We need

God's transforming power. And God gives that to us. Over and over again, we receive love and forgiveness, grace and resurrection. God creates and re-creates even at great cost to God's very self.

This is made visible in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus—a God who loves us, who reaches out to save us from ourselves, who acts in a costly and sacrificial way to transform us. And thus, in the face of these extraordinary acts of love and mercy and compassion, we are humbled. We are in the presence of someone and something greater than ourselves.

The beginning of wisdom is found in humility before God—the God who created us and this complex world, the God who knows us, forgives us, loves us, and has the power to raise us to new life, the God who is greater than ourselves.