

“THE WISDOM CURVE”
Proverbs 16:16; James 1:5
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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Today is obviously a milestone day for the Woodbury United Methodist Church. It’s a day of celebration because we’re together again – at least a small portion of us are together. But reaching any milestone is also an occasion for reflection. We’re all thinking today about what we’ve experienced and learned, how we’ve coped and changed, over the four months we’ve been apart.

I visited on the phone recently with a friend in another state and asked him how he had experienced the pandemic. He replied, “It’s been a steep learning curve.” I understood exactly what he meant and identified personally with his comment. The term “learning curve” refers to the process by which you and I acquire new information and skills. A steep learning curve involves learning very quickly, often by trial and error.

COVID-19 struck the world like a terrible swift sword, and we had a short amount of time to learn about it and adapt to it. We had to take a crash course in how the virus is transmitted and how its spread can be prevented. In the wake of the shutdowns and lockdowns, all of us had to find new ways to communicate, to get things done, and to meet our basic needs. Children and youth had to master virtual learning; adults had to master working remotely. Those of us who are technologically challenged had to become more tech-savvy overnight, learning how to order food with a phone app, conduct meetings by Zoom, FaceTime our family members, or stream movies on Netflix. When we were confronted with the pandemic, we faced a mountain we had never climbed before, and we’ve been on a steep learning curve.

This morning I want to focus on another kind of curve – what I’m choosing to call the “wisdom curve.” Again, when we speak of a learning curve, we’re typically referring to the acquisition of new knowledge. But we all recognize that there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. You and I know individuals who are highly knowledgeable but are not necessarily wise. We also know persons who have a limited education or an average intelligence quotient, but whose wisdom quotient is off the charts. Knowledge is about having the facts; wisdom has more to do with how we understand and interpret those facts and how we choose to act on them.

During the pandemic we have acquired a lot knowledge about the Coronavirus and the measures available to protect ourselves and others from it. We don’t yet know everything we need to know; but still, there is no shortage of information from public officials and the news media. Our learning curve has been steep, yet most of us have made our way up the curve without falling off.

However, over these past twelve weeks we’ve also been navigating the “wisdom curve.” We’ve been trying to take the pieces of information we’ve gathered, put them together, and understand their implications. Just having the facts wasn’t enough; we’ve also needed to interpret the facts and respond to them in ways that are helpful to us and to others.

It strikes me that the wisdom curve is much more challenging to navigate than the learning curve. Wisdom is more subjective, mysterious, and elusive than knowledge. What seems wise to one person may seem unwise to another person. Even when you and I try to exercise wisdom as individuals, we often find ourselves pulled in two directions, struggling between competing priorities, and making difficult choices.

During the pandemic, we've had to decide how to balance our need for safety and health with our need for financial security. We've had to choose when to exercise our personal freedom and when to sacrifice that freedom for the common good. We've had to weigh our desire to be present and supportive to our loved ones against our equal desire to be protective of them.

We've faced similar dilemmas during this recent period of social unrest. The facts are clear that racial injustice is still a serious problem in our country; what is less clear is how to address and alleviate this problem. How do we take a stand against the violence done to people of color without endorsing or encouraging further violence? How do we oppose police brutality and still offer support to the noble officers who seek to make peace and provide for public safety?

Most of us have at least some knowledge about these issues; but what we need just as much is wisdom – the wisdom to understand what we know and to use our knowledge to good ends. In these challenging times, I can think of no commodity more valuable to us all than wisdom. The writer of the Book of Proverbs affirms this when he says, “How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver” (Proverbs 16:16).

And so, on this milestone day in the life of our church, it's worth asking what wisdom we have acquired during this time of unprecedented change. In my conversations with you, I've learned a lot about the wisdom we have gained over the past twelve weeks. This wisdom runs much deeper than exercising good judgment about social distancing and wearing facial coverings. It reflects a more realistic way of seeing ourselves, the old way of life we have lost, and our relationships with each other and with God.

One form of wisdom many of us have acquired is a sense of humility about ourselves. Let's be clear that humility doesn't mean putting ourselves down or cultivating a low self-esteem; humility means seeing ourselves realistically – our limitations and needs as well as our virtues and strengths. Simply stated, I believe the pandemic has helped us to have a more realistic view of our own humanity. As recently as last February, most of us felt safe and secure, in control of our lives, and relatively immune from the catastrophes that befell previous generations. “Pandemic” was a word in our history books, not a present-day possibility. The pandemic of 2020 shattered that illusion in the twinkling of an eye; but it also gave us a higher wisdom: no matter how modern, medically advanced, and technologically sophisticated we are, you and I are still mortal and are susceptible to suffering like all those who have gone before us.

Nancy Mairs is a gifted writer who has reflected extensively on her own experience with multiple sclerosis. She says that instead of asking the question, “Why me?”, she has learned to ask, “Why not me?” Things happen to people, she points out. When it is our turn to suffer, we naturally reflect on our suffering. “It is best to start,” she says, “in humbly recognizing that we weren't singled out for suffering. It's just our turn.” This is the wisdom of humility.

In recent months I've seen wisdom manifested in another form – in a more realistic way of seeing our past. In this pandemic, many of us are nostalgic for the old normal. We want to get

back to our regular coffee shop, our favorite restaurant, our in-person church service. And there is nothing wrong with the desire to return to these cherished routines. But some of us have decided that we don't want to go back unthinkingly to the old normal. Upon reflection, there were problems with the old normal that we weren't fully aware of at the time, and we now realize that we contributed to those problems. In the "good ol' days," we took our health and prosperity for granted and lived out of a sense of entitlement rather than gratitude. We were too busy to be fully attentive to the people we love the most, and unresponsive to the needs of others outside our immediate circle, especially those who are different or marginalized. We were selfish as individuals and conflicted as a nation.

It takes wisdom to recognize that not all aspects of the old normal were so great; they are not things to be nostalgic about. As we experience discomfort in this time, some of us are beginning to dream of a new normal that addresses the problems that were going unaddressed in the old normal. We realize that if we're wise, we won't go back; we'll go forward.

We're also discovering a wisdom that we needed all along – the awareness that we are all connected and interdependent. This may seem counter-intuitive because we have been disconnected in so many ways in recent months. When John Donne wrote his famous poem, "No Man Is an Island," he obviously wasn't quarantined in his house during a world-wide shutdown! However, to illustrate how connected we all really are, the Christian writer Brian McClaren invites us to reflect on how the Coronavirus is spread. He says: "We used to think that we caught diseases as individuals: 'I'm sick; you're not.' But now we realize we catch diseases as individuals who are part of families, and families that are part of cities, and cities that are part of states and nations. We realize now that the whole species can become infected, and that our whole globe can be changed because of our interconnectedness."

So there is a definite down side – even a danger – to our being so interconnected. But the pandemic has also given us the wisdom to realize that, even with those risks, we want and need to be connected to other people. This is one part of the old normal that is non-negotiable, that we want to have back and can't do without. We miss human contact; we miss each other's faces and hugs; we miss the companionship of our friends, especially our church friends. When we are isolated, we are prone to have tunnel vision, and we need the wisdom and counsel of others to help enlarge our vision.

But this leads me to identify one other pearl of wisdom many of us have discovered over the last four months. We have learned the limits of human wisdom and the infinite scope of divine wisdom. Perhaps you have heard the story about the young man who was ambitious and goal-oriented and wanted to do everything he could to avoid making mistakes. He approached a wise old sage and asked, "How can I avoid making mistakes?" The old sage responded, "Get wisdom." The young man then asked, "But how do I get wisdom?" The sage responded, "By making mistakes."

This is a cute story with a lot of truth to it, but it misses an important point. You and I could avoid a lot of mistakes and make much wiser choices if we would consult with God before we speak or act. As we've struggled to make difficult decisions during the pandemic, many of us have done something we had gotten out of the habit of doing: we've gone to God for direction; and better yet, we have not been disappointed. Notice that the writer of the Epistle of James offers

both an admonition and a promise: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (James 1:5).

Yes, wisdom comes from other people, and wisdom comes from our own experience, including the school of hard knocks; but the Scriptures tell us that wisdom comes ultimately from God, and that God’s wisdom is not all that difficult to discern. You and I gain access to God’s wisdom through prayer, and through the nudges and intuitions that are an answer to prayer. If that seems too vague or subjective, we have a more objective source for tapping into God’s wisdom. We have the Scriptures, and especially the teaching of Jesus. Our Lord doesn’t give us answers to every specific dilemma we face, like whether to take a vacation this summer or whether to participate in a rally to protest racial injustice. But Christ does offer us some basic wisdom – love your neighbor as you love yourself and treat others as you wish to be treated – and then trusts our wisdom to work out the details.

Friends, you and I have been on a steep learning curve, but we’ve also been on a wisdom curve that is just as steep. And the one who guides us up that curve is the God we know in Jesus Christ. God, “grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour.”