

“The Search for Wisdom is an Eternal Search”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of
St. Andrew’s United Church

for Sunday, May 22, 2016 – Pentecost 2,
or Victoria Day Weekend

Scripture Readings: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
John 16:12-15

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

The search for wisdom is a common biblical message.

The book of **Proverbs** is all about that search. Now, not all of the statements and nuggets of wisdom from that document ring true today, yet the goal is to share wisdom that is life changing.

Some sayings are eternal. “A good name is to be more desired than great riches. Favour is better than silver or gold.” (Prov. 22:1)

And the New Testament has many places where wisdom is part of the story. Even when Jesus complains about a “brood of vipers” or struggles with “how long he must put up with the current generation,” he is speaking about frustrations as to the wisdom and common sense of people with whom he engaged and discussed life.

As Christians, we limit the teachings of the faith if we do not honour and acknowledge the importance of wisdom as part of who we are as a people who seek to follow God.

The Proverbs passage read by Torrin emphasizes the importance of wisdom:

“Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads, she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance to the portals she cries out.”

Wisdom is that which transforms us, and makes life full and meaningful. It is not knowledge alone – that is **gnosis** in Greek, or **scientia** in Latin. Wisdom has a life defining aspect – in Latin **sapientia**, or in Greek **sophos**.

It is the kind of insight, in part, written about by Carroll Spinney, the person who played Big Bird in Sesame Street, in his book **The Wisdom of Big Bird**. It is filled with common sense, wise reflections that can animate (pun intended) any life: Be Persistent, Be flexible, Don’t Ruffle Your Feathers. Wise statements for the life that we lead. Advice as to how to live, whatever one faces.

Gary Zukav has been a popular story teller and speaker of Soul Stories over more than 2 decades. He touches on the edges of what wisdom is in the following story:

“Air Canada three twelve, this is San Francisco Approach Control. Turn right to two-seven-zero and descend to five thousand feet,” said the air traffic controller.

“Turn right to two-seven-zero and descend to five thousand feet. Air Canada three twelve,” Jeff repeated to approach control.

The atmosphere in the pilot’s compartment was tense. It had been a rocky road from Vancouver, all instrument flight conditions. They were fifteen minutes late, and the weather was closing in on them.

“Air Canada three twelve, contact San Francisco tower on one-one-eight point six-zero. Good night.”

“San Francisco tower one-one-eight point-six-zero. Air Canada three twelve. Good night, sir.”

Jeff and his co-pilot, Carolyn, glanced at each other. She was glad that he was with her on this flight. His eighteen years of experience had given him a fatherly composure that he had maintained through sunny skies and ice storms. It had calmed many co-pilots. This time, though, she sensed his concern.

We’ll make it, she said to herself. No problem.

Through the mist a long row of lights appeared below them. Then the runway, outlined in white dots. The huge aircraft touched down as gently as a swan on a calm lake. As Carolyn brought the enormous engines into reverse thrust, and Jeff braked, they both sighed in relief.

It had been a tough flight, but there were no high fives or “Well done” in the cockpit at the end.

Actually, there was no cockpit, as this was not a regular flight, but a simulation, and they had been in a large black box in a hangar, surrounded by technicians.

We all want flight commanders and pilots and co-pilots to know their work, to have the skills to fly these huge planes, yet there are limits as to what they can learn from equipment such as a flight simulator.

The simulator offers no judgment on one’s life. It does not make any assessment on whether you are handling a crisis appropriately. It simply tells you what you are doing.

Knowing how to do something in a technical way is gaining knowledge, even wisdom about a profession, but it does not touch us in our spiritual search.

As important as wisdom is, Jesus is not immersed in the search for wisdom alone – in John’s Gospel, in the midst of four chapters (John 14-17) where he speaks about the coming comforter and the expectation of a new way of being, Jesus encourages the disciples to await the “spirit of truth.”

Wisdom is important, yet the spiritual insight that faith offers is even more important.

One of the significant roles that the church can offer today is to lift up the importance of spiritual wisdom.

Many institutions and organizations highlight knowledge (I attended a high school whose motto was *scientia per studia*, and some may remember enough Latin to know that translates as “knowledge through study.”) The school did hold knowledge as important, but the church is one of the few places where we can openly talk about the power of spirit-filled wisdom.

Thomas Jefferson wrote a Bible, or more accurately rewrote the New Testament to speak of Jesus’ wisdom, ethics, and consoling power, but the miracles and divination stories were removed. It was an attempt to bring together theists and atheists alike.

There is power in accepting and focussing on those aspects of the New Testament, but it is not the whole story.

I truly believe that miracles can and do happen, and that spiritual insight is part of life.

And it happens best when we do not dismiss the insights of others, but listen to them and learn from them so that our own wisdom may be complete.

As Proverbs 16:22 points out: “Understanding [one can read in that word “wisdom”] is a fountain of life to those who have it.”