

2024 01 28 – *The Beginning of Wisdom*

Scripture: Psalm 111 (*Voices United & The Inclusive Bible*)

There's one particular verse in today's psalm that many people find troubling. It is, of course, that last verse. The one that says:

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,
those who practice it have good understanding.

Many of us would question the idea that we need to fear a God of Love. We will explore that issue, but let's begin with our understanding of wisdom. Melanie, during our Community Learning Time, has already noted that knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing. Knowledge is an accumulation of facts, an understanding of a particular topic. It is what we get by reading books or searching the Internet. But wisdom is different. Wisdom is not so much about what we know, but rather how put that knowledge into practice. The Oxford Dictionary says wisdom is the "capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends." So wisdom is about how we live our lives, about the choices that we make in our living. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom>

The ancient Greek philosophers had quite a bit to say about wisdom. Plato, attributed the following statement to Socrates:

I am wiser than this man;
for neither of us really knows anything fine and good,

but this man thinks he knows something when he does not,
whereas I, as I do not know anything,
do not think I do either. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom>

It's seems that for these brilliant philosophers, wisdom begins with humility, with the ability to recognize, not only what we know, but also what we don't know.

The ancient Romans also valued wisdom, which was personified in their goddess Minerva. Her symbol was the owl, which is still, today, a popular representation of wisdom, because the owl can see in darkness. Wisdom is about dealing with the difficult questions of life and adapting to complex situations. This is why we often pray for wisdom for the leaders of our world as they make decisions affecting the lives of millions of people. So often those decisions have to be made without a complete understanding of all the implications.

So wisdom begins with the realization of our own lack of knowledge and that we have to make decisions in our life based on more than just the facts of a particular situation. Wisdom is about seeing even in the darkness. So where does that ability come from? What do you think? Where do we find or how do we attain wisdom? (wait for answers: life experience, intuition/insight, common sense)

Life experience is a key factor in wisdom. It's why we go to our elders for advice. It's why elders are revered in many cultures, including that of our North American Indigenous peoples. We can gain a deep understanding of life and different perspectives just through living. But psychologists tell us that experience does

not automatically result in wisdom. Some would say that wisdom comes from a life that has been examined, a life where both mistakes and successes have been analyzed. Brené Brown puts it this way:

Regret is one of our most powerful emotional reminders that reflection, change, and growth are necessary. When used constructively, regret is a call to courage and a path to wisdom. <https://brenebrown.com/art/atlas-of-the-heart-when-used-constructively-regret-is-a-call-to-courage-and-a-path-to-wisdom/>

Being on the path to wisdom means we must not only live but also reflect, change and grow throughout our lives.

Yes, we need, humility, knowledge and an examined life, but I also believe that a key factor in the development of wisdom is what some people would call intuition or insight, but what I would identify as a connection with the Sacred. Let's go back to today's scripture reading, to Psalm 111. What is this particular ancient song saying about the Holy Mystery, about YHWH? Here are some of the phrases:

- Great our your works, O God;
- your righteousness endures forever;
- you are gracious and full of compassion;
- the works of your hands are faithful and just;
- they stand fast forever and ever, grounded in justice and truth.

These are descriptions of a God of Wisdom, a God of Love, the Essence of Love. This is not a God to be feared, but rather to be revered, held in awe, respect and wonder. In fact, in the Inclusive Bible, the translation that we often use in

worship, the word reverence is used instead of fear: “Reverence for YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.” I believe this translation is a better representation of what is required for a deep and healthy relationship with the Sacred.

When we revere YHWH, then we are holding in reverence all of God’s creation and all God’s grace, compassion, truth, justice and faithfulness. With reverence of the Sacred comes humility, the recognition of our own limitations. With reverence of the Sacred comes a wonder and a desire to follow God’s path, to live with love and compassion. With reverence and connection to the Sacred comes an ability to live with the paradoxes of our world, to live in the unknowing, to find answers beyond ourselves, to see in the darkness. With reverence of the Sacred comes the beginning of wisdom.

In our bulletin this week, I included a quote from Theodore Isaac Rubin, an American psychiatrist and author who practiced in the second half of the last century. He wrote

Kindness is more important than wisdom,
and the recognition of this is the beginning of wisdom.

Rubin believed that kindness, compassion, and love of self were key components in mental health and wisdom. Some would argue that his approach to psychiatry was closer to spiritual practice than psychoanalysis. Rubin recognized the importance of connecting with that part of ourselves that is love, that part of ourselves that is Sacred. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Isaac_Rubin

May we all revere, connect with and love the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being. May we attain, at least, the beginning of wisdom.

May it be so. Amen.