

For Want of Wisdom

I Kings 3:3-15

Well, if you've been following the news from Washington, we have just suffered through one of the strangest, most bizarre weeks we may have ever witnessed! It started with the President's speech to the Boy Scouts of America which, in the style of a political rally, upset many as it was out of character with Presidential norms of the past. Then, the Republican-led healthcare repeal effort by the Senate came crashing down, only to be followed by a rather undiplomatic obscenity-laden tirade by the incoming White House Communications Director, Anthony Scaramucci, which was then punctuated by the sacking of Chief of Staff, Reince Priebus—one of Scaramucci's targets! If this wasn't enough, also in the same span of time, the President, out of the blue, disqualified transgender soldiers from serving in the military (unbeknownst to those in the Defense Department), at a time when the stakes are high in relation to North Korea and Russia. And that's only some of the craziness of the last seven days.

So, while we collectively catch our breath, take in some wisdom from the writings of St. Francis de Sales: "Never be in a hurry, do everything quietly and in calm spirit. Do not lose your inner peace for anything whatsoever, even if the whole world seems upset." Bless you, St. Francis. The country needs you now.

I hope the collective leadership of our nation will do the same: slow down a bit, take a deep breath, think things through and gain a little wisdom before rushing into consequential decisions. Good decisions take time; consequences and ramifications must be taken into account and evaluated; incorporating other views and opinions to make sure everyone can be on board and invested in the end result isn't a bad idea, either. All in

all, there seems to be a dreadful lack of patience and a dearth of wisdom in our nation's capital.

So, let me offer a few more thoughts from other great sages of history:

- ❖ To enjoy good health, to bring true happiness to one's family, to bring peace to all, one must first discipline and control one's own mind. If a man can control his mind he can find the way to Enlightenment, and all wisdom and virtue will naturally come to him. *Buddha*
- ❖ I, wisdom, live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion. *Proverbs 8*
- ❖ The only true wisdom is in knowing [and recognizing] you know nothing. *Socrates*
- ❖ By three methods we may learn wisdom. First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest. *Confucius*
- ❖ God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. *Reinhold Niebuhr*

However, the most relevant counsel may come to us from the epistle of James:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. (James 3:13-18)

If I could, I should love to etch this on the doors of Congress and in the Oval Office before they put us through another week like this!

Now, I suppose, it's easy to point fingers at the White House and Congress and the "reality show" circus that has seized Washington, but surely they are not alone. There are many in these times who are driven by their anger and rancor to say some crazy things—people who rebel against reason and common sense and who speak before they have thought things

through. Prudence of speech and action seem to be in short supply. As I learned long ago, whenever I am tempted to point the finger at someone else, I must recognize that, in doing so, three others are pointing back at me! In other words, the want of wisdom is a common phenomenon. So, if I'm going to criticize its lack in another, at the same time, I must reckon with how it may be lacking in me.

Wisdom, of course, is something human civilization has revered since time immemorial. In Scripture, wisdom is valued above all things. As Proverbs tells us,

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue is better than gold...Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy. (3:13-14, 17-18)

Wisdom is the way we humans calculate the impact and consequences of actions and words. We cultivate our consciences with it so we may act morally and ethically and appropriately. Wisdom is what guides us through life, so we may live well and, hopefully, live long.

The dictionary¹ tells us wisdom is “the ability to make good judgments based on what you have learned from your experience, or the knowledge and understanding that gives you this ability.” The operative words, as I see them, are “experience”, “knowledge”, and “understanding”—where to be wise means exercising all three to arrive at the best judgment possible. Of course, we know this to be true. We remember past experiences to teach us how to act in the present; we acquire knowledge to overcome ignorance so we will know what we're talking about; we seek understanding to put in proper perspective all the

¹ Cambridge online dictionary, www.dictionary.cambridge.org.

dimensions and ramifications of any choice or action we make, so that what we do or say is not only appropriate, but effective.

Wisdom, in many ways, is meant to protect us from harming ourselves or others unnecessarily. It will discourage us from being impulsive or rashly reacting to some provocation and escalating problems; it teaches us to value input from others, so that we're not merely relying on our own views and opinions to arrive at the truth. At its essential core, wisdom requires a measure of modesty, so we reckon with our place in the larger scheme of things—so we don't overstate our importance or dismiss the relevance of others.

One more thing. Wisdom also requires effort, in that there is always more to learn and understand than what meets the eye. Those who would be wise will work hard at gaining knowledge and understanding to come to a right decision, to deliberate, discern, and become cognizant of the consequences, especially on matters of importance.

Perhaps, that's why wisdom is essential for leaders—those who often are called upon to make important decisions on behalf of others. Wisdom is essential for keeping baser instincts of human nature in check, while inspiring and appealing to the more noble and gracious traits within people. When done well, a wise leader will lead by example, modeling the type of character and behavior that will inspire the better angels within everyone.

For this reason, today's story from I Kings is a noteworthy example of the best aspirations of leadership. It's the ancient tale of when King Solomon rose to power and the remarkably honorable spirit in which he claimed the throne. It's not to say he always maintained this level of humility and transparency, but at least from the outset it gained him a

notoriety and reputation as the wisest one in Israel. This was demonstrated in the legendary story of the two women who fought over an infant child born to one of them, where no one knew which one was the child's mother. You may recall the story. When they came before Solomon, he instructed them to take a sword and cut the child in two in order that each mother would be given half. Though rather extreme and seemingly foolish, it did the trick: one of the women eagerly agreed to the king's judgment which would result in the death of the child; whereas the true mother was revealed in the one who would rather give her child away to the imposter than lose the life of her newborn. And, as truth be told, Solomon wisely discerned that the actual mother would be revealed by her sacrificial love for the child. And all of Israel was astounded by Solomon's extraordinary insight to foresee the outcome of this perplexing dilemma.

In our text for today, though, it was Solomon's humility before God, played out in a dream, that takes center stage. Instead of asking for a long life, or great wealth, or the life of his enemies, in this dream Solomon asked God for wisdom to rule his people. This may be the stuff of legends, but the point is made: wisdom is more important in leadership than all the power and riches one can acquire. Such humility and selfless concern for the role he would play in his nation's life was revered within Israel as an amazing demonstration of integrity and goodwill in his heart.

What Solomon sought was unexpected. Those in the seats of authority typically employ the instruments of power to control and dominate others and to advance and protect their own interests. We see this all the time played out on so many levels of life. Pride and power are an intoxicating mix, which is why wisdom and humility are crucial to ensure good leadership.

Throughout the biblical canon, Solomon's legacy is deemed remarkable—revered as he was following in the wake of his father, David. As the annals of Israel described him:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else...his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak about animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (I Kgs. 4:29-34)

In the eyes of the legend tellers, King Solomon was a paragon of virtue.

That doesn't tell the whole story, however. In time, Solomon's pride and power became a toxic mix as his success as a supreme leader replaced his humble desire to be wise. His excesses became extravagant, his arrogance his folly, his corruption inevitable. The early potential for moral greatness slid continually toward personal and national ruin until, upon his death, Israel split into two rival kingdoms (Israel and Judah) that would never again be united. It only proved to show that wisdom and sound judgment must be constantly pursued, followed, and applied to oneself, as much as it would serve to guide others. Personal failure is sure to come when wisdom is no longer heeded or valued.

One of the proverbs attributed to Solomon reminds us of this: "When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble" (Prov. 11.2). The key to acquiring wisdom is humility, where we recognize our human limitations, faults, misgivings, and mistakes, while also recognizing and building on the strengths of others. Humility uncovers self-deception, so often found in the mix of pride and power, by limiting the sense of self-importance and valuing the common good more significantly than self-

interest. Thus, to know a wise person is a gift; to find a wise leader even more remarkable.

In an April Op-Ed piece in the New York Times, Peter Wehner made this observation:

Humility believes there is such a thing as collective wisdom and that we're better off if we have within our orbit people who see the world somewhat differently than we do. "As iron sharpens iron," the book of Proverbs says, "so one person sharpens another." But this requires us to actually engage with, and carefully listen to, people who understand things in ways dissimilar to how we do. It means we have to venture out of our philosophical and theological cul-de-sacs from time to time. It's worth the effort...

A friend of mine recently told me that humility...is elusive, a perpetual goal, almost always a little bit out of reach. The wiser we become, the more we see how much we don't know and how much we need others to help us know.²

His words sound like the sages of old. It's a truth we cannot risk losing in these current times, as chaotic as they are. For our want of wisdom must be corrected before we will ever find our way to be the best we can be while we take this journey, individually and collectively, through this period in human history we call our life.

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² Peter Wehner, "The Quiet Power of Humility," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2017.