

**PRECIOUS METALS, PRECIOUS TRUTH**

**We human beings love a good story. We tell them all the time. Stories to remember by, stories to entertain, stories to teach. Yes, we love a good story. Here's one of my favorites.**

**There once lived a very old man who was known far and wide to be a man of great wisdom. He didn't look particularly wise. In fact, he was rather bedraggled. He had a long gray beard and his clothes were not much better than rags.**

**One day as the old man was out for a walk he was jumped by a gang of thieves. They beat him, almost to death, and took what few coins he had in his pocket. Then they left him by the side of the road to die.**

**Fortunately for the old man, a small group of soldiers were traveling the road that day. When they saw him by the road, they stopped. One of them bound up his wounds, another gave him a long drink of water, and the third soldier hoisted the old man on to his back and carried him to his cottage. There the soldiers tucked him into bed and made sure a neighbor would check in on him.**

**The wise old man's wounds began to heal, and later in the week the soldiers stopped by to see how he was doing.**

**"So," said the old man, "You are the kind young souls who saved my life. I am indeed most grateful. Let me repay your kindness."**

**The three soldiers began to protest, but the old man insisted.**

**"I have the power to grant each of you one wish, but only one. So use it well."**

**The soldiers were a bit skeptical. How could such a ragged old man have such great powers? But they decided to humor him.**

**The first soldier had always lived in poverty. It had always seemed to him that wealth would solve his problems, so he wished for money.**

**Suddenly, there appeared next to him on the floor a great sack of gold coins. He was overjoyed. He thanked the old man profusely, and fairly leapt as he went down the road with his newfound wealth.**

**But as he went, the old man quietly shook his head. For being wise as he was, he could see that the first soldier would enjoy the comfort and friendships money**

would bring for a time, but then the sack would be empty, and he would be poor again.

The second soldier was one of the ugliest men ever to live on earth. His face often frightened little children. Even the dogs would run away. Seeing the first soldier's good luck, he wished for what seemed to him to be impossible: he wished for good looks.

Within seconds, he could feel the very structure of his face being altered. He ran to a mirror hanging on the old man's wall, and to his delight, he saw not the ugly face he had grown to loath, but a handsome young face, with finely chiseled features.

The second soldier was delighted. He vigorously shook the old man's hand and then headed out to meet the world.

But as he left, the wise old man once again shook his head. For he could see that though the second soldier would be loved for his looks by all the woman and many of the men, time would catch up with him. His smooth skin would become wrinkled with age, and his flesh would sag. And once again he would be considered ugly by those whose values rest on the external.

The third soldier was both poor and ugly. Having witnessed what had happened with his two fellows, it was hard to predict what he might do with his wish. He crossed over and whispered his request into the old man's ear. He then shook his hand and walked out the door.

This time the wise old man did not shake his head, rather he nodded and smiled. For he knew the third soldier would always know true joy, for his wish had been the wisest of them all.

And what had he whispered in the old man's ear? Simply this:  
"I wish that I might always be content with whatever I have."

(Based on "One Wish," found in Charles Arcodia's *Stories for Sharing*)

This story beautifully illustrates what is meant by the writer of Proverbs when in our reading for today he says:

Happy are those who find wisdom,  
And those who get understanding,  
for her income is better than silver,  
and her revenues better than gold.  
Wisdom is more precious than jewels,  
And nothing you can desire can compare with her.  
(Proverbs 3:13-15, NRSV)

Or, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it: “[Wisdom’s] value exceeds all the trappings of wealth, nothing you could wish for holds a candle to her.” (*The Message*, 1098)

The third soldier was destined to live a happy life, because he had found wisdom, and valued living wisely above riches or good looks.

But what is wisdom? And where can it be acquired? The old man and the third soldier provide us with examples of those who are wise—but what is wisdom itself?

In ancient Israel wisdom was understood to be a combination of common sense and religious principles.

It is not secret knowledge. It is not limited to the select few. Though it is, in part, a divine gift it is available to all. The wisdom spoken of in Proverbs comes about when we combine obedience to God and our natural abilities to think and reason. We might speak of wisdom as divinely guided common sense. Wisdom, therefore was (and is) available to anyone who seeks to obey the will of God and use his or her natural gifts of intellect and intuition.

In ancient Israel, it was also understood that *certain* men and women had diligently sought after wisdom. By studying the Law they had come to better understand the will of God. They had also sharpened their native intelligence. This resulted in their having much to share with others. These folks were known as wise men and wise women. They often spent time in the city or village gates, offering instruction and resolving differences between feuding friends and family members. Some of their instructions took the form of pithy sayings. The book of Proverbs is made up of such nuggets of wisdom.

But where do we turn if we wish to learn from the wise ones of our day? How will we recognize them? We have no city gates—where will we find the wise men and women of our time?

One place we can look is in the church school wing of our building here on Post Road. This morning we are honoring the women and men who teach there, and who work with our youth. They *have* devoted themselves to understanding the scriptures a bit better, so that they might know the will of God. And they have found ways to make practical the great truths of the faith. They are among the wise in our midst.

Indeed one of the wisest women I ever met was a church school teacher and administrator. Her name was Dorothy Herrick.

Dorothy was in her late eighties when I first met her. She had retired from teaching in the church school by then for health reasons, but she had been a member of the church school staff in River Edge for decades.

Up until she was about 92 and had to move into an assisted living facility several miles away, Dorothy was one of the regular participants in my Sunday morning Bible study. She also engaged in the regular study of scriptures on her own. She even owned a full set of commentaries by Scottish scholar William Barclay—owned them, and used them! And Dorothy was a woman of prayer. Every morning she set time aside to talk with God.

For all her wisdom, though, Dorothy never held herself out as a know-it-all. She subscribed to the truth captured in Pilgrim Pastor John Robinson's parting words to his congregation as many of them left Holland for the New World: "God," he told them, "still has more truth to break forth from the Word." Even as a very elderly woman, Dorothy continued to seek to know the will of God through the study of scripture and prayer at an age and time when folks less graced with wisdom might say "why bother?"

But Dorothy didn't stop at study. For she worked diligently to follow God's will in practical, everyday matters of life. She always reached out to her neighbors when they had need. If we were looking for someone to cook or bake for the homeless shelter, there was Dorothy. If the program we ran for developmentally challenged adults needed a special dish, there was Dorothy.

For many years during her long tenure Dorothy served as the Director of the Church School. There was a time when River Edge was predominantly Protestant, and during that time the Church School housed over 700 children. In an Annual Report from the early sixties Dorothy noted that it was staffed by "70 teachers and assistants, 5 departmental superintendents, 6 department secretaries, 2 main office secretaries, 2 financial secretaries, 6 pianists, 5 choir leaders . . . [and] numerous substitutes . . . ." Quite a staff! All ably led by Dorothy who indeed was blessed with divinely-guided common sense.

That same year Dorothy described a new printed curriculum being put to use in the Church School. She wrote: It is not material to be learned. It is a course to run, a task to do, a purpose to realize."

That, my friends, is wisdom in a nutshell. For wisdom is not material to be learned. It is a way of living. It is, indeed a course to run, a task to do, a purpose to be realized.

Monthly *our* Church School Director, Abby Peterson, gathers our Church School staff together for what she calls the Teachers' Circle. I wish all of you could be present some month to see them at work. They deal with very practical matters: who's going to arrange for acolytes, or decorate for a function. Who's scheduled to teach when. They talk about balance between outreach and worship and working with the curriculum. But they also talk about deeper issues, for they recognize, as did Dorothy, that it is not really about the printed curriculum. It is instead, about

**helping boys and girls come to know the God they can trust throughout their lives. That is wisdom.**

**My friend Dorothy Herrick closed one of her Annual Reports with these words: “Working together [we] form an arm of the Church which is striving, stumbling, picking itself up and going on in search for the true meaning of faith as it is found in Jesus’ way of life and in the witness of His followers through the ages. There is so much to be done . . . .”**

**Wise words, from a wise woman.**

**And what was true then, is true now. What was true there, is true here as well.**

**There is much to be done.**

**But we can thank God there are women and men of wisdom, like Abby and her team of teachers, to help us along the way. For we too strive, we too sometimes stumble. We can get sucked in and believe the slick television ads and glossy magazine pictures that tell us wealth or physical beauty will make us happy. But even though we may stumble and fall, there are those in our midst who come along and help us pick ourselves up. There are those who help us to keep going as we move along on the search for true meaning. Who help us find wisdom?**

**For the truth that we are loved by God is far more precious than gold. Far more precious indeed.**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**