

SITTING AT THE FEET OF YOUR OWN LIFE

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on August 15, 2021
based on I Kings 3:3-14*

Every year, Beloit College in Wisconsin prepares their faculty and staff for the incoming class of freshmen by reminding them of just what these kids have, and have not, lived through. Here are a few things that are shaping the class of 2025:

They have never licked a postage stamp.

- Color photos have always adorned the front page of The New York Times.
- Hybrid automobiles have always been available.
- Google has always been there.
- The Lion King has always been playing on Broadway.
- The only memory they have of 9/11 is from pictures and what others have told them
- They may have no idea of the context behind the following quotes ...
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- *Read my lips: no new taxes*
- *I am not a crook*
- *I did not have sexual relations with that woman*
- *Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy*

Of course, one should also ask, does it matter whether or not they know where those come from?

The poet, T.S. Eliot once wrote: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

Our subject today is wisdom. Do you have it? Do you know it when you hear it? Is it, maybe, something as rare as happiness or perfect pitch?

To be wise about wisdom we need to realize first that wisdom does and does *not* increase with age. A certain amount of reflection on one's experience is necessary for wisdom, but there are those who have had a lot of experience in this world and have not learned much at all from it.

I mean, we all know people who are sixty but instead of having sixty years of experience have had one year of experience sixty times.

Wisdom. At the end of the day, what is it? In Virginia Woolfe's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is this observation about the relation of age and wisdom:

The compensation of growing old, Peter Walsh thought, coming out of Regent's Park, and holding his hat in hand, was simply this: that the passions remain as strong as ever, but one had gained -- at last!-- the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round slowly, in the light.

Someone has said what all definitions of wisdom "have in common is the capacity and the willingness to step back from the immediacy of the moment – whether it is an affect, a judgment or a conflict – in order to attain perspective." (Michael Buehler in *Aging Well*, p. 251).

People who are Biblically literate will remember a story that comes early in the reign of Solomon. Two young women come to him carrying one baby. The one says that the other rolled over and smothered her baby in the night and then exchanged her dead child with the living one. The other mother denies it and says the opposite was true.

Solomon called for a sword to be brought. "Divide the baby in two," he said, "and give each a half." Then one mother says, "By no means, give it to her. The other says, "go ahead and divide it." Solomon says, "Give the baby to the first, for she is his real mother. And all Israel knew there was a wise king in Israel."

Solomon the *young* king certainly *seemed* wise, but in his old age Solomon proved to be as foolish as any king of Israel, as foolish as a famous King portrayed by William Shakespeare, King Lear. At age what?, 60?

Lear shows himself to be a self-indulgent fool and a man of very poor judgment. "Thou shouldst not have been old before thou hadst been wise," says Lear's young court fool. Perhaps Solomon was merely clever. Well, the text set for this morning claims Solomon was given wisdom from God.

In a story not unlike *Aladdin and The Magic Lamp*, Solomon is granted one wish, and so he asks God for wisdom and God says:

"Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the lives of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind."

So what makes wisdom more blessing than asking for long life, or money, or praying for the death of one's enemies?

Let's look at these three things up close. First, long life is great, but twenty extra years doesn't always add up to something better.

On his last evening alive Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to a church gathering in Memphis where he is remembered to have said, "I'd like to live a long time. Longevity has its place, but it doesn't matter with me now. I've been to the mountain top."

And #2: money. Money is a cushion against circumstances. It's, maybe, the comfort food of life. Yes, but large amounts of it tend to insulate the one who is flush with it from what is truly essential about life.

As has been noted, \$75,000 a year will buy you all the happiness money can. Anything more won't help you. In fact, anything over \$75k tends to detract from satisfaction.

Most people have not gotten that memo, however. There are even churches where it is preached that God wants everyone to be filthy rich.

#3: Asking for the death of ones enemies also insulates you. I was in the room once when someone asked Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, a man I would deem a wise man, this question. "Rabbi," this person said, "How can we best hear the voice of God?" Kushner took his time and then gave answer: "In the words of people you cannot stand."

The Dalai Lama of Tibet was once asked, "Who have been your most important spiritual teachers?" And without hesitation the Dalai Lama said, "The communist Chinese." The people who threw him out of Tibet and massacred thousands of his monks.

What the Dalai Lama was saying was, if you speak of universal love and don't take into account people who persecute you and those you love, you are just making noise. You're just being glib.

When Solomon asked for wisdom he literally asked for a "hearing heart." That is the literal Hebrew meaning. Think of that.

In the Biblical book of *Proverbs*, chapter 8, there is this verse --

Does not wisdom call; 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 of the portals she cries out: To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.

Where is it to be found, this wisdom? At the crossroads, portals, those transition places in our lives that give us rumbling stomachs and the fidgety legs.

These are the times when we are most susceptible to fits of . . . wisdom.

Cl'm speaking of times of crisis: remember the two Chinese characters that make up the word crisis? Danger and Opportunity.

Life is not easy for the faint of heart. Such people are tempted to give themselves up completely. So many people are tempted to look for “the perfect master,” someone to follow blindly.

Maybe it’s because I have lived in differing periods of my life in Marin County, California, and Ashland, Oregon. Half the people you meet on the street in those two places claim to be enlightened and the other half seem to be looking for some perfect master.

I have good friends who thought the Bhagwan Sri Rajneesh was the wisest man on earth. Remember him – the guru with 72 Rolls Royces who was featured on Netflix? He was certainly clever.

I don’t know. I don’t want to judge another’s religion. That wouldn’t be right; but the apostle Paul, for one, did **not** say: “Go find a new and wise teacher” – “No,” he said, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

Even Jesus did not claim to teach us all the world's wisdom:

"I still have many things to teach you," he said, "but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all the truth." John 16:12

Underlying this is a critical truth: Life is a school. Wisdom is hard won over considerable time.

Let me say a few words about someone I found to be fairly wise. The late, Ramm Dass who was born, Richard Allport. In the early 1960s he taught at Harvard alongside Timothy Leary in the Psychology department. They experimented with LSD.

When he was fired for that he traveled to India. He studied Eastern Religions, took mushrooms and was trying to find a way to be “high” all the time.

He would go home and his father would ask, “Have you got a job, yet?” Then he’d say to himself, “My parents bring me down, or, “Society brings me down,” or “Money brings me down.”

Finally one day something clicked inside him: “Maybe life is not a mistake; maybe it’s a school. If that's true, then why not take the curriculum?”

So here is my point. Everything that happens to us in life is our teacher. The secret seems to be to learn to sit at the feet of our life and be taught.

David Cooper has said: "In the end, everyone is your teacher, on one level or another. The child is our teacher, our friends our family, the stranger on the street.

Every experience is a challenge; a teaching is always hidden in it. Every thought that bubbles up in our minds can teach us things about ourselves -- if we are able to listen."

Last week I spent 4 days with my granddaughters – age 3 and 1. They are currently my most important teachers. Well, they teach me about the most important things. But one has to pay attention.

"Does not wisdom call; does not understanding raise her voice?"

Pema Chodron, the wonderful Buddhist teacher, has said something deeper than profound. She said, "Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know" (WHEN THINGS FALL APART).

So, let me ask you, what nagging thing in your life is your current professor? What essential thing about life are you on the verge of learning? What are you needing to know in your bones?

Years ago I officiated at the memorial service for my father-in-law. Then, just after midnight, my own mother died, somewhat unexpectedly, in Sacramento.

My learning curve for something was suddenly very steep. Yes, the lesson was about mortality, but I got a lesson in that pretty strongly when my father died years before that. So I thought, there must be more going on here.

I did the service for my mother on the next Thursday, and then on Friday morning I tuned in to National Public Radio and an interview was going on. The first words I heard were these: "When our parents die, we may think the relationship is over, but the fact is, it is just beginning."

BONG !

Things like that happen so often. Serendipity is everywhere. It's like the most palpable argument for God there is. It also is evidence that life is web-like. Everything is linked to everything else. Everything. There is no summer break in the school of living.

And you know, the relationship DOES go on. I remember how important my dreams became to me after my father's passing. He came to me so often in the night.

We'd had what I thought was a good relationship, but there was evidence in my dreams that the relationship needed tending. In time it became as comfortable as the fit of a favorite pair of gloves, but it took time.

Nearly the same thing happened with my mother. Our relationship was so complicated. She was a very troubled person.

But in a dream I had three years after her passing she became very vulnerable to me in a way she only did a couple of times in my life, and I was able to tell her I loved her. And I woke up feeling purged.

We may not always want to wrestle with our living. No one should all the time. It'd be too hard. Some people, however, would rather avoid it at all costs.

Nearly 100 years ago the great poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, exchanged a series of letters with a young poet who looked at this world and all its shortcomings and the inexorable reality of death and was tempted to believe there had been some mistake at creation. Among other things, the elder poet wrote him the following:

We are set down in life as in the element to which we best correspond, and over and above this we have through thousands of years of accommodation become so like this life, that when we hold still we are, through a happy mimicry, scarcely to be distinguished from all that surrounds us. We have no reason to mistrust our world, for it is not against us. It has its terrors, they are OUR terrors; it has its abysses, those abysses belong to us; there are dangers at hand, we must try to love them. And if only we arrange our life according to that principle which counsels us that we must always hold to the difficult, then that which now still seems to us the most alien will become what we most trust and find most faithful. (LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET)

For all of us, no matter our belief structure, life is our first teacher. It seems to me that the happiest and most fulfilled of us are those most able to allow themselves to sit at the feet of their own life.

There are a number of ways of doing this. Journaling is good. Having coffee with a good friend on a regular basis; you know, with someone who draws you out, can be a great help.

After my daughter was diagnosed with breast cancer this last April I set up a meditation table in my apartment. I'm not naturally very good at prayer, so this is a help to me. It's a terrific way to sit at the feet of your own life. On it I put a bunch of things: several pictures of my daughter, of course,

and her two daughters

and my dad

and a candle

and a rosary

a bit of poetry written in the script of a long dead friend of mine

a signed photo of Mister Rogers

.... and because I said earlier in this sermon that to hear the voice of God we should attend to the words of our enemies ... I put a handsome photo of ... Tucker Carlson on that table.

I apologize if he is a hero of yours, but if he is, let me tell you that I am trying to hear what he is saying, because I know that millions of people who are not so different from me adore him.

I have so much to learn. I take heart that, as Pema Chodrin said “Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know.”

Amen