

Wise Up!

Proverbs 9:16; 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

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Northminster Presbyterian Church

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Gosh, remember back when things were great?

Back, when, Oh, I don't know...when Reagan was President and it felt good to be an American again. Oh, of course there was that arms for hostages thing that probably led indirectly to two wars in Iraq and the creation of ISIS, but wasn't it great?

Or, wait, wasn't it amazing back when Eisenhower was President...we were a kinder, gentler nation back then weren't we? Oh of course, there was the cold war and the Jim Crow South and a few lynchings every couple of years...but wasn't it great?

Or, better yet, back in Roaring 20's? It was just one big party wasn't it? Oh, sure, Chicago's murder rate rose by 250% during the turf wars over Prohibition...but there was great architecture and the clothes and the music, right?

Why do we do this? Why do we look back and tend to see the past through rose colored glasses? Why do we so often look back in a way Barbra Streisand would describe most accurately as misty water color memories of the way we were? In a November 2012 issue of *Psychological Science*, researchers Benjamin Storm and Tara Jobe report that this tendency to remember things better than they were is a natural mechanism of maintaining mental health. They point out that many people want to have a reasonably positive self-image. To keep up that self-image, we focus on positive memories. In order to focus on positive memories, though, it is important to both retrieve positive memories AND tamp down negative memories.

Maybe that's why we get this story of Solomon today. The Biblical scholars tell us this part of the Bible was likely written hundreds of years after the fact by the Israelites who were held captive during the Babylonian Exile. These folks who ended up being betrayed by bad kings look back and they appear to see Solomon only as the Wise One. They even give us this great story that follows today's text...of the two women claiming one baby child...and Solomon's rather frightening way of resolving the dispute—offering to cut the baby in half...and the true mother is the one who offers to give up the child so that he can live. Isn't Solomon wise? He solved the mystery and saved the baby at the same time!

But where are the rose colored glasses in this story? How is this a misty water color memory? Well...you see a few chapters back...when Solomon, the chosen one, is faced with the reality of his father's death...he raises his sword not to cleave a baby in

two, but to kill his chief generals and his half-brother, the presumed heir, Adonijah. And you thought that Game of Thrones had political intrigue. No one wants to remember this part of the story...we'd rather talk about Solomon's humility before God and his request for Wisdom.

And I suppose, given our two texts today, that's what we need to talk about...wisdom...Solomon's wisdom and the Woman Wisdom figure from Proverbs who calls the people out of immaturity into her land of insight.

The dictionary tells us that wisdom has three possible meanings: a body of knowledge and principles within a society; the quality of having experience, knowledge and good judgement; and the soundness of an action when considered in light of experience, knowledge and good judgement. In other words, wisdom can be something that simply is, something we learn or something we do.

And with all due respect to Solomon...I think he sort of misses the boat on that last one. Oh, sure, when it comes to everyone else, perhaps he is a wise judge to decide disputes...but when it comes to his own life? Our story opens today with Solomon making burnt offerings in the High Places. Nothing wrong with that...except that it isn't a place for the worship of Yahweh...but the worship of the other Gods of the region...from the Egyptians to the Edomites. It's the beginning of a trend that will ultimately destroy the united kingdom of Israel...Solomon marries many, many women...from many, many tribes, nations and power centers...and to keep the peace, he worships with each of them...he makes offerings to each of the Gods...and he ultimately wipes out the one thing that unites this tiny nation of peoples on the Mediterranean Sea...their loyalty to Yahweh. When he dies...the kingdom totters, splits in two and is never the same again.

Maybe then, those folks over in Babylon a couple of dozen generations later aren't so rose-colored after all...Maybe they want us to see that Solomon's discerning mind as the NRSV puts it, isn't very helpful if it's not wisdom in action. Maybe just being the smartest or the one who best interprets the wisdom of a particular time isn't the most important thing...maybe it's that third definition...living out the wisdom we have learned in the decisions we make and the choices we make.

Maybe it's not about being right...so much as it is living justly, living lovingly, living graciously. As the famed Episcopal writer Barbara Brown Taylor once put it, winning a theological argument has never fed a hungry child.

But...we're Presbyterians...we are people of the mind...isn't figuring things out...being right...a big part of who we are?

Surely learning is a big part of our tradition...but what we do with that learning becomes much more important. Howard Lutnick can appreciate how important it is to not simply gain wisdom...but to live it...to let it transform who we are and what we do.

When Howard was 17, his mother, an artist, died of cancer...the next year he went away to college, to a little school called Haverford College, in a suburb of Philadelphia. Two weeks into his freshman year, he received a call...his father, unbeknownst to him, was suffering from colon cancer and had been given an accidental overdose of chemotherapy medicine...and had died suddenly.

The next morning, as he gathered with his siblings, they were all not only grieving but also adrift...what could the future hold? That morning he got a phone call from the president of Haverford College...Howard...your four years are free...

When Howard returned to Haverford a week later to continue classes, the college, a source of communal wisdom and love for him—a new family of sorts...not only giving him a free education, but a sense of community...as he put it, “they taught me how to be a human being”...After college, Howard went to work for Cantor Fitzgerald, the investment banking firm...

Over the years, he helped support a scholarship program at his alma mater...he thought that was the way he was called to use the wisdom he had gained...He had gained a rather cut-throat reputation in the Bond world at Cantor...and that skill helped him become president there by 2000...and then 9/11 happened.

Cantor Fitzgerald had their offices in the World Trade Center...he wasn't in the office that morning, because it was his son Kyle's first day of kindergarten...that horrible morning more than 2/3 of Cantor Fitzgerald's employees, everyone who was already in their offices when the first plane hit, died...

And it was on that day that Howard discovered his deepest calling...the place where the wisdom he had gained and the needs of those he cared about came together...where once he had found the gift of family and love in the midst of terrible loss as a young man...now he had the wisdom and the compassion necessary to do the same for hundreds of families...

After an early stumble in halting paychecks for those who had died, he put a plan in place...for the next ten years, one-fourth of the pretax profits of Cantor Fitzgerald went out the door in checks to the families of those lost that day—to date over 180 million dollars...and once a year, the entire company of Cantor Fitzgerald (and many other companies who have joined in through the years) donate their September 11th salaries and spend the day recruiting donations from their clients...To date that effort has raised over 113 million dollars for different charities he encourages employees to find and recommend.

And since 9/11, Howard and his family have reconsidered his commitment to the place that taught him to be a human being...that gave him wisdom...and their donations to Haverford College since 9/11 have exceeded \$65 million...

It didn't have to be this way...we all know the stories of investment bankers who have lost themselves in that jungle of power and wealth...

But even though Cantor Fitzgerald still plays the game, Howard's company doesn't work that way and neither does he...After Hurricane Sandy devastated communities across New York City, Cantor set up a relief fund in the tens of millions of dollars and adopted 19 of the hardest hit schools and their families, distributing emergency funds to 10,000 families.

Is he perfect? Heck no. They are still playing a game where money too often takes precedence over humanity. But has Howard Lutnick allowed the wisdom he has gained to shape his life and his actions? It sure looks that way.

So what does that mean for us...since most of us aren't billionaire investment bankers? What if Solomon's cautionary tale and Lutnick's life are invitations to us to seek the wisdom of our tradition...to seek to learn more about God's movement in the world, to listen for the guidance of the Spirit in our experiences and in those we encounter...to grow in our understanding of God's grace, God's love, God's merciful justice...and not simply learn it...but live it...using the gifts, the talents and the resources at our command with listening hearts...creating memories that are not misty watered colored half-truths...but a legacy of joy, of hope and of love. May God make it so through us. Amen.