

**Preaching Series – “The Serenity Prayer” - Part 4: “The Wisdom to Know the Difference”**  
**Proverbs 14:8, 16-17, 33; James 1:5-6**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent: March 26, 2017**  
**A Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden      Copyright: 2017, I. Peden**  
**LUMC, Lewisville, NC**

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“But if any of you lacks wisdom,” the writer of the Letter of James says, “she should pray to God, who will give it to her.” (James 1:5)

My mother and stepfather raised six children and I have to tell you, it wasn’t always easy. One of my stepbrothers struggled in his teenage years with alcohol and drugs. In those early days there was often a lot of tension and anxiety in our home. Some days, I don’t know how my parents made it through. I remember my mom talking with me one time about raising us kids and saying, “The hardest job in the world is being a parent and it’s the one job that no one ever prepares you for. Children don’t come with a training manual attached to them. You’re expected to make all the right decisions regarding your children, and most of us are young and inexperienced when our kids are born. What do we know? Yet you do your best and hope things turn out okay.”

I remember my mom saying those things as if it was yesterday, and I believe I have said those self-same words myself. “So, how did you do it?” I asked my mother. “What kept you going when things looked pretty hopeless?” “I prayed,” she said. “It was all I could do some days. I prayed for wisdom and patience and that God would be with each one of you wherever you were and whatever you did.” And pray she did! Every night we saw her kneel beside her bed in prayer. She admitted her need for wisdom and followed the apostle’s instruction to pray for wisdom. And for the most part her prayers must have been answered because five out of six kids turned into responsible, productive adults. One may still be without a fixed abode in South Africa. We are not sure exactly where he is! Pray for him.

“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...” Trevor Hudson writes in chapter 4 of his book, *The Serenity Prayer* that we can all think of situations in our lives when we struggle with a need to either accept or change something. Having to decide in such matters can often rob us of our serenity and peace in life. It is not always easy to find the best way forward.

So we need wisdom.

My mother was one of the wisest people I've ever known, and one of the most patient. She knew *The Serenity Prayer* and learned how to apply it to her daily life. It sure seemed to work for her. Here at LUMC, Susan Ewing and I are in week four of our preaching series on "The Serenity Prayer." We've spoken about serenity, acceptance, and courage. Today you can hear that I am talking about wisdom. As I have discovered in my preparation, wisdom is not an easy concept to define. A disciple once asked his teacher, "O holy one, what is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?" And the teacher answered, "When you have knowledge, you use a flashlight to show the way. When you have wisdom, you become the flashlight." Does that help define wisdom? Somewhat!

The first thing to say about wisdom is that **it is more than knowledge**; it is more than common sense; and more than the ability to solve problems. Knowledge has to do with facts, wisdom has to do with the way we apply our knowledge, the way we use those facts. Wisdom requires us to be present in the moment, and attentive to the world around us. That is the first thing I hope you take away with you from this sermon today.

Second, and just as important, **wisdom requires patience** ...patience with ourselves and with others. That's a difficult one, isn't it? When we can't do what we used to do because we have certain limitations, when the people around us are making foolish choices and we know their lives could be better if they only took a moment to stop and think, when the world around us seems to be imploding, wisdom sometimes requires us to step back, take a deep breath, and wait. The apostle Paul lists patience with other qualities in Galatians 5:22 and calls them the "fruit of the Spirit." We are thankful that we don't have to work at patience in our own strength but have an ally in the Holy Spirit who produces patience in us.

Trevor Hudson reminds us that the wisdom we so desperately need, that includes patience, cannot be bought, or earned, or invented. It is given by God and must be asked for. But Hudson is quick to remind us that besides asking God for wisdom, there are also some things that we need to do. "And when we support our prayer request with these practical measures, we will find that God does begin to show us the way and bless us with wisdom." So what are "these practical measures" that Hudson suggests? What do we do after asking God for wisdom? From my reading and preparation for this sermon I have discerned at least these four

practical steps that we may take after we first pray for wisdom.

Hudson describes how our fellow Christians, called Quakers, first *consult the Bible* to check whether or not the matter one is dealing with is settled by the clear teaching of God's Word. After all, the psalmist reminds us that God's word is "a lamp to our feet and a light to our path." (Ps. 119:105). It is there to provide us with both information and inspiration as a means of God's grace and a guiding light in times of darkness and doubt, dilemma and despair. That is why, my friends, it is essential that we use every opportunity to study and get to know God's Word as fully as possible.

Growing in knowledge of God's Word is the first step we take after praying for wisdom to know what we can change and what we cannot change in our lives. John Wesley emphasized this. Wesley described Methodists as "people of the Book," saying that it contained everything necessary for our salvation. So, first, after we have asked God for wisdom, we go to the Bible.

Second, Hudson says we *listen to our thoughts and feelings*. We need to be attentive to what God will say to us inwardly ...through God's "still small voice" we will hear in those receptive places of our lives, our spirits, our souls where we make space and time for God to speak. Unless we listen carefully to what is happening within our lives we can so easily miss the whisperings of the Spirit. If we don't hear anything quickly, we don't give up and we don't get alarmed. Hudson says: "We simply repeat our need for wisdom, continue with what we have to do, and confidently get on with our lives." But we continue to listen to our thoughts and feelings, waiting patiently for some inner prompting from God.

Third, we would also do well during this listening phase to *discuss our whole situation with trusted friends*. We all need companions on the Christian journey. It was never intended to be a solitary walk with the Lord. Sometimes our friends bring a perspective to our situation that we have never considered. At other times what they say may confirm the way we have already been thinking.

The fourth practical step we take is to *think imaginatively about making a decision*. We should never forget that God has given us the gift of imagination and expects us to use it along with common sense. For example, if we are facing a dilemma about the kind of situation we find ourselves in, we imagine ourselves continuing to live in the situation just as it is ...not trying to change it ...and then, holding that picture in our mind for a few moments, we ask:

“How does it make me feel to stay in this situation just as it is?”

Next, we create an imaginary picture of ourselves if we decided the other way. In this case, we are trying to change the situation in some way. We imagine ourselves doing our best to make some sort of difference. We concentrate on that picture for a few minutes and then ask ourselves: “How does this make me feel? Do I feel at peace, or am I anxious, unsettled, and uneasy?” The Quakers believed that we would experience a deeper peace resting on the decision that God would want us to make. We would feel a quiet steady peace or serenity. Hudson says the Quakers believed that this inner assurance would be God’s way of guiding us, even if it was the more difficult and painful path. We are reminded today that our God is a God of peace and that God will always lead us in peace.

Hudson concludes his chapter saying: “When we follow the choice on which [God’s] deep peace rests, we will find the way that God wants us to go.” So, all that remains now is for us to make a decision with trust and conviction that it is God’s way, but always staying humble and open to correction. No one is infallible. Even the greatest saints in history would admit that at times they have been proved wrong. So we are careful about saying things like ‘God told me’ or ‘I know it is God’s will.’ It is better to accept personal responsibility and to leave open the possibility that we may be wrong.”

I find this helpful, don’t you? These are constructive and creative ways to start thinking again about practical wisdom for everyday living as Christian people. Wisdom isn’t something we are born with. It isn’t something that is always a part of us. We can make some pretty foolish mistakes at any time in our lives. But the wisdom that we use when we follow the steps outlined in Hudson’s fourth chapter is a gift from God, a gift that we ask for when we really need it. The gift of wisdom is available to each one of us. The gift of wisdom can become more real to us as we grow deeper in our relationship with God. As we do that, as we grow in our relationship with God, we come to know more completely what it is that God expects of us and how it is that God wants us to live in community with others.

Remember our text: “But if any of us lacks wisdom,” James writes, “we should pray to God, who will give it to us.” Sounds like a promise to me. If we will believe that, I think we’ll find that wisdom is not very far away.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.