

“Being Smart vs. Being Wise”
Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-19
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
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“Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today, I want to talk to you about wisdom. Wisdom is a gift that we all need in our lives. It is the ability to make sound decisions based on knowledge and experience...In our world today, we are bombarded with information from all sides. We have access to more knowledge than ever before, but we are still struggling to make good decisions. The problem is that we often rely on our own understanding instead of seeking wisdom from God. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” This verse reminds us that we need to trust in God and seek His wisdom in everything we do.

So how do we seek wisdom? First, we need to pray. We need to ask God to give us wisdom and discernment. We need to ask Him to show us His ways and His will for our lives. Second, we need to read the Bible. The Bible is full of wisdom and guidance for our lives. We need to study it and apply its teachings to our daily lives. Finally, we need to surround ourselves with wise people. Proverbs 13:20 says, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” We need to seek out mentors and friends who can offer us sound advice and help us grow in wisdom.

In our world today, there are many voices that are competing for our attention. We are bombarded with messages from social media, news outlets, and advertisers. It can be difficult to discern what is true and what is not. But when we seek wisdom from God, we can be confident that we are on the right path.”

Ok, *pause*.

Would you believe me if I told you that the beginning of the sermon you just heard me preach was written by Artificial Intelligence?

Well, it was! For those of you whose ears pricked up a little bit and who thought something sounded a little “off” from my normal preaching style, good job! You noted that something was different!

Recent news has been captivated by the advent of a new kind of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, one version of which is called ChatGPT. Released by the company Open AI this past November, Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer is governed by neural networks, which is “systems that are similar to the human brain in the way they learn and process information. They enable AIs to learn from experience, as a person would. This is called deep learning.”² If that was about as clear as mud to you, after reading a good amount of articles about AI, here’s how I

would describe it: artificial intelligence has access to all the information on the internet, and when assigned a task, it combs through all the information it can access to find the most frequently-sourced articles. Then it generates the input information to fit a form appropriate for the assignment.

Humans interact with this technology via text. For example, this week I logged into chatgpt.openai.com and typed in this task: “write a 500-word sermon on wisdom.” And in a matter of seconds, I had before me 500 words in a standard, 3-point sermon format, about wisdom as drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Testament texts. (Don’t worry, this is the only time I am going to use this technology for a sermon!)

The sermon that AI wrote sounds...fine. There’s a use of Scripture texts, a reference to the status quo in our modern society, an ethical exhortation. But there’s also something missing. To me, this AI-generated sermon is almost clinical in format and affect. It definitely doesn’t sound like my normal preaching, right?

Not to toot my own horn, but I think this sermon is lacking in pastoral wisdom! The program ChatGPT that created this sermon from a request I typed in a chat box certainly is smart--intelligent, even. But the program ChatGPT is not wise.

Being smart is different from being wise.

For our Scripture today, we turn to the book most often called the Wisdom of Solomon. If you have never heard of this before, you are probably not alone, as for most Protestants, this book of 19 chapters that is included among the apocryphal texts. Some Bibles come with apocrypha, the books that are not included in the canon of collected works we call the Bible. Apocryphal books are writings that have uncertain origin or authorship. That means we don’t know a whole lot about where they come from, but scholars have tried to figure it out as best they can!

Though it is titled The Wisdom of Solomon, this book was almost definitely not written by Solomon. Instead, it was most likely written by someone living in a Jewish community in Alexandria in Hellenistic Egypt, surrounded by Greek influence and Greek society, sometime between the 1st century BCE-1st century CE. So why did ancient thinkers attribute this work to Solomon? In part, because the overarching topic of the writings is wisdom, and Solomon was known for being a wise and discerning ruler, valuing wisdom more highly than wealth, as wisdom was the path to God.

Let’s hear our Scripture from Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 6, as translated by Rev. Dr. Wilda C. Gafney in the Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year A:

Luminous and unfading is Wisdom,
And easily discerned by those who love her,
And found by those who seek her.
She anticipates those who desire her,
To make herself known in advance.
The one who rises early to seek her will not grow weary,

And will find her sitting at the gate.
For to fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding,
And the one who remains awake on her account will soon be secure.
Those worthy of her she seeks, traveling about,
And in their paths she appears to them, graciously,
And, in every thought she meets them.
For her beginning is the true desire for instruction,
And concern for instruction is love of her.
Now love of her is keeping her teachings,
And attention to her teachings is assurance of immortality.
And immortality brings one near to God.

Wisdom as portrayed in this text has her own characteristics and personality, but instead of being personified as a cosmic being co-existing with God, as we read in Proverbs 8, Wisdom here is a way of becoming close with the Holy.

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary on this passage notes that Wisdom is not passive. Wisdom is not only for the seeker to pursue, but Wisdom is also seeking us, even waiting for us outside our own gate! Humanity does not gain Wisdom by achieving advanced degrees or a certain amount of life experience or following a prescribed way of discipline...we do not have to expend great energy or time or resources to find Wisdom, but we must *truly* desire to learn. There is a humility to Wisdom as portrayed in this passage; she is not high and mighty, lording over and above humanity, requiring great feats of intellect or contests of strength in order to reach her. A curiosity, a humility, a graciousness, a deep desire for becoming close to God and following the Way of God...these are qualities Wisdom is drawn to.

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary says, "Wisdom is the manner in which God has created the world and fashioned the human heart. Wisdom is the manner in which God continuously intervenes in history both to save the just and to thwart the designs of injustice."¹

In our Thursday Zoom Bible Study, after we all seemed to agree that being wise is different from being smart, one participant posed the question: which is better?

Returning to the original illustration of this sermon, artificial intelligence is surely very smart and useful! And we encounter it every day! We encounter AI when we use Google Maps to find our way across the city, and when we report a pothole or an obstacle in the road on our path. If you have facial recognition on your phone, or if you drive a car with an autonomous system like a Tesla, or if you use a voice assistant to mark calendar events, set alarms, take notes or draft text messages—you are using AI! One of my favorite ways to use AI is to identify plants and birds when I'm out on a walk or hike; the program I have downloaded to my cell phone takes a picture of what I am seeing, uses GPS to tell where I am and compares my photo to other photos taken in the area and to an encyclopedic database of local plants and animals...and then it suggests several possibilities for what I am seeing. In less than a second, the tiny computer brain in my

phone that is connected with the worldwide web, knows where exactly I am and has a pretty good idea of what bird I can cross off my birding list!

Of course, used for capitalistic goals of consumption and profit, we usually encounter AI in the algorithm that advertises certain products to us on Amazon based on our recent purchases, or that shows us certain posts on Facebook or Twitter that are statistically likely to match our pre-determined beliefs.

My intention with talking about AI is not to disparage technology or to scare you about an impending robot takeover like in the Transformer movies. Technology in the 21st century is incredible—just think of the medical technology that brought us the COVID-19 vaccine, the astronomical wonder that is the NASA’s James Webb Space Telescope, and the many green technologies that utilize renewable energy resources instead of fossil fuels. Technology today regularly saves lives, communicates beauty and art, and keeps us in contact with our loved ones across the world!

But not everything that is smart is wise. And sometimes it is hard to tell the difference.

So, which is better? Is it better to be smart? Knowledgeable, possessing a great mind? Or is it better to be wise, to have some unity of brain smarts plus emotional intellect? Who decides which is better? Or should we hope to possess both smarts and wisdom?

That poignant question moved our Bible Study into a conversation about different kinds of intelligences, and how there are different ways of knowing things that serve different purposes.

Muriel advised, “It is possible to have all the degrees and not have a lick of common sense!” And that’s true, right? It is also possible to have not had access to formal education and be a poet, an artist, a farmer, a good friend, a loving neighbor, a scholar.

Different kinds of intelligences are key—and recognizing the various gifts each of us has can lead us into being a community with great collective wisdom.

For example, there is an abundance of knowledge in this church—we have among us, in this very gathering, mathematicians and lawyers and biologists and civil engineers and managers of large companies! And we also have among us musicians, artists, writers. We have here people with expertise in working with children, teachers, naturalists, ministers. And beyond the formal roles our society assigns to us for our labor, we have people who are friends, parents, grandparents, children, someone we can trust, someone whose ideas we take seriously, someone whose life experience teaches others, someone who has learned what belonging is. There are so many ways to be wise, dear ones. Wisdom of advanced age, wisdom of young age. Wisdom of experience, wisdom of humility. Wisdom of loving others. Wisdom of allowing yourself to be loved.

A question for us today is what kind of wisdom are we invested in? Do we mostly think about book smarts, about elite degrees, about high achievement and high-paying jobs? Or do we accord wisdom to lived experience, to the hardships that have been faced and the humanity that continues through the challenges? Do we accept wisdom when it comes from “the usual suspects,” the writers and artists and thinkers we admire? Do we receive the wisdom that

surprises us, from a person trying to make a living on the subway, from the child playing in our midst, from the elder who speaks through the fog of dementia?

According to our Zoom Bible Study conversation, which you are all invited to participate any Thursday over lunchtime, these are some ways that we can seek wisdom:

Listen to the lessons of the past.

Lean into community.

Don't think you know everything worth knowing.

Seek out voices who are different from you.

Pay attention to your life, and notice who you interact with on a daily basis.

If someone has a differing opinion, be curious about what leads them to that conclusion.

Recognize our own limitations and how they affect us.

When what is needed is to change our behavior, don't be afraid to change.

Admit when we are wrong. Admit when we have questions.

Allow yourself to be surprised by wisdom.

SFBC, we have wisdom gathered here in this space—in the people who are in our community today, as well as in the rich legacy bestowed on us by the past. The wisdom of Harold Jensen, Gus Hintz, Rod Romney, and other ministers who have gone before continues on in these walls and places we gather. And the wisdom of loved ones like Sue Tollefson, Gordon and Roxana Harper, Justice Charles Z. Smith, Mark Jensen, and so, so many others continues here as well—in you, who have known and loved them, who have been changed by their spirits as they encourage us still to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with the Holy. Take a moment to call out the name aloud of a wise one who has impacted your life in this community.

(pause)

Beloved church, Wisdom is not only waiting for us to seek her out, but she is also seeking us. Perhaps she will reach us through our studies, our professional lives, or our daily reading of the newspaper. Or she may reach us through the laughter of a loved one, the surprising story of a neighbor, or a garden in blossom that we pass every day. Wisdom is waiting for us just outside our own gate, at the entry to our lives. It would be almost impossible *not* to encounter Wisdom as we live each day in this complex world.

Pay attention, beloveds. Wisdom calls us to paths of justice, love, mercy and humility.

May we receive and return that call.

Amen.