

We Need More Wisdom
October 2, 2016
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

A few years back there was a commercial on TV that showed the good life. Do you remember this one?

“I’m Stanley Johnson. I’ve got a great family. I’ve got a four bedroom house in a great community. Like my car? It’s new. I even belong to the local golf club. How do I do it? I’m in debt up to my eyeballs. I can barely pay my finance charges. Somebody help me.”

Well, perhaps it wasn’t really the good life. In fact, it was a life fraught with anxiety.

Back in 1999, I decided, after renting for 5 years, that I was going to once again become a homeowner. I found a townhome just in the early stages of being built and I started the process of buying. I went through the procedure of being pre-approved for a mortgage. Imagine my surprise when they said I was pre-approved for a little over a quarter of a million dollars! There was no way in the world, on my salary, that I could have afforded the monthly payments. Yet, they would have done that. Of course, this was 1999 – in the middle of the growing housing bubble that came to crisis in 2008.

How do these things happen? When we listen to the “wisdom” of the world, we sometimes end up looking through a distorted lens. The world tells us we need more, newer, better stuff. There is an old saying, “The one who dies with the most toys *wins*.”

When we think of people in history who were known to be wise, we can’t discount King Solomon. As a young man coming to the throne, God asked what he could give to Solomon. As a kid, I always thought this story sounded a lot like the genie coming out of a lamp and offering three wishes, but God offers Solomon just one thing. He could have asked for untold wealth or for success on the battle field. Instead, he asked for something that would make him a better ruler of the people. We have been told by some that he asked for wisdom. Some translations say he asked for a discerning heart. The adjective in 1 Kings is the Hebrew word *shomeya*, which is the same root as *shema*, which means ‘to hear’ or ‘to listen.’ In asking for a listening heart in order to fully hear his people and what is happening, he is asking for a type of wisdom that allows him to slow down and not to merely jump at the first thing that is offered.

Last week, I talked about my place on the Global Rich List, and I know some of you went home and figured out where you fall on that list. There are people in our country and in many parts of the world who live on \$2 a day or less. Most of us are not in that

situation. Starbucks has become quite the phenomenon in our country. Many people hit the drive-through every day on their way to work. A medium size or grande skinny vanilla latte costs \$4.36. If someone does this five days a week, in a year's time they spend \$1,133.60. There is nothing wrong with buying coffee on the way to work. It is just that sometimes we do not realize exactly what we are doing and what the implications are.

John Wesley's father was a parish priest and the family was quite poor. Wesley chose the route of being an academic rather than working in the local parish and was a fellow at Lincoln College, Oxford. For this, he was given a stipend of 30 pounds per year – enough for a single man to live on reasonably. At Oxford, Wesley enjoyed playing cards, drinking brandy, and tobacco. One of the perks of living at Lincoln College was that the students were provided with maid service for their apartments. On one occasion, Wesley's maid came wearing a threadbare coat and he asked her why she was not wearing something heavier. She explained that this was all she could afford. He reached into his pocket to give her money for a better coat and realized that he had spent the last of his stipend on the pictures adorning his wall. He is reported to have asked himself, "Will thy Master say, 'Well done, good and faithful steward?' Thou hast adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold! O justice! O mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?" The next year, John limited his expenses and found he could live on 28 pounds and he gave the other 2 pounds away. The next year his income doubled, but he still lived on 28 pounds, giving away 32 pounds. The next year, his income jumped to 90 pounds, but he still lived on 28 pounds giving the rest away.

I'm not suggesting that everyone ought to take John Wesley's austerity measures. I am, however, proposing that all of us might be more mindful of the ways in which we use our wealth. In this case, I preach, first and foremost, to myself. I realize that it is very easy for me to spend on things I may want, but don't need. Again, I'm not saying that people should take a vow of poverty.

Some years ago, I heard a Catholic priest give the best two-part definition of justice that I have ever heard. He described justice as 'us having enough.' He said we are pretty good with that part. The second part is tougher. It is, 'but not so much that others do not have what they need.' We are so ingrained with society's push for us to attain more and more that we do not see other people around us. Again, justice is us having enough, but not so much that others do not have what they need.

There are people in the world who truly do not have enough. We are probably not among them. The book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon, though he most likely did

not personally write it. There are several sayings in there that talk about money. For example:

- How fortunate are those who discover Lady Wisdom and those who understand her ways! For her worth is greater than the most expensive prize you could win. (Prov 3:13-14)
- It is better to live with less and honor the Eternal than to have riches and carry the burdens that come with them. (Prov 15:16)
- How much better it is to receive wisdom than the riches of gold and to gain understanding over some silver prize! (Prov 16:16)

Our faith is important to us, as it was to the disciples. They had been following Jesus from town to town and listened to his teaching. Clearly, they must have realized they were coming up a bit short in the faith department because they asked Jesus to give them more faith. It almost sounds as though Jesus is reprimanding them here. That is not the case in the original Greek. The meaning would be clearer for us if it read, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, *and you do*, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea.’” Even the amount of faith the disciples had cancels out words like ‘impossible’ – a tree being uprooted, and ‘absurd’ – a tree being planted in the sea. In other words, they and we already have faith enough to transform the world. That’s our job as the church.

Sometimes we live in a world of “I can’t” or a world of “it’s too hard.” The wisdom we receive from both the gospel and epistle readings for this day is that we can do more than we think we can. Today, we gather around this table with Christians all over the world. Together, we can do great things. Stewardship is not about funding a budget, it is about living faithfully. The writer of 2 Timothy reminds us that when we fall into “I can’t” and “it’s too hard,” we need to rekindle the gift of God that is within each of us. We can do far more than fund a budget, because again, as our epistle lesson said, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

In times like these, it is important to sincerely look at ourselves and our way of living. We need to take stock of the things we want as opposed to the things we need. Finally, we need to give ourselves permission to think big as we look at this work of transformation and building up of the kingdom of God. I have only been with you a short time, but I know that there is nothing we cannot do if we decide it is both what we want to do and is God’s will for us.