

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC**      **August 4, 2019**  
**18th Sunday of Year C**      **Ecc. 1:2, 2:21-23**

What is the value we place on wisdom" in today's world? I would suggest that it's not very much! Even the language we use—wiseacre, wisenheimer, wise-guy—seems to imply that wisdom is more often seen in its counterfeits than in its authentic expressions. Higher education with its de-emphasis on the study of the liberal arts seems to be saying that a more technical training, directed towards the acquisition of specific skills, with the aim of making the graduate more marketable in the business world, should be the hallmark of a college degree. And when we look to ourselves, what are the qualities that would seem to enhance our own sense of self-esteem? More often than not it is that we feel we should be successful, or attractive, or well-qualified for a job, or friendly, or perhaps even concerned about the welfare of others, but does it really matter that I be wise? Do we presume that wisdom is something that comes naturally with the accumulation of years, or is wisdom something to be cultivated by being attentive to the choices we make? For a few minutes let's pause to see what role wisdom can play in our everyday lives; how it can pull together the varied experiences of life, which without some sense of coherence and purpose, will always run the risk of being fragmentary and disconnected, with the consequence that our lives will feel out of joint and somewhat aimless.

What is wisdom? Some might suggest that wisdom is having "the answer" to the big questions about life. But I think it is just the opposite, that there is no one big answer, but only a variety of smaller answers or responses, each appropriate to a particular situation. In the third chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes, from which was today's first reading is taken, we find the words made popular by the rock group, the Byrds, back in the 60s.

"There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every purpose under heaven.

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and to uproot the plant.

A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down, and a time to build.

A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance.

A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them; a time to embrace, a time to refrain from embracing.

A time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away.

A time to rend and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak."

The wise person is he or she who knows when it is the right time to do this and

when it is the right time to do that. In the passage I just read what is significant is the juxtaposition of opposites—"a time to seek and a time to lose....a time to mend and a time to sew, etc. At the critical moment of having to make a decision, a person may be faced with two very valid, but very different, even opposing, options. The wise man or woman is he or she who responds appropriately and differently to situations with a response that is measured to the demands of the specific moment, who knows when to "zip" and when to "zap." The wise person does not meet the challenges of life with the same habitual, predictable, supposedly tried-and-true pattern of responses.

That is reflected in the proverbs that we have in our own language to express the accumulated wisdom of the ages. For example, we have a saying, "Look before you leap," which counsels deliberation before acting and then we have, "He who hesitates is lost," which advises the opposite, that quick decision-making will lead to a successful outcome. There are many other sets of familiar proverbs that seem to advise opposite courses of action. So, what does one do? Well that depends; it depends upon what the situation itself requires; it depends upon what I am capable of doing; it depends upon what effect my actions will have upon others. There are no pre-packaged solutions to life's quandaries that can be applied irrespective of specific situations. Rather, life has to be lived improvisationally, with a heart and mind alert to demands of the moment. So, the person who is not wise, the one whom the Scriptures calls the "fool," is he or she thinks they have it all figured out, who goes through life willy-nilly, their mind set on "automatic pilot," responding to what life throws at him or her always in the same predictable way.

We all have something of the "fool" within us, because to one degree or another we have all developed some specific pattern of dealing with life that seems to work well for us, that, by relying upon certain of our talents and abilities, seems to get us through life rather well most of the time. But, I would suggest, we overextend ourselves; we lead with our strong suit too often; we use those abilities that work well for us most of the time and that give us a measure of success and security, but employ them in situations for which those talents may be inappropriate, may even be dead-wrong. For example, I may tend to rely upon my head, my intellect, at a time when really it is the resources of my heart, a sense of feeling and compassion, that may be called for in this situation, and vice versa. An assertive, confrontational attitude may be successful in the office, but it won't work at home. Oppositely, if I allow my feelings to dictate my course of action, and refrain from just sitting back to take a cool, calm look at what's going on, I may be courting disaster. A "wise" parent deals with different children differently. Children with different personalities require different approaches to their upbringing.

An over-reliance on an attitude or way of response that seems to yield successful results most of time will eventually reveal its limitations in being able to deal effectively with life's challenges all of the time. In fact, the very thing that we see ourselves as best at, our own most prized quality, talent or ability, can be the very thing that does us in, that leads to the unraveling of our private universe, if we rely exclusively upon those supposed strengths, at the expense of other unrecognized and undeveloped abilities we possess. What we like to think of as our preferred way of engaging life, of meeting its challenges head-on, is actually only a single way of coping with life that we've developed very early on, and, because it seems to work for us most of time, we've stuck with it. Wisdom invites us to widen our repertoire of responses.

Let us pray for that "wisdom of heart" that is mentioned in the today's Psalm response, that we might be able to use the intelligence and the good sense God has given us to meet all of life's challenges in a manner appropriate to the occasion, and not relying simply upon the same outworn and rigid patterns of behavior that in the end blind us to us all the opportunities for growth that God continues to offer us.