

Thanks to all the folks who provided our religious education, there's probably nobody here who can't recite the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary or Glory Be from memory without a moment's hesitation. For some of us, that's where it ends, but the readings invite us to appropriate the deepest wisdom of our faith, literally to feed upon it, and in doing so, to come to realize the fulness of the promises of God, both for ourselves and for those with whom we live.

The first steps in acquiring wisdom of any kind, secular or religious, are to receive it, then to understand it, then to make it your own and then to share it by the way we live. Wisdom is found both in Scripture and the Eucharist. Each in its own way provides us with wisdom, the one through words and the other through the direct experience of a life of love lived jointly with God; a life lived in awareness of the real presence of God.

Appropriating God's wisdom – making it our own, making it the foundation of who we are and how we behave, requires deliberate effort. I'd suggest to you that there's nothing like memorization to make wisdom part of who we are and how we operate. I remember vividly the first time I read the words of our second reading. They struck me as being so wise and so powerful that I simply had to make it part of who I was and how I operated. So I memorized it. Here's the whole thing, acapella, from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians: [recite it].

It's part of me now, and it has come in handy for me and some of my friends who've decided they wanted to memorize it too. Let me tell you a little story. I was chatting with my friend Ernie, who has those two teenagers I've mentioned to you in the past. He came home from a particularly tough situation at work one day, where he'd had to discipline a couple of people on his staff who were going after each other's throats. Little did he know he was going to encounter the same thing at the dinner table.

As his wife served dinner, his daughter, Alice, lit into one of her classmates.

“Do you know what Rachel did today?” she asked her dad through glowering eyes.

“It wasn't on the news as I drove home,” Ernie said, “why don't you tell me.”

I am going to paraphrase Alice's response since some of her language wasn't particularly edifying.

"That miserable excuse for a human being is telling people that I stole her boyfriend and made him hate her. It's not true! People like that shouldn't even exist. What a waste of food and air! He dumped her because she acts like a test pilot in a broom factory, that's what!! He's as dumb as three rocks at the bottom of the sea, but at least he could figure that out!!!"

Ernie, having survived a very similar situation just hours earlier, looked at Alice with calm empathy and remarked: "You seem upset."

"Upset?! You bet I'm upset," Alice roared. "I am personally going to kill that disgusting..."

Ernie interrupted her as his wife grasped Alice's arm, since you don't want to be waving an arm that's holding a steak knife.

"Alice," Ernie said calmly, "I just had a situation at work today exactly like what you're describing."

"Did you kill anybody?" Alice asked.

"No," Ernie replied. "Would you like to know what I did?"

"Sure," Alice said, still shaking with anger.

"One of my men came into my office furious at his co-worker, yelling and calling him names. I knew he was a parishioner, like us, so I told him to sit down. Then I took the little crucifix you gave me for my birthday last year that I keep on the credenza in my office and placed it in front of him. He got very quiet, very quickly."

Ernie's wife got up and silently put the crucifix they keep in the kitchen on the dinner table as Ernie continued.

"We talked rationally from then on and yes, there had been an injustice which will be corrected. The evil talk though? I told him it had to stop. It's one thing to be an observer of our angry thoughts and strong emotions, and quite another to be a victim of them."

"I asked him to look at the crucifix and tell me what Jesus did to the people who were spreading lies about him and arranging for him to be killed. Do you know what Jesus did, Alice?"

“He should’ve sent them all to hell,” Alice snarled.

“Well, he didn’t,” Ernie said. “Jesus forgave them because they really didn’t know what they were doing. In doing so, he showed us what anyone who wants to be like him should do.”

“Are you telling me I have to forgive that...that...” Alice stuttered.

“Sooner or later,” Ernie nodded. “Why let a person who upsets you live rent-free in your brain, Alice? And you certainly don’t want to retaliate in kind, either. Remember that line from St. Paul I use all the time? “Never let evil talk pass your lips. Say only the good things people need to hear – things that will really help them.... Try it. To paraphrase Mark Twain, you will astonish those who don’t like you and surprise those who expect you to retaliate in kind. You will also be creating an opportunity for both of you to discover some important things about yourselves – some deep goodness that never requires cutting other people down and spreading lies about them. It’s part of growing up, Alice,” Ernie said. “Try it, and let me know what happens.”

“Did it work for you?” Alice wanted to know.

“I can’t tell for sure just yet,” Ernie replied honestly, “but he did ask to borrow my crucifix. Salvation is ultimately God’s work to accomplish in us – we just have to share the wisdom and play our parts, seems to me. God knows what God’s about, and my experience tells me God’s trustworthy.”

Perhaps you’ll choose to memorize this verse too, and use it as the need arises, Maybe you’ll pick a different verse instead – the great law of love of God and neighbor in the twelfth chapter of Mark’s gospel, a proverb or two perhaps, or the simple requirements God has of us that are expressed in the sixth chapter of the Book of Micah.

Whatever wisdom you choose to appropriate, connect it through prayer with the Eucharistic life of Jesus Christ within you and use it. Draw strength from the living wisdom of his Presence, and invite God to become visible to others through you. Wisdom expressed is love unleashed, and the Lord knows how badly our world needs that today.