

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, August 16, 2015

**Knowledge is Not Wisdom!**

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

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1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14 Ephesians 5:15-20

One of my favorite passages of scripture is one that I learned from my college fraternity. That statement may sound strange to you, particularly when considering all of the bad press that fraternities have been receiving in recent years. But, like many things in life, a minority of any group can cast a shadow over everyone in the group.

Extremists in the Middle East, and a few here, who represent a tiny minority of Muslims have cast a shadow over all Muslims even though the great majority of Muslims condemn the actions of the extreme groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL.

Christian terrorists, another very tiny minority, have similarly given Christianity a black eye in many parts of the world and we often don't realize it. Some years ago I had lunch with a group of pastors in South Africa and they asked me if things were really as bad in the United States as what they were hearing on television and reading in the newspapers. They heard about bad things that happen here and tended to equate those things to all Americans.

We know about radical Islamists, who by the way have been killing far more Muslims than Christians, but we overlook radicals among Christians right here at home. Many Americans tend to condemn all of Islam because of a small minority of radicals while overlooking the fact that the majority of violent attacks in the US have been carried out by white so-called Christians, not by any ethnic, religious or racial minority.

We tend to forget about school shootings; about what the Ku Klux Klan did; about what Eric Rudolph did in Atlanta; about what Timothy McVeigh did in Oklahoma City; and on and on. These people claimed to be Christians yet we don't condemn all Christians for what they did. We know what they did. We know what radical Islamists have done. We know what a few fraternity chapters have done. That is knowledge. But condemning all fraternities, all Muslims or all Christians because of the actions of a few is not wisdom. The difference is huge.

The scripture passage that my fraternity impressed upon me is Proverbs 4:7,

*“Wisdom is the principal thing. Therefore get wisdom and with all thy getting get understanding.”* (KJV). That comes from the King James translation of the Bible. In your pew Bibles, it is, *“The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding.”* (NIV).

Knowledge is not wisdom. You can have multiple university degrees and an IQ of 160. You can have a lot of knowledge but you are not necessarily wise. Wisdom comes when you understand the big picture, not when you can spout a bunch of facts or when you emotionally react to random bits of knowledge or to stories in the media.

Our two scripture passages emphasize this point. In the reading from 1 Kings, Solomon goes high on a hill in Gibeon and makes one thousand offerings to God praying for wisdom. He asks, *“Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.”* (NIV). God responds that he will give Solomon a *“wise and discerning heart”*. He will give him both wisdom and understanding.

Our reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians stresses the same point saying, *“Be very careful, then, how you live --- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”* (NIV).

At the Red Cloud School on the Sioux Indian Reservation in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, the children recite a prayer about wisdom. It goes:

*“O’ GREAT SPIRIT,  
Whose voice I hear in the woods, and whose breath gives life to all the world,  
hear me! I am small and weak, I need your strength and wisdom.  
LET ME WALK IN BEAUTY, and make my eyes  
ever behold the red and purple sunset.  
MAKE ME WISE so that I may understand the things you have taught my people.  
LET ME LEARN the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.  
I SEEK STRENGTH, not to be greater than my brother,  
but to fight my greatest enemy --- myself.  
MAKE ME ALWAYS READY to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes.  
SO WHEN LIFE FADES, as the fading sunset,  
my spirit may come to you without shame.”*

This children's prayer is a beautiful picture of what it means to gain knowledge and with it to gain wisdom.

In a small village of the Fujian province of China, the children await the Old Man of Christmas each year. He wears a red suit and has a white beard but the Old Man of Christmas is not the Santa Claus that our children await --- far from it!

The Old Man of Christmas brings very different kinds of gifts than does Santa Claus. According to Gary MacDonald of the United Church of Canada, children in this tiny village told him, *"If you go to sleep and are very still and quiet, the Old Man of Christmas will come to you. He will give you many gifts. He will put love in your heart. This is a special love you have for Mommy and Daddy. The Old Man of Christmas will make you clever. He will make you clever so that when you go over the mountain to school he will help you remember to be careful so that you do not fall and hurt yourself. The Old Man of Christmas will make you kind so that you help your teacher at school."* (From Gary MacDonald, "Children: Is Anybody Listening? We are!", United Church of Canada, 2001.)

These children do not wait for material things at all even though they are very poor. They wait for the Old Man of Christmas to bring them wisdom far beyond their years.

*"Wisdom is the principle thing. Therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting, get understanding."* (KJV)

**Amen.**