

I once heard Thomas Hopko teach on holiness and sainthood saying, “I’m not a holy man, but I have seen them before.” I’ll modify that statement as an important disclaimer before I lead this meditation on the virtue of wisdom today: I am not a wise man, but I have known wise men and women. I found a stack of old journals a few weeks ago. There is much data of my foolishness there. And the past is prologue, for I still find myself learning and unlearning the same struggles from years past.

So I believe my task today is much like a biographer who wants to pen the story of his heroes. I recently began Walter Isaacson’s biography *The Innovators* which tells the story of the men and women who made the personal computer possible. I probably won’t finish it because in my foolishness I start too many books and don’t finish them. If I reference a book in a sermon, never assume I’ve read the whole thing. Nevertheless, Isaacson’s task as a biographer was finding people he admired, exploring their story in depth, then writing that story for the sake of his readers.

So I speak today as a “reader” of wisdom. I speak as a student or an apprentice who desires to walk the path of wisdom. I believe I’m just at the trailhead of this path, but the map in my hands is an ancient guide—the Word of God, the stories of the saints. So let’s explore the terrain of wisdom together with the confidence that wisdom renews the world.

Wisdom is a long pathway and along the way you’ll acquire skills for relationships and the inner life—perception, insight, and understanding. But those skills aren’t the heart of wisdom. The heart of wisdom is, well, the heart. That’s the main path of wisdom—to find the heart of things; to live and act from the heart.

And that is the legacy of Solomon, whom Israel acclaims as their wisest sage. Return to 2 Chronicles 7 in your pew Bible while I tell you another Solomon story. Solomon begins serving as Israel’s king when he is a very young man. Early in his reign, he has a dream when the Lord appears to him saying, ‘Ask what I shall give you.’ Solomon says, ‘I do not know how to be king. You have given me a great and wonderful people to rule. Give me

an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.<sup>1</sup> God answers Solomon's prayer and gives him a wise and discerning mind, the greatness of which Israel had never seen.

That's how Solomon's kingship began and the wisdom theme appears again when Solomon completes the greatest project of his reign—the construction of the Temple. This is where our morning reading picks up in 2 Chronicles 7. Once Solomon completes this Temple construction project, the Lord appears to Solomon again by night. We hear the heart of God's message to Solomon in verse 16: 'now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time<sup>2</sup>.'

This is wisdom's invitation. God has revealed to us where we can know his heart. Will we answer the call to enter his presence? Wise men and women decide to walk through the door, to enter the presence of the Lord in season and out of season, to know his heart, to see as God sees.

In some ways it may seem 'out of season' to meditate on wisdom with such a horrendous storms bearing down on Florida and the southeast. I'm reminded of the Anglican theologian, Evelyn Underhill, who published a book on the spiritual life the week Europe entered World War I. She considered delaying publication a book on prayer when people's attention were rightly turned to 'struggle and endurance, practical sacrifices, difficult and long-continued effort.' Yet she proceeded with publication with the convocation that the spiritual life 'means nothing if the attitude and the discipline which it recommends be adapted for fair weather alone.' We enter the presence of God in times of crisis because we have the historical record that, as Underhill states, 'the stronger the forces of destruction appeared [in times past], the more intense grew the spiritual vision which opposed them...[The spiritual life] has the power of lifting those who possess it to a plane of reality which no struggle, no cruelty, can disturb: of conferring a certitude which no catastrophe can wreck.' She considers that two women who 'left the deepest mark upon the military history of France and England—Joan of Arc and Florence Nightengale—both acted under mystical

compulsion...their intensely practical energies were the flowers of contemplative life.<sup>3'</sup>

The wise person is the one who makes one choice that shapes all of her other choices, preparing her both for service and spiritual growth: *she enters the presence of the Lord*. She makes that single choice thousands upon thousands of times, in season and out of season. And when crisis comes to her life or the life of another seeking her counsel, she can speak from the depths of God.

For all the prayer events that invoke 2 Chronicles 7.14, I've never heard the passage explained in its greater context. These are poetic and inspiring words on repentance and renewal, but the most important feature of this exchange between Solomon and the Lord is the location of their encounter: the Temple of the Lord, the place where the Lord promises his presence.

The Temple of the Lord is a room filled with light. When you enter the Lord's presence, his light reveals the darkness within us. That's why healing comes when Israel repents of their sin. Light casts out their darkness. But you cannot see that light outside of his Temple. As the psalmist said, 'In your light we see light.'

We have a sun room at our home with windows facing east, west, and north. When the eastern sun shines its light on our windows, I see all the dirt and grime I need to clean. But that dirt is hidden at the end of the day, when the sun sets in the west. I need light to reveal what needs cleaning.

And here is the gift of the Lord's light and wisdom: he shines his light on chaos and darkness, putting things in order, making them beautiful. St. Thomas Aquinas quoted this phrase often in his theology: the function of the wise person is to order. That's the heart of the word 'discernment', too. *Discernment* comes from a Latin word meaning 'to separate apart.'

When you think about your story and your relationships, we need discernment with major life decisions, not minor decisions. Think of your personal history and the relationships dearest to you. We need discernment in matters of the heart when we don't see clearly. It's difficult to *separate*

*apart* and order all the desires within. We need light that can put first things first and secondary things in succession thereafter.

I love the words of the psalmist Asaph who sought wisdom in a time of personal chaos and confusion. He does not understand the widespread prosperity of evil around him and he's weary from the suffering it's causing him. He can't square it up, place in order, or find peace from what his eyes see. Then you come to the middle verses of Psalm 73 and everything changes. Asaph writes, 'When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, *until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.*<sup>4</sup>'

When I entered the presence of the Lord, he revealed his light and I found confidence and peace. My brother and sister, the heart of wisdom is seeking the face of the Lord, for only in his presence can we discern the heart of all things. Only the Lord can bring order and beauty from chaos and disorder.

Yet we must remember *how* the Lord brings beauty and order from chaos and disorder. It was by his cross. On the cross, Jesus disarmed the powers of this present darkness. On the cross, our Lord Jesus ended separation between God and man and the Temple veil was rent in two. Now we are the Lord's Temple. When we enter the presence of the Lord, we find him in our hearts. All because of the cross.

We have no other wisdom but the wisdom of the cross. You cannot put things back into order without the cross. We cannot discern decisions or make choices unless we walk the way of the cross, embracing suffering, humility, and self-denial.

We embrace a wisdom foreign to our world. St. Paul said it best: 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart...For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.'<sup>5</sup> It's not just any generic wisdom that renews the world.

The wisdom of the cross renews the world. For the wisdom of the cross gives light and peace, even in our weakness.

If you had visited Vitovnica, Serbia in the early 1980s you would have encountered thick traffic descending upon the local monastery. Once upon the monastery grounds, you would have joined a long line of people waiting to speak with a meek and fragile man who would greet you in the kitchen or under the grapevines in the front lawn. Elder Thaddeus was his name and pilgrims from all over Serbia sought this man's insight because he was known to be a man of great prayer. But most of his life was a battle with illness and weakness.

Thaddeus grew up in the tumultuous years of World War I, suffering the loss of his mother, and then the cruelty of a new stepmother. He was restricted to a diet of bread, onions, and cucumbers because his body couldn't tolerate meat or dairy.

Throughout his life, Thaddeus was beset with frailty due to weak lungs. He nearly died at age 23 from pulmonary complications. He had to endure a painful medical treatment called pneumothorax which involved injecting oxygen and medication into his lungs. He endured two heart attacks, two nervous breakdowns, and a stroke in the later years of his life.

Yet the greatest battle he faced in his life was an interior battle, a life-long struggle to surrender all his thoughts to the Lord. He believed that when we acquire patient long-suffering, when we practice forgiveness, we discover peace and joy. He says, 'Then we will see that there is no death, that the Lord has vanquished death, and that He has given eternal life!'

Over time, the depth and richness of this man's soul became a treasure, not only to those under his care as abbot in Serbian monasteries, but many who sought wisdom and discernment regarding their doubts and inner pain. The lines to speak with Elder Thaddeus were so long in the 1980s and 1990s that they could only be described as rivers of pilgrims. He would have conversations, share spiritual advice, pray, give talks long into the light and early in the morning. His health deteriorated because he had to talk so

much to those coming in need. He said, 'People keep on coming with all their worries and their afflictions. There was a time when I didn't have high blood pressure. Now, when I listen to people's difficulties, these pass on to me—that's why my blood pressure is high. I don't like medication either, but, here we are; I'm still alive!'

He gave simple instructions to those seeking guidance. He believed 'we do not need to say anything or do anything, but we feel so good in the presence of a humble and meek person who is full of love and goodness. He does not have to say anything either, yet he radiates warmth, and it is as though we have caught a chill and have come into a warm and pleasant room and it warms us.' But he was not much for pilgrims seeking instant miracles. He would listen and seek the Lord. 'You come to me with your problems,' he would say, 'I have many problems too, and the Lord comforts us all. I tell you my troubles, you tell me yours, and everything will be well afterwards...The Lord will have comforted us!<sup>6</sup>'

Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica is a beautiful example that wisdom renews the world. A soul who seeks the face of God over and over again; a soul that waits for the light of God to shine in his heart; a soul that embraces the cross in great suffering and lives from the depths; well, that just might be the kind of evangelism our chaotic and weary world needs.

Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy believed that if the Church were to be instruments for the renewal of the world that she would have to become a listening Church. My brothers and sisters, it's my prayer that we could be just such a listening Church here in Knoxville. Here's how we can begin...

Find a chair in a quiet room. Make yourself unavailable to anyone else. Park your bottom in that chair. Wait on the Lord and listen for his voice. Spend 20 minutes in a listening posture; set a timer if you need to.

Here's what will happen. You will encounter a whirlwind of distractions; you will feel anxious about your to-do list. You may wonder if you're wasting your time. Allow all that junk to be there and calmly pray this sentence to

center your soul in Christ. “Send out your light and your truth, let them lead me.” That’s Psalm 43.2. When your mind wanders, return to that Scripture and wait on the Lord.

Do three of these listening sessions this week and see what the Lord might reveal. I spent 20 minutes in this manner of prayer last Thursday and I didn’t find calm right away. I was a mess of distractions. You know what the Lord said? I’m by your side even when you’re flooded with distractions. That’s light; that’s truth.

It’s one thing to find comfort for your own soul. But I’m just as eager to share that good news with another person seeking light and truth amid *their* distractions and weariness. Then I can say let us seek His face together, let’s listen for His voice—the Voice of the Great One, Jesus. For He alone is Wisdom for our lives, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>1 Kings 3.3-9

<sup>2</sup>2 Chronicles 7.16

<sup>3</sup>Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, Preface.

<sup>4</sup>Psalm 73.16-17

<sup>5</sup>1 Corinthians 18-19, 25.

<sup>6</sup>Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica, *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*, Chapter 1.