

Year B – Proper 9 “The Hand of wisdom”

“What wisdom has been given to him? And what of the powerful deeds that come through his hands?” (Mark 6:2)

How many of you have been participating in the Sacred Ground program? To me, it’s been very sobering as well as enlightening, especially in terms of our history with people who are not Anglo-Saxon. Shocking, in many ways. And as we gather to celebrate another Independence Day, that hidden history casts a long dark shadow on what has seemed to be an effort to create an equitable and thriving society that is governed by the people. Of course, originally those people were white mostly privileged men. But underneath their original intentions is a vision they cast which has been absorbed by all the people of this land who are slowly pushing us all toward “a more perfect union”, one painful step at a time.

Jesus was a person of color who was born within a people who were under the oppression of Roman Occupation. Depending on where you were in the hierarchy of the Jewish peoples, you might have benefited or at least been respected by the Roman rulers. But not if you were a commoner. And certainly not if you were among the outcast. Even though the structure of government was different, the issues were similar. People were oppressed – treated as “less than”, Jews and outcasts.

It is in this environment that, after his baptism and time in the wilderness discerning who he is and what he should do, that Jesus emerges around Galilee as a teacher and healer of the disenfranchised. And he finally shows up in his hometown (presumably Nazareth) on the sabbath and teaches in the synagogue. The locals are amazed at his wisdom and the power that comes from his hands. And yet, even as they experienced him, they discounted their experience and reject him. And Jesus is amazed, too – at their unbelief. They fail to see that he is not about the status quo, or his status in the community, or even the traditional teachings. It is his unity with the Source of Love that he carries and wishes to share. The people have been hungry

for connection with God but apparently those in Nazareth cannot get beyond the Jesus they once knew to allow that hunger to be fed.

The hunger for a deeper, more rooted in daily life understanding of Jesus, has been growing throughout Christianity around the world for the last half Century. That hunger has been expressed with a variety of terms, most commonly in the West as a desire for “spirituality”. It’s a hunger that is growing in all of us and I’m convinced is fed and nurtured by the Spirit of the Living God and Christ himself in and through us. We are all hungry for meaning, for connection, for a sense of the whole among the many, for the living life of God’s grace, for light, for understanding, for peace, for love that abounds, for compassion that is at the center of our beings. The word that pulls all of those together is the word “Wisdom” – Sophia. In the biblical text Wisdom is present at the dawn of our creation, and calls us to a life that is whole and steeped in integrity and unity with the cosmos that is far bigger than we are. Jesus personifies Sophia.

According to Rabbi Rami Shapiro: *“Wisdom is not a thing you can know, but a Way you can follow. . . The way to follow Wisdom is to surrender narrow mind to spacious mind – the mind that knows to the knowing itself. In this way you end the tyranny of words and see what is (choach mah) without the filter of how you so desperately wish things to be.”* ¹

Jesus incarnates this Wisdom as that form of Being which is One with what he called heaven and earth. And the people around him saw the effects of Wisdom that flowed through him and became evident through his hands as he reached out and touched them.

During the last year we have greatly missed the power of touch. Just the other day I saw a friend I had not seen in over 18 months. We rushed to hug each other – almost like Elizabeth and Mary – that power of connection in person says so much! The incarnation actually means God in flesh! We encounter the Living One in our

physical connection one with another If we can be present and open to the encounter.

The work that is required to be open to the transforming love that lies within us is what we call “spiritual work”. But it is not only inner work, it is also outer work. I learned this a number of years ago when I participated in a week long Wisdom School. It’s a kind of retreat that focuses on the work needed to develop the individual capacity for Holy perception and experience.

At the Wisdom School we lived a certain rhythm of life that is very Benedictine (and therefore Anglican) in its rule. The daily pattern included meditation, teaching, physical labor, and rest/recreation. The pattern is important because it reinforces the teaching of living a balanced life centered on the Source of Life. It teaches Wisdom that is not knowledge but Lived Presence.

In our daily work sessions we engaged in what are commonly called “awareness practices”, that is actually attending to what you are doing in a specific kind of way. On the first day we were asked by our teacher to attend to pressure. As we worked, we were to pay attention to how much pressure we had to exert on our tools and on the surface with which we were working. It was an interesting exercise. I was working in a group that had the task of painting a deck throughout the week. I discovered that first day that if I put too much pressure on my paint roller I got spattered with paint! If I failed to put enough pressure on, the paint was applied too thinly. I had to respect the grain of the wood, and work in unity with it in order to accomplish the goal of protecting it from the elements without messing myself up!

Think about it another way- Let’s say we are trying to mirror one another: If I put my hand up and you put yours up and we bring them together and then I push too hard yours will fall back. If I fail to push enough we won’t touch or move productively. If you put up too much resistance and push back, then my hand is

rendered useless. There is delicate balance required – both of us must push but not too much!

That's what's going on with Jesus in his hometown. Jesus is Wisdom incarnate. It's not that he knows a lot of great knowledge. It's that he IS that knowledge. He is at unity with Divine Life and the material world. In him, both are joined in perfect harmony and balance together. And because of that, people could be healed, not necessarily cured (that can be a by-product), but healed. And that means that they were brought into that harmonic balance of the One just by truly listening to his teaching to die to self and become newly filled with light and life, by trusting in it at the heart of their own being. In his hometown, the people push back too much. Their resistance to him prevents the Wisdom of the Divine from doing its work. His hands that reach out to them have little effect.

It's not simply that God needs our help to continue the evolution of Creation. It's that we are God's instruments of Divine life on the planet. The 2nd Century preacher, Peter Chrysologus, put it this way: *"In truth, Christ goes out and comes in not of himself, nor for himself, but in you, and on behalf of you, until he recovers you from your exile, and calls you home from your captivity."*²

Our founding documents as a nation do give credit to God for human agency and "inalienable rights", though that has become lip service as the example of the founders and many of the leaders of this country have failed to live lives that are balanced with compassion and love for all human beings. And our religious institutions have lost the trust of many people in our country. In addition, our efforts (and the laws we live by) focus on individual rights and not a common unifying purpose or a common good. We want a "more perfect union" without sacrificing each person's individual need for liberty. We need to develop the skills to value both and hold the tension inherent in them. That is the work of Wisdom.

Christians are those summoned by God to follow the teaching and life of the Anointed One (Christ/Christos), to yield and to move in a kind of celestial dance of heaven here on earth. Being open to the work of the Spirit of Wisdom in our lives requires practice, attention, silence, reflection, and a community of people to support us and work together for the sharing of this path and this Good News. It will also give us the skills required to live the vision that was cast 245 years ago on this day.

*The Wisdom Way of Knowing*³, as Cynthia Bourgeault calls it, is the path of death and resurrection that we learn as we engage in contemplative practice. This is the path that Jesus himself walked. It's not a path that you can learn in a few moments, but rather with a great deal of intention and attention to the choices we make, our priorities, how much energy we give to God's life in us, we can learn to thrive in the balance of heaven and earth as the creatures we were made to be.

Contemplative Ministry is not an ancillary event or program for some special people who are "spiritual". It's the main meal in which we become the Eucharist through the breaking open of our selves in offering to the world. It's the path that was lived and taught by early Christians who were not yet concerned about the structures and rules/dogma of the church, but by those who wanted to live the life that Jesus had shown them. I seriously invite you to explore more about this path of Christianity that is emerging among us. I think you will discover that your deep hunger begins to be fed and your life becomes more of what you would envision it to be!

God's grace, love and abundant life is already pouring out through all of us. Think about that the next time you touch something or someone (even as we are more careful about that these days!). The Hand of Wisdom is Jesus' hand, your hand, my hand stretched out to meet the world and share with compassion. Let us open the eyes of our hearts to see in our very Being that the love and light of Christ in God may abound all the more! In so doing, our nation and the planet will thrive.

Amen.

Patricia Rome Robertson+

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

Bainbridge Island, Washington

July 4, 2021

¹ *The Divine Feminine*, p.26 commentary

² Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Volume II, New Testament, Gospel of Mark*, p.79.

³ See her book of that title.