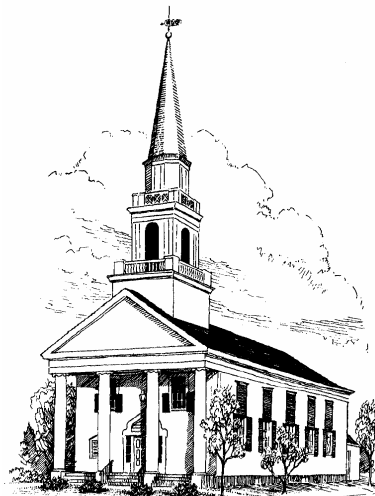


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from August 16, 2009
“Seeking Wisdom, Expressing Gratitude”
Rev. Martha M. Nilsen

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



Do you recall feeling unsure when you started your first job, purchased your first home, or signed that first mortgage? Did you question whether you would be able to fulfill the obligations for which you just committed yourself? Do you remember the worries you had when bringing your first child home from the hospital or the adoption agency? Did you ask yourself if you had the parental capacities to raise a healthy, happy, well-adjusted child? How about the challenge of living the first days without a life-long spouse or following a first-ever diagnosis of cancer or other life-threatening illness? Did you wonder, where do I begin, how will I cope, how do I re-order my life given this devastating situation?

Early on in life we learn just how intimidating and daunting first-time experiences can be. In today's OT lesson, Solomon acknowledges the awesomeness of the responsibility placed before him particularly in light of his ardent desire to govern God's chosen people correctly and faithfully. He recognizes that he can't fulfill his new role as king by himself. He is highly aware of the fragile context within which he has been crowned king. He takes over from his father who faltered during his reign, thus, Solomon steps in following a period of much upheaval and turmoil. His people have been wounded and their future is unclear. In honest recognition of the multiple challenges before him, King Solomon starts off his governance by requesting wisdom from God by which to lead the people with sensitivity and keen insight. I find Solomon's expressed humility and awareness of the limits of his knowledge, experience, and abilities quite admirable!

As the minister of a small, local church, I know what it is like to serve and lead a group of people. I identify closely with Solomon's doubts and uncertainty about leadership. So it occurred to me in preparation for this sermon that the thoughts Solomon had when taking on the new position as king might well be the same thoughts Pastor Ann is having in taking on her new position as minister of this church. Never before had Solomon served as a political and spiritual leader. This was a first-time experience for him just as serving as an ordained minister of a church is a first-time experience for Pastor Ann.

Everyday you and I are confronted by first-time situations or new problems all of which demand a response from us. If we've had no prior experience with the situation or problem,

then how can we arrive at an appropriate and effective response; a response which is faithful to ourselves, to God, and to others? Today's OT lesson teaches us that during new circumstances or un-traveled roads we, like Solomon, are to seek God's wisdom first. By turning to and placing our trust in God's knowledge, we are ushered from the darkness of fear and uncertainty to the light of hope for the future and are granted a direction towards which to move as lit by the light of God's wisdom.

I define wisdom as compassionate understanding. To understand is to comprehend intellectually and rationally the situation you find yourself in. Understanding involves knowledge of past events and the analysis of data relevant to the current context. But wisdom isn't simply understanding, it includes compassion as well. Compassion engages the emotional side of human intelligence. It grants us the ability to imagine—to “put ourselves in another's shoes,”—and allows us to envision future possibilities. Compassionate understanding is the wisdom we all need in order to carry out our roles whether as pastor, teacher, lawyer, business owner, volunteer, caregiver, parent or grandparent.

I recall a time when I was empowered and led by the wisdom of God. Years ago I taught a Pre-Confirmation class—they were 7th graders. Every Sunday two boys would come to class who would talk and giggle between themselves making it difficult for me to teach and those students there to learn. One Sunday we couldn't meet in our classroom so we met in the fellowship hall which was about twice the size of your hall. I divided the class into small groups and let them sit scattered around the hall. I put the two boys together—I'm sure they thought they had hit the Jackpot! I gave the groups a task to perform. During the class I intended to visit each group to see how they were progressing on their assignment. When I came upon the two boys I knew that I wasn't going to inquire about their progress on the task at hand but rather to talk with them about how their behavior disrupts the class. As I approached them I didn't know what I was going to say, all I knew was that they were best of friends and awesome soccer players who played on the same soccer team. As I drew closer to them I prayed to God to give me the wisdom and words to say that would convey to them in a way they would understand just how disruptive they were. When I got to them I pulled up a chair, sat down, and said: “I want you to imagine that you are playing in the soccer game, and just as you, ‘David,’ get the ball and are racing down the field with a free shot on the goal, the official blows the whistle to stop the game because I released by dog and he was running around the soccer field. Later in the game, ‘Jeff,’ the same thing happens to you. You have the ball, you are running down the field with an open shot on the goal when the official stops the game because my dog is running around the field again. Now this happens not only one Saturday but the next Saturday and the Saturday after that. My question to you, ‘David’, is how do you feel? “Well,” replied ‘David’, “I'd be mad because I had a shot on the goal; I could have scored and won the game for my team.” Turning to ‘Jeff’ I asked, “And how do you feel?” ‘Jeff’ responded, “I'd feel the same as ‘David’. I'd be mad because I could have scored and your prevented me from getting a goal.” At that point I looked at the boys and said, “On Sunday mornings, I am the soccer player and you are the ones with the dog!” I then got up and left. Do you know that after that I never had a problem with the boys in my class! I consider this my “Parable of the Young Soccer Players,” but to this day I credit God and the Holy Spirit with this parable—for giving me the wisdom and words to say.

Moving on to Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul states that wise living requires

“Making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” What did he mean? To Paul the present times were sinful—things in the world weren’t going as God would desire for them to be going. Given this environment, Paul alerts the church that if it is to make the most of *its* time and place in the world, then it must position itself in contrast to the world. Paul urges the Ephesians to get off of being stuck, to not persist in activities that are closely tied to social or cultural ways and expectations but to focus upon the will and expectations of God. Paul is calling upon the church of Ephesus to keep from repeating the same decisions, the same mistakes, the same practices, or drawing the same conclusions. It’s a call to change - to infuse the church and all of its practices with the wisdom of God. More broadly it’s Paul’s call to all individuals, to us, to infuse our lives with the wise Spirit of God. And when, as Paul writes, you and I are filled with this wise Spirit, we can’t but help sing hymns and spiritual songs in gratitude and praise.

As a resident of Mystic and a minister ordained by the UCC, I consider Mystic Congregational my “hometown” church. I want you to know that in recent years I have prayed for you the parishioners, for Thomas, and for Mystic Congregational Church. Today I am so gratified by what I see for what I see is a church that has turned the corner. Rather than allowing past wounds, past decisions, and past judgments to hold it back, Mystic Congregational Church is moving powerfully forward. I sense a church filling itself with and being lead by the wisdom of God and thus I’ve observed you singing hymns and spiritual songs with thanksgiving and praise. Congratulations to all of you and the hard work of your lay leaders and devoted members. So long as this church seeks and practices compassionate understanding as granted by God, Mystic Congregational has the future to look forward to!

In closing, I don’t know where the future will take this church. I don’t know what new challenges you will face. I don’t know in what ways you will be called upon to serve God by serving others. But I do know this, *you are* in the hands of God and his wisdom will always be available to you. From where I stand, you are truly blessed to have this historic sanctuary in the center of a charming village, a beautiful, functional building, active members, youth and children, gifted musicians, and a new and eager minister. Today as every day, may you give “thanks to God!” Amen.

