

“Practicing Pentecost: After Wisdom”

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1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Richard Rohr, who you know I read regularly, in a recent post referenced Hindu wisdom writings that speak of four major stages in life: (1) the student, (2) the householder, (3) the forest dweller or hermit, and (4) the beggar or wanderer. The first two make immediate sense to the Western mind. The student sounds like a beginner’s stage, which is how all life begins in the East or the West. And the householder? Well, if you tried to run one, you know the responsibilities and required wisdom necessary to navigate much of early adulthood whether at home or in a business. But as often is the case for images and words unique to Eastern writings, the forest dweller or hermit and the beggar or wanderer sound almost too strange to be valued by us. This third stage of forest dweller or hermit, however, corresponds roughly with being “retired from business as usual.” The stress isn’t so much on retirement, as in resting, but on a move from business as usual. Sadly, retirement, I’m told, can simply be business as usual, but just at a different pace.

But the strangest sounding stage is the beggar or wanderer. This stage refers to the truly wise or fully enlightened person, one who is not overly attached to anything and after learning wisdom begins to know the joy from creatively detaching from everything as one prepares for death. While lecturing in India, Rohr found these four stages represented in four stained glass windows in a Catholic church in Bangalore (the Silicon Valley of southern India), which indicates the importance of these four stages well beyond practicing Hindus. Similar to the importance of Jesus’ parable of the four soils, which tells of the stages of receptivity, what is helpful in speaking of various “stages” in life is that we are given words and images that help us find direction in our journey into maturity. Without some way of marking the flow of life, well, it is hard to discern growth at all, and equally difficult to see the trajectory of a full human life, lived in response to God’s gift of life.

With this as a backdrop, let me suggest that we practice Pentecost after wisdom by moving passed life as “business as usual” in an ongoing process of emptying out, so that, little by little, we create a capacity for a new kind of fullness. To practice Pentecost after wisdom is to live beyond business as usual, because life is meant to be holy “unusual,” a life that thrives once we have fewer attachments. This is why Solomon’s story is so surprising and suggestive. It seems to even surprise God. Not late in life while moving into maturity, but supposedly at age 20, the inexperienced ruler asks for what typically must be acquired slowly and with great patience. Solomon is remembered for being so wise, that the writer of 1 Kings says, looking back on a life so filled with wisdom, that God grant Solomon’s unusual request, because Solomon was wise enough to ask for it early on. Solomon lived life as holy “unusual,” and we would be wise to do the same.

The ancient Hebrew word usually translated “wisdom” is not primarily an activity of the intellect, like having an encyclopedic mind. Rather, wisdom is a living conversation between, well, the head and the heart, seeking to know what is right for the purpose of doing what is right. The word “right” found in verse 11 is actually the word usually translated “justice.” One commentator says that, translated literally, an “understanding mind” is “a hearing or obedient heart.” Wisdom, then, the very thing for which young Solomon asks, has more to do with the will than the mind. This episode in the young king’s life reminds me of the story about the young, rich man or ruler who asks Jesus how he can inherit eternal life. Remember? And Jesus responds: “Sell all that you have, and come, follow me. Truly, I say to you, there is no one who

has left house or spouse, brothers or sisters, parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive more than they could possibly imagine.” And as we watch the rich, young ruler walk away from Jesus, does it not seem that we are seeing a kind of Solomon story in reverse? Can the early, first half of life walk away from the second half? In other words, is it possible for us to never move on into maturity? We wonder.

To seek wisdom is to express the desire to be obedient. I know that the word sounds un-usual. Good. And I know that it carries with it the worry that it means we will become subservient. But, wait, don't walk away so fast. The word obedience is derived from Latin and Greek words that literally mean “to listen or to hearken to.” Plato uses this word when speaking of a doorkeeper. The duty of a doorkeeper is to listen for the signals of those who arrive at the door and then to admit those who wish to enter. Viewed in this light, obedience to God is fixing our hearts on God, our listening hearts, attentive to God's leadings, resting silently in God's grace, so we can discern God's will for our lives and our relationships, our church and our world.

But how? In prayer? Yes, as long as prayer is an act of attentive listening. Praying after wisdom, we find that prayer is more than bringing a list of things to God to do or solve. It is more than a magical formula that is spoken in the hopes of altering God's mood. Prayer as active listening? Holy un-usual? Now we are on to something. And what about meditating on the scriptures? Of course, we can discern God's will by meditating on the scriptures, but not in a “business as usual” kind of way. The Bible is not a collection of truths to be accepted and then stacked in a corner of our minds for future reference. That is business as usual and rarely activates an adequate conversation between mind and heart. Thomas Hawkins has written: “We should not read the Bible like a bird flitting from branch to branch. Nor should we read it like a bird collecting twigs for a nest. Sometimes people pick up a phrase or a parable or a fragment here, and a sentence there, and use it to reinforce an already too rigid nest of opinions or to feather an already too comfortable set of beliefs.”

To practice Pentecost after wisdom is to listen for the voice of the living God vibrating off and in between the human words inked on the printed page. They are not God's words, bound together as God word's, but our words, the only ones that God can use to get to us. To practice Pentecost after wisdom is the business of learning how to actively listen for God, standing watch as a willing door keeper of our hearts and minds. In obedience we become wise, even as we become just and loving, knowing and doing what is right.

The story is told of a famous rabbi who finds his students playing checkers one day instead of studying the Torah, the most important portion of the Hebrew Scriptures. The students hastily put the checkerboard away and return to their studies. But the wise old rabbi tells them that they could be studying the Torah even when they are playing checkers. “What are the three rules of checkers?” he asks. The students remain silent, wondering what on earth he will say. Then the rabbi speaks: “First, you must not make two moves at once. Second, you must move only forward, not backward. Third, when you have reached the last row, then you can move wherever you like. Such is what the Torah also teaches.” It was only later that the students realized what the rabbi had taught them. They should not clutter their minds with more than one move at a time. They should always keep sight of the goal toward which they are pressing. And third, they would be truly free when they move to the last row, making themselves obedient to God.

“Give me an understanding mind” asks Solomon, and God does. And I bet he could play a pretty good game of checkers. And you?