

The Bible, Wisdom and Older Adulthood

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Knowledge and wisdom are two sides of the same coin we call human intelligence. Knowledge has its basis in the world of science and factual data, while wisdom is both experiential and spiritual in nature. Knowledge is the human mastery over facts and theories that enables the growth and development of technology and scientific advancement. Wisdom on the other hand is learned by living and understanding personal experience and applying the lessons learned from interpersonal experience. Over the past several generations our modern society has valued the knowledge dimension of human intelligence over wisdom. In the world of business we see a greater worth placed on youth and the latest technology and training as a way of enhancing profitability. This emphasis frequently results in young, inexperienced employees hired to replace older employees with more costly salaries and decades of tenure and experience. In the world of advertisement, the beauty of youth is promoted as the gold standard of life, while older age is presented as something to disguise, or color over, or to apply cosmetic surgery to conceal the effects of aging on the body. We hear young people disrespect older adults with derogatory terms like “geezers” and “biddies.” Against such societal values the church has a vital role in reclaiming a focus on wisdom and helping the world to maintain a balance between the two dimensions of human intelligence.

The Bible makes very clear the importance of the role of Wisdom in human life. In the Old Testament, the books of Ecclesiastes, Job and Proverbs each address aspects of wisdom as a gift of God for human beings. Ecclesiastes recognizes how powerless an individual is against the many dynamic forces of life. This is a painful and hard learned gift of wisdom. Job conveys the wisdom that suffering comes to all humanity and that one’s relationship with God is not to be measured by the presence or absence of hardship and disaster. Proverbs reveals many lessons of wisdom which are revealed in every day experience. Chapter 8 of Proverbs speaks of wisdom as a partner with God at the time of creation and serves as God’s counsel to human beings. Wisdom is clearly a divine gift to human life if it is heeded and learned from.

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John describes Jesus utilizing the same basic terminology and description that Proverbs 8 uses to describe Wisdom. John also includes the phrase, “the word made flesh,” in reference to Jesus. Elsewhere, Jesus describes himself and John the Baptist in the gospels as being “children of wisdom.” Indeed Jesus is widely recognized as being, Wisdom personified. From the perspective of God’s wisdom, we recognize that Jesus teaches us how to live faithfully and serves as our “way” to discovering joy in life.

With this biblical and historical background, the church is called to serve as an advocate for the role wisdom plays in human life. When you combine this with the recognition that the church is called to uphold the dignity of each member of the faith community with particular attention to those who are in greater need, our call is to serve those who suffer at the hands of any form of injustice including elder abuse. Seeking to be Christ-like in our relationships with others, Christians are called to honor older adults and the wisdom that they have to share with the rest of the faith community. We do this by listening to their faith stories, seeking out their advice and engaging in the mutuality of fellowship with them on an ongoing basis. As Presbyterians, we have long valued the wisdom of our elders in positions of leadership. In a society that discounts this dimension of human intelligence, Presbyterians are uniquely positioned to serve as a witness to a higher truth and balance in human life.

When an old man died in the geriatric ward of a small nursing home near Tampa, Florida, it was believed that he had nothing left of any value. Later, when the nurses were going through his meager possessions, they found this poem. Its quality and content so impressed the staff that copies were made and distributed to every nurse in the facility.

One nurse took her copy to Missouri. The old man's sole bequest to posterity has since appeared in the Christmas edition of the *News Magazine* of the St. Louis Times Association for Mental Health. A slide presentation has also been made based on his simple, but eloquent, poem. This little old man, with nothing left to give to the world, is now the author of this "anonymous" poem winging across the internet.

Crabby Old Man

What do you see nurses? ... What do you see?
What are you thinking ... when you're looking at me?
A crabby old man, ... not very wise,
Uncertain of habit with faraway eyes?

Who dribbles his food ... and makes no reply.
When you say in a loud voice ... "I do wish you'd try!"
Who seems not to notice ... the things that you do.
And forever is losing ... a sock or shoe?

Who, resisting or not ... lets you do as you will,
With bathing and feeding ... the long day to fill?
Is that what you're thinking? Is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse ... you're not looking at me.

I'll tell you who I am ... as I sit here so still,
As I do at your bidding, ... as I eat at your will.
I'm a small child of Ten ... with a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters ... who love one another

A young boy of Sixteen ... with wings on his feet
Dreaming that soon now ... a lover he'll meet.
A groom soon at Twenty ... my heart gives a leap.
Remembering, the vows ... that I promised to keep.

At Twenty-Five, now ... I have young of my own.
Who need me to guide ... and a secure happy home.
A man of Thirty ... my young now grown fast,
Bound to each other ... with ties that should last.

At Forty, my young sons ... have grown and are gone,
But my woman's beside me ... to see I don't mourn.
At Fifty, once more ... babies play 'round my knee ,
Again, we know children ... my loved one and me.

Dark days are upon me ... my wife is now dead.
I look at the future ... I shudder with dread.
For my young are all rearing ... young of their own.
And I think of the years ... and the love that I've known.

I'm now an old man ... and nature is cruel.
'Tis jest to make old age ... look like a fool.
The body, it crumbles ... grace and vigor depart.
There is now a stone ... where I once had a heart.

But inside this old carcass ... a young guy still dwells,
And now and again ... my battered heart swells.
I remember the joys ... I remember the pain.
And I'm loving and living ... life over again.

I think of the years ... all too few ... gone too fast.
And accept the stark fact ... that nothing can last.
So open your eyes, people ... open and see
Not a crabby old man. Look closer ... see ... ME!!

Remember this poem when you next meet an older person
who you might brush aside without looking at the young soul
within ... we will all, God willing ... one day, be there, too!