

Psalm 111 (UMH451, tune: Slane)

**R: "Be thou my wisdom, O Lord of my heart,  
Naught be all else to me save that thou art."**

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD!

**I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the  
congregation.**

<sup>2</sup> Great are the works of the LORD,  
**studied by all who delight in them.**

<sup>3</sup> Full of honor and majesty is his work,  
**and his righteousness endures forever.**

<sup>4</sup> He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;  
**the LORD is gracious and merciful.**

<sup>5</sup> He provides food for those who fear him;  
**he is ever mindful of his covenant.**

**R: "Be thou my wisdom, O Lord of my heart,  
Naught be all else to me save that thou art."**

<sup>6</sup> He has shown his people the power of his works,  
**in giving them the heritage of the nations.**

<sup>7</sup> The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
**all his precepts are trustworthy.**

<sup>8</sup> They are established forever and ever,  
**to be performed with faithfulness and  
uprightness.**

<sup>9</sup> He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant forever.  
**Holy and awesome is his name.**

<sup>10</sup> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;  
**all those who practice it have a good  
understanding.**

**His praise endures forever.**

**R: "Thou and thou only, first in my heart  
Great God of heaven, my treasure thou art."**

THE EPISTLE

Ephesians 5:15-20

<sup>5</sup><sup>15</sup> Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the most of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURE

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

<sup>2</sup><sup>10</sup> Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. <sup>11</sup> The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. <sup>12</sup> So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. <sup>4</sup> The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. <sup>5</sup> At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." <sup>6</sup> And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. <sup>7</sup> And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. <sup>8</sup> And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. <sup>9</sup> Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

<sup>10</sup> It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. <sup>11</sup> God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, <sup>12</sup> I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. <sup>13</sup> I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. <sup>14</sup> If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

A man was walking on the beach one day when he found a bottle half buried in the sand. He decided to pick it up and open it. Inside was a genie. The genie said, "I will grant you three wishes and three wishes only." The man thought about his first wish and decided, "I wish I had a million dollars in a Swiss bank account. POOF! (His wish was granted.) Next he wished a big house in the fancy part of town. POOF! He found himself in a mansion overlooking the ocean. And as he stood in the foyer looking at his reflection in the mirror, he made his final wish: "I wish I was irresistible to women." POOF! And he turned into a box of chocolates.

Truth be told, when presented with the opportunity to have "anything we want" most people's initial impulses mirror our beach-walking man, don't they? Let me ask you a question: How many of you have ever had a conversation with someone that started with the question, "If you had a million dollars, what would you do with it?"

Years ago there was a song -- that went like this: "If I had a million dollars, I'd buy you a house, buy you furniture for your house, I'd buy you a K-Car." It went on to buying her a dress and a coat and even her love! And the punch line of the song -- which ended up being used by the New York State lottery for years was: "If I had a million dollars, I'd be rich." (song by Barenaked Ladies) And wouldn't *that* come in handy right now in our present moment of history! A million dollars?! What a relief! If you lose your job, or you're without a job, or your retirement portfolio is more of a prune than plum—wouldn't it be great to win the lottery?

Wouldn't it be helpful if the United Methodist Church condoned gambling? "If I had a million dollars, I'd be rich."

We're starting out this morning talking about wealth as we prepare to consider the story of Solomon's dream. Maybe you think that my beach-walking, bottle opening, genie man is a bit farfetched, but the story we heard about Solomon this morning reads a lot like that except that, instead of a genie in a bottle, it's God who shows up in Solomon's dream.

"Ask what I should give you," says God to Solomon. Excellent! Bring it on! What king doesn't want a million bars of gold, a huge palace, a fast chariot, and a harem of women? I mean, why not ask for that?

Solomon's time had no more certainty in it than our time now. In fact it had *less*. Back then, a kingdom could be overthrown in a week and a day. Who would blame Solomon for asking for these things?

But Solomon *doesn't* fall into this all too human trap. Instead, he asks for...what? Do you remember? He asks for "an understanding mind to govern your people, (God), able to discern between good and evil".

Not wealth. Not status. Not women. Solomon instead asks for *wisdom* – and this pleases God! And, POOF! God made Solomon wise! “Because you have asked this,” says God to Solomon, “and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, <sup>12</sup> I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.”

Nice! But, is being wise really all that it's cracked up to be? Paul seemed to think so. We heard him this morning in his letter to the Ephesians telling them to be wise. “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time,” he advised the people of Ephesus.

So, Solomon thought wisdom was more worthwhile than wealth and Paul seemed to also, but do we?

Today, we are invited to consider whether “wisdom” is, indeed, a better thing than money and privilege. *Is wisdom really better?*

The ancient philosopher, Sophocles, thought so. In his famous work *Antigone*, he wrote, “Wisdom outweighs any wealth.” So he thought wisdom was better and he wrote this in 442 BC, proving that our question this morning did not begin with us – nor will it end with us. Rather each generation from ancient times forward contemplates this question.

“Wisdom outweighs any wealth,” Sophocles said, but is he right?

Think about it! With *wealth*, we don't have to be self-serving, we can be *generous*. With *wealth* I could buy my youngest sister a house! I could endow the poor mountain churches I pastored back in the early 2000s! I could sponsor a child from a poor country. I could fund the building of a school in Ghana. “If I had (a couple of) million dollars, I'd be rich.”

But would I be *wise*? And is it better to be *rich* or to be *wise*? Do we set our tent with Sophocles? Or do we set our tent on the beach waiting for a bottle to wash up on shore?

With family visiting this week, this reflection of rich vs. wise brought back memories of a trip to India that I took with my sister, Amy, and her partner, Allan – who are here today with us (along with my mother and our relative by marriage, Michele.)

Two images came to mind. One was the Taj Mahal, and the other was the Gandhi Museum -- both of which we visited in India in 2009.

For those of you who have never had the privilege, I can attest that standing on the marble floors of the Taj Mahal at sunrise is a *very rich* experience! The Taj—made of all white marble, embellished with inlays of

semi-precious gemstones and intricate carvings is situated to greet the sunrise and the sunset in *perfect symmetry!* It took 20,000 artisans and laborers 20 years to build this work of art. It was built as the resting place for an emperor's beloved third wife who died giving birth to their fourteenth child.

It is *very rich!* And at sunrise I walked the terrace in bare feet marveling at a structure that was *still as beautiful* as it was when it was first built almost 400 years ago! How good for this emperor to be so rich that he could build such a monument to love! It was breathtaking!

But am I a *better* person for having visited the Taj Mahal? Probably not.

Now let me tell you a little bit about the Gandhi Museum in Delhi. Before you even walk through the door you are confronted with a profound quote inscribed on the wall outside. "My life," said Mahatma Gandhi, "is my message." That really made me stop and think. As one blogger said of this quote: "If *that* is a means to measure *any of us*, what message does *our life* deliver to the world?" (Terry Tamminen, [www.fastcompany.com](http://www.fastcompany.com)) What message does *my* life deliver to the world?

*This* is where we start to talk about *wisdom*.

Gandhi, owned almost nothing when he died; his body we most often visualize as emaciated and frail given his self-imposed starvation protests. Yet he had this message of wisdom and it is etched in stones *far* greater than the Taj Mahal—it is etched in history itself. "*My life is my message.*"

Did you know that India attributes its *freedom* to *Gandhi* – *not* to **Mirza Shahab-ud-din Baig Muhammad Khan Khurram**, (who?) better known by the name **Shah Jahan** – still nothing? Shah Jahan was the rich man who had the Taj Mahal built. And yet, it is not he but *Gandhi* who India calls "The Father of the Nation".

Yes, the stunningly beautiful Taj Mahal continues to impress people to this day, but it is Gandhi's *wisdom* that changed history. His wisdom which lives on in museums and blogs and books that people continue to read today—70 years since his death. They are filled with wisdom and hope. They are words of wisdom influenced by both the Hindu scriptures known as the Bhagavad-Gita *and* our Christian Scriptures, specifically, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—did you know that? (Matthew 5:3-10) Here are some of Jesus' words that influenced Gandhi deeply:

“3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The wisdom Gandhi gleaned from these words laid the foundation of his insistence on non-violence.

In a world filled with too much devastation, too much corruption, too much need—Gandhi spoke these words of wisdom: “When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—*always*...It is the *quality* of our work which will please God and not the *quantity*.”

(<http://www.quotationspage.com>)

Such words of wisdom set a country free! Such words of wisdom floated over the seas on the clouds, on a breeze, and set our country free as well. You do know, after all, that the wisdom of Gandhi was a major influence in the life work of Martin Luther King, Jr., don't you? *Non-violent wisdom that challenged the chains of racial discrimination in this country and loosened them up. Non-violent wisdom that caught the imagination of hundreds of thousands and changed a country so dramatically that in just 50 years we had an African American president!*

Is there more work to do on racism? Absolutely! But did *wealth* push the envelope forward...or did *wisdom*? Looked at through this chain of history, *wisdom wins!*

“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil,” asked Solomon of God. And this pleased God.

With *wealth* I could buy my youngest sister a house -- but maybe her apartment is just fine! Maybe she really needs a car! I could endow the poor mountain churches I used to pastor – but might that keep them open when no one is worshipping there any longer? What would be the point of that? If I can sponsor one child from a poor country, perhaps I should sponsor two. I could fund a school building in Ghana, but maybe that village needs a *well* for fresh, clean water.

“If I had (a couple of) million dollars, I'd be rich” – but it's *wisdom* that sculpts the best use of such generosity.

Solomon would, indeed, go on to be a very wise man. He presided over his courts with great wisdom. We are told that, when two women came to Solomon each claiming to be the mother of a single baby—he knew how to discern who the real mother was! When the queen of Sheba came to visit him, she was so impressed by his wisdom that she most certainly returned to her country with a testimony to it! (1 Kings 10:1-13) We are told that Solomon's wisdom was "greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. (That) he was wiser than any other...and (that) his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke 3000 proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five...Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom." (1 Kings 4:29-34)

From Solomon to Jesus, from Jesus to Gandhi, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr., from Martin Luther King, Jr. to other really wise people we haven't mentioned this morning because we don't have that much time, and from those really wise people to *us*!

As people of faith, we are invited to value wisdom over wealth -- even though that is countercultural. We are invited to dig deeply into our scriptures and to reflect earnestly on the teachings and message of Jesus to gain true wisdom. The Sermon on the Mount that challenged Gandhi and ultimately brought him to a strategy of non-violence, brought about more change in this world than any amount of money could have.

Today we are invited to walk in the way of wisdom and live. It is not an easy road. It is certainly not the message that we have received, imbibed and consciously or subconsciously embraced in a culture driven by consumption, wealth and status. But, it is our walk. Our journey. One that each of us takes for ourselves. And one that we take together, as a community of believers, committed to a Gospel that sets the world free.

Blessings on the journey. Amen.