

The Wisdom of Every Generation

A sermon preached by Dr. Eric Bigalke
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Excelsior, Minnesota
on Sunday, September 16, 2018.

On the occasion of his official welcome and blessing as Director of Music and Organist of the same.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer. AMEN.

For any of you who may be wondering how it is that I came to be preaching during this, my Welcome Sunday, I'm delighted to tell you that this was Anne's idea while Devon was on vacation. During one of my first weeks here at Trinity, she invited me back to the "Deacon's Den" and asked if I might want to preach for my Welcome Sunday. Actually I don't mind occasional preaching, but it's always a matter of what to preach about. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit has provided some guidance in this respect, and my heart has been meditating on today's reading from the apocryphal text of the Wisdom of Solomon, so it is there that I would like to focus our time this morning. Since the passage is not often read on Sundays, let me refresh your memories with a portion of the reading:

*For wisdom is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.*

*Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;
for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.*

Truly, this passage has been on my mind, and in my heart for some weeks, as I have been preparing for this morning.

Last Saturday, I went with my parents up to the Central Minnesota town of Grey Eagle, on Big Birch Lake, about a hundred miles northwest of here, between St. Cloud, Little Falls, and Sauk Centre. The occasion was the annual Harris Cousins' Party. Harris is the married name of my maternal great-grandmother, Rose. She and my great-grandfather had five daughters in Grey Eagle. After my great-grandfather died at a young age, Rose was left to raise her daughters alone, and she supported the family in part by tending the telephone switchboard, and writing the gossip column for the Grey Eagle newspaper—activities which doubtless coincided in some way or another. Among the five daughters, two of them each married a brother from the Kutter family, who also lived in Grey Eagle. These days, the Cousins' Party is still usually held on one of the old Kutter family farms. The farm is now owned by "Big" Mike Kutter. He was once drafted by the New England Patriots, so he is big. But he missed his family and farm so much that he came back to Grey Eagle and opened an insurance agency. As a result of his business relationships in the community, Mike has assembled quite a collection of old Corvettes and Cadillacs, in which he has a certain amount of justifiable pride. And he's converted the old pole barn into a hangout, filled with old traffic signs, beer signs, bar signs, lighted signs, an old jukebox, and a bar...Kut's Kooler, as its called, is quite the spot!

My maternal grandmother, Hazel, did not marry a Kutter boy, but married a Peschel. Hazel and Rob are buried in the Catholic cemetery, just outside Grey Eagle, right next to a farm that they used to own. Often, when my family and I visit Grey Eagle, we make an almost obligatory run to the cemetery, which we also did last Saturday. There indeed was that Peschel gravestone. I remember so clearly when it was first put in. My Grandpa Rob died in 1988, and I remember his funeral very well. I actually have lots of memories of him, since I was about six when he died. I was almost stunned last week when I noticed again the year that he died. It means that all of my memories of him are all over thirty years old! Where have the last thirty years gone! It's scary.

I also remember when his name and dates were the only ones on the stone. It was like that for years—just Grandpa's name. But as time has gone by, which it seems to inevitably do, all of the empty places on the stone have been completely filled, first by my Grandma Hazel, and then with my Uncle Lynn, and my Aunt Rosanne. So many of these people that I remember so well in my life have already gone, and the gravestone that was fresh in my childhood has become filled.

As the Holy Spirit would have it, the cousins' party from last week featured two presentations on the family genealogy as part of the festivities. It was definitely a first. One of the Kutter cousins about my age literally gave a PowerPoint presentation right there in the Kooler, which was followed up by my mom's Cousin Bob. I had already heard some of this, but also learned some new things. My Great-Grandma Rose's maiden name was Noyce. One of my early Noyce ancestors was the Rector of a church in the village of Cholderton, in southern England. That parish dates to before the Norman Conquest. A bunch of Noyces sailed on the *Mary and John* to Massachusetts in the early 1630s. A near descendant of these Noyces became one of the Founders of Yale University, and the Noyce family tradition of clergy continued, with many Noyces educated at and affiliated with Yale.

Another family line from England were the Hungerfords. Apparently, one of the family ancestors was the Baron Hungerford, but he came out on the wrong side of the English Civil War and was sent to America, as punishment. These English immigrants and their descendants lived around Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire practically for centuries, until a few of the family began to strike west during the 19th-century westward expansion. We know that a particular Noyce moved from New England to Ohio, and from there ended up teaching Latin and Greek in Wisconsin. A subsequent generation fought in the American Civil War, and as a consequence were given land grants around the area of present-day Grey Eagle. The word is that they spent their first year in the area in a sod house. Over a period of about 250 years, my ancestors went from English clergy and nobility in Berkshire and Wiltshire, to Founders of Yale, to pioneer farmers in Central Minnesota.

Now, of course, this only one part of my ancestral tapestry, but it already comes with lots of threads. It makes me wonder what the common thread is. On the one hand, I think that knowing a bit of the family history makes history in general much more interesting. The English lords and ladies, and Puritans, and Salem Witch Trial prosecutors, and Civil War soldiers, and pioneer farmers weren't just "some people" lost to history. They were the earlier generations of my family. And probably they were the earlier generations of a lot of your families. And, in a way, that makes each of us the common thread. The people and events of the past are indeed history, but they've pushed forward over the millennia to us, and now it is

our turn to live our lives, and to tell our part of the story. The story of Creation. And a century, or a millennium from now, we will be part of the history, of people, events, and places. Names and dates. But we will also have contributed our part to the story, just like all of our ancestors have contributed theirs. One of the most fascinating aspects of all this to me is that no generation can be left out. If there would ever be a gap, then humanity would end, and all human knowledge would cease. But that hasn't been the case. Each generation has contributed to the next, in an unbroken line, since the dawn of Creation. I find that to be awesome.

It is also flattering to think of myself as the common thread...the point where all previous stories and generations come together into the present. But I feel that the spiritual task in all of this is to attempt to discern the common thread of wisdom. Our apocryphal text this morning assures us that, "in every generation she [wisdom] passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets." And further, that, "God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom." It would be so reassuring to think that I am a person who lives with wisdom. That you are a person who lives with wisdom. That we all are people who live with wisdom. I don't know...what do you think? In a way, I feel it's a trap. I'd rather consider myself a fool and be wise, than consider myself wise and be a fool.

But if I take myself out of the equation, then, in each generation, can I find the holy souls, the friends of God, and prophets? You know, I think that I can. And I can definitely tell you that, as an expectant parent, I pray that wisdom passes into my children, that they are holy souls, and friends of God. And I wonder, who doesn't want that for their children? I would think that, in this regard, you have all become my choir, that I'm preaching to.

I'm sure that most of you are familiar with the 1 Corinthians passage which proclaims, "Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love." I would not dispute that. But I would also argue that wisdom is a virtue to be valued and pursued. I had never thought before, what could be superior to light, but indeed, it is succeeded by the night. Wisdom is that reflection of the eternal light, the working of God, and an image of his goodness, against which evil does not prevail.

The question is how. How can we have wisdom enter and work among us, enter into our generations, and pass forward to the future. How can we write a part of the story together, that when our descendants look back, they say, "Holy smokes! Those people really had it together! What a legacy they've left for us. How marvelously they have equipped our generations with wisdom!" I believe the answer is to proclaim, as did the writer of Joshua, that, "As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." Let us decide that we're not too tired, not too old, not too young, not too rich, not too poor, not too empty, not too full, not too hurt, not too proud, not too anything to love the LORD our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Let us dedicate ourselves to worship God, and sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Let us dedicate ourselves to loving and serving our families, friends, neighbors, and communities across the world in need. Let us leave God's Creation a better place than we found it, with more beauty, and richness of knowledge, and love. Let us be the embodiment of wisdom in our age, and pass wisdom down to all of the ages to come. Through the power, the grace, and the glory of God; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.