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Family Matters: Words of Wisdom

Exodus 18:17-24, 27

Jethro comes to visit his son-in-law, Moses. We first meet Jethro when Moses as a young man kills an Egyptian and then Moses runs for his life. It is Jethro who takes in Moses, gives him work, a place to stay and ultimately his own daughter, Zipporah. Many years later, we find Moses leading the Israelites to the land that God has promised them. This is a great throng of people. Certainly, there are various estimates concerning the number of Israelites in the desert with Moses, but 600,000 people is the number often cited in writings about this time in history.

Moses is no longer a young man. Nearing his 80s, he is still the leader of the people of Yahweh and when his even older father-in-law arrives, Moses tells him of the mighty acts of Yahweh. Jethro is not only impressed by God's actions, he is convinced and convicted by God's power and grace. Jethro who is clearly well aware of the worship of many gods, of the polytheism of his culture gives his life and devotion to one God, Yahweh. We are told that he prepares an offering for Yahweh and then in his conversation with Moses, Jethro, this brand new convert to monotheism, begins to build his life on the fear and awe and devotion to God.

As he surveys the leadership skills of Moses, Jethro offers this advice: "You will wear yourself and these people out! The work is too heavy for you." I love those words. A voice of wisdom that echoes across the centuries, you cannot depend upon yourself alone. If you do, you will wear yourself out and you will wear out all those around you. Life in relationship with God is a communal reality. It is not based on one individual, but on the relationship between God and humanity with each other. Going it alone will bring no added blessing or benefit. Then Jethro adds this great advice and true wisdom: "Select capable men from all the people, men who fear God."

Wisdom seems difficult to find these days. I asked you earlier in the service to consider the wisdom that has been shared with you over the years by those who have been your elders. Part of the loss in this culture is the front porch mindset, where people sat outside in the evening and took the opportunity to sit and discuss life; to engage in discourse. Philip Gulley speaks to that loss and to the fact that air conditioning took many in this culture away from spending time outside with others to spending time isolated inside. In addition, many families no longer share time as an extended family at the dinner table. That lack of engagement has diminished the opportunity to exchange ideas, to discuss values and impart wisdom.

For generations, wisdom has been exchanged through face to face encounters between the young people and the more mature members of society. Certainly, not everything an older person has said to a younger one is wise and we all know that ignorance and bigotry have been handed down generationally, but the truth is that we have become a culture more interested in

information than in wisdom. We love to know the facts and figures in the shortest sound bites possible so that we can make a snap decision that we will support with great energy and commitment – even when the facts and figures are wrong and the sound bite misleading.

True wisdom is becoming scarce. The opportunity to sit down and discuss living out our faith between generations has become rare. Instead, we have become isolated individuals who will defend our rights to the death with little concern about the rights of another. Our sense of community is eroding away in the church as well as the culture.

Randy and I went to a 4th of July parade in Lebanon, Indiana on Friday afternoon. We had not been there for many years and it was much like I remembered it. There were children on bikes decorated with red, white and blue streamers. There were cars carrying the present Miss Boone County, followed by many prior Miss Boone County queens. There were cheers for the most beautiful Boone County babies. There were bands and fire engines and floats and flags. People lined the streets of the town to cheer on the parade participants. It was fairly idyllic and reminded me again how much I love this country. We spent a wonderful time Friday night watching an amazing fireworks display out on the east side of the city. Several times during the day, I was struck by an overwhelming feeling of love for this country. I did not know anyone else standing near me at the parade, and yet I felt connected to them. I watched the fireworks with hundreds of strangers, yet felt a bond with them, the bond which grew from knowing we were all Americans.

Like you, I love this country. With all of its beauty and its flaws, this is my country. This is the land of my birth and there is no country on the face of the earth in which I would rather live. The wonderful celebrations every 4th of July remind us of the precious bond we share as the people of the United States of America. Yet, I pray that we are wise in our devotion to this land. For as important as our love of country, we must never allow our love for one land, our love for one people to overshadow our devotion to our God. Wisdom cautions us not to allow our love of country to blind us to the ways of God. Going it alone as an individual or a nation will only wear us out. We are all God's people, if it were not so, you and I, gentiles like Jethro, would not have been received into God's grace. May we embrace his wisdom for he understood that Moses, a powerful and strong leader, was not able to administer the leadership necessary on his own. Jethro counsels Moses not to look for the most popular men, or the oldest men, or the smartest men to serve as leaders, but rather he encourages Moses to find those who fear God, who bow down before Yahweh and allow Yahweh to lead. It is the faithful of the community that Jethro considers worthy. His wisdom calls to us this day.

As wonderful as this nation is, as devoted as we are to it, we are wise to focus on our faith relationship first and foremost. It is from our fear, our awe of God, from our love and devotion to God that our wisdom is rooted. It is our faithfulness that God claims as worthy. Our salvation does not rest in the candidates running for president. Certainly, it is important that we participate in the process of the coming election, not for our salvation, but for our nation, but we need be very clear, our salvation lies not with any human in this land or any land, our salvation and the salvation of the world rests solely in the hands of our loving God and through the grace of Jesus Christ.

In his book, *God's Politics*, author Jim Wallis offers these words: “We bring faith into the public square when our moral convictions demand it. But to influence a democratic society, you must win the public debate about why the policies you advocate are better for the common good.... religious people shouldn't be told just to be quiet, they should be invited to participate as citizens who have the right and the obligation to bring their deepest moral convictions to the public square for the democratic discourse on the most important values and directions that will shape our society.”

Christians are shaped by our devotion to God and we are neither wise disciples nor wise citizens when we try to separate the values instilled by the practice of our faith from our daily living in this world.

In 1884, The New York *Times* carried an article about the placement of the capstone on the Washington Monument. It was quite an occasion. A special platform was built so that dignitaries could be elevated up above the crowd that was gathered below to watch the capstone being put into place. The project itself had begun 36 years earlier with the placement of the cornerstone. The actual monument was built to be over 550 feet tall with the anticipation that it would remain the highest point in Washington, D.C. The capstone itself is marble with an apex of aluminum. There are four faces to the capstone and there are inscriptions on each face.

One face includes the names of the chief engineer and his assistants.

Another face has the date of the cornerstone, July 4, 1848

The date of the first stone 1880

And the date of the capstone December 6, 1884

The third face has the names of the Joint Commission who were presiding at the setting of the capstone

And the fourth face has two words in Latin: *Laus Deo* meaning “God be Praised” or “Praise be to God.”

Now of course, you cannot see these inscriptions when you are standing on the ground looking up, but during a recent renovation, a replica of the capstone was placed so the public could inspect it. Controversy was sparked when the face of the replica stone was placed near a wall and the side with *Laus Deo* was no longer visible to the public. In a response to the concerns of many who visited the Monument, Bob Unruh, a spokesperson for the National Park Service offered these words in an email. “The replica capstone was on display in a tent on the National Mall during recent renovation of the Monument. When it was moved inside the Monument, it was placed against the wall. While the change in placement and wording was never intended to offend anyone, we understand why some visitors might feel otherwise. We made a mistake and are fixing it. The capstone is being moved away from the wall so that visitors will be able to read the engravings on all four sides.”

Now, standing alone this email is just another fact to put into our enormous bucket of information with all the other facts and figures we carry around with us. It only becomes real

wisdom when we move from the knowledge that Laus Deo, Praise be to God, is inscribed on the capstone to the understanding that we as individuals and we as a nation find “Praise for God” as the foundation for all our words and all our actions, for the way we live in harmony with one another in this nation and with all nations, for the way we structure our budgets and disperse our revenues, for the way we manage our resources and cherish our interdependence. Only when “Praise Be to God” becomes the life stance for us as individuals and as a nation will we truly become the people God envisions and will we truly become wise.

When was the last time you shared your wisdom, your abiding understanding of God with another? When was the last time you engaged in discourse about the essentials of faith in such a way that you listened to the wisdom of another as well as shared from your wisdom?

Laus Deo, words not just inscribed on a piece of marble or words to be remembered on the 4th of July, but rather living praise for God each and every day. Wisdom comes as truth borne out over time. Our wisdom as individuals, as a nation, as a global community, as the people called Christian, is rooted in our love and praise for the God of all creation. Even as we celebrate liberty, even as we continue to strive for justice, may we have the wisdom of Jethro who was convinced and convicted by the power and grace of God and then began to build life anew as a devoted follower of the ways of God. In so doing, he became wise as he submitted to God while he structured his life based upon his new found faith. “Praise Be to God” -- not just words inscribed in marble, but the very wisdom upon which we build our lives and our nation.