

## Proper 20B

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8

A turtle who always talked at the wrong times was approached by two swans who offered to fly him to a nearby pond. Each swan took an end of a stick and told the turtle to grasp the middle of the stick with his mouth. As the swans took off into the air, the turtle opened his mouth to speak, lost his hold on the stick and fell into a puddle. There is a time to talk and a time to be quiet. <http://www.simplewisdomfables.com/plaques.html>

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An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life...

"A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

"One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego.

"The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

"This same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old chief simply replied, "The one you feed."  
<http://www.saphyr.net/natam/two-wolves.htm>

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Marge went to her mail box and there was only one letter. She picked it up and looked at it before opening, but then she looked at the envelope again. There was no stamp, no postmark, only her name and address. She read the letter:

Dear Marge: I'm going to be in your neighborhood Saturday afternoon and I'd like to stop by for a visit. Love Always, Jesus

Her hands were shaking as she placed the letter on the table. "Why would the Lord want to visit me? I'm nobody special. I don't have anything to offer." With that thought, Marge remembered her empty kitchen cabinets. "Oh my goodness, I really don't have anything to offer. I'll have to run down to the store and buy something for dinner." She reached for her purse and counted out its contents. Five dollars and forty cents. "Well, I can get some bread and cold cuts, at least." She threw on her coat and hurried out the door. A loaf of French bread, a half-pound of sliced turkey, and a carton of milk ... leaving Marge with grand total of twelve cents to last her until Monday. Nonetheless, she felt good as she headed home, her meager offerings tucked under her arm.

"Hey lady, can you help us, lady?"

Marge had been so absorbed in her dinner plans, she hadn't even noticed two figures huddled in the alleyway. A man and a woman, both of them dressed in little more than rags "Look lady, I ain't got a job, ya know, and my wife and I have been living out here on the street, and, well,

now it's getting cold and we're getting kinda hungry and, well, if you could help us, Lady, we'd really appreciate it." Marge looked at them both. They were dirty, they smelled bad and frankly, she was certain that they could get some kind of work if they really wanted to. "Sir, I'd like to help you, but I'm a poor woman myself. All I have is a few cold cuts and some bread, and I'm having an important guest for dinner tonight and I was planning on serving that to Him." "Yeah, well, okay lady, I understand. Thanks anyway." The man put his arm around the woman's shoulders, turned and headed back into the alley. As she watched them leave, Marge felt a familiar twinge in her heart. "Sir, wait!" The couple stopped and turned as she ran down the alley after them. "Look, why don't you take this food. I'll figure out something else to serve my guest." She handed the man her grocery bag. "Thank you lady. Thank you very much!" "Yes, thank you!" It was the man's wife, and Marge could see now that she was shivering. "You know, I've got another coat at home. Here, why don't you take this one." Marge unbuttoned her jacket and slipped it over the woman's shoulders. Then smiling, she turned and walked back to the street ... without her coat and with nothing to serve her guest. "Thank you, lady! Thank you very much!"

Marge was chilled by the time she reached her front door, and worried too. The Lord was coming to visit and she didn't have anything to offer Him. She fumbled through her purse for the door key. But as she did, she noticed another envelope in her mailbox. "That's odd. The mailman doesn't usually come twice in one day." She took the envelope out of the box and opened it.

Dear Marge: It was so good to see you again. Thank you for the lovely meal. And thank you, too, for the beautiful coat. Love always, Jesus

The air was still cold, but even without her coat, Marge no longer noticed.

[http://www.livingconnections.com/christian\\_parables.html](http://www.livingconnections.com/christian_parables.html)

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We enjoy stories. In fact, we enjoy stories so much that we often remember the major points or lessons or the stories more easily than if we heard those same points or lessons in a lecture or even – God forbid – in a sermon. Stories engage us because we can so often see ourselves or someone we know in the characters. Or because we identify or connect with one of the characters in some way.

And we remember the lessons long after we have heard the final line in the story and sometimes long after we even remember the story itself. But the lesson sticks.

Those lessons are what help us develop wisdom in our own lives – they help us to develop a way of life that makes it possible to live in peace with others, to be compassionate, to be just and merciful, to forgive, to balance our priorities, to remember our own faults and mistakes, to live with a sense of hope, and to know how to share what we've learned – that is, to share our wisdom – with others. Not in a prideful way but in a humble and caring way. In an honest but not offensive way.

Knowing when to open our mouths and when to keep them closed.

Knowing that we always have choices when it comes to how we are going to act, to speak, to make choices on the paths our lives take.

Knowing that every person we meet is deserving of some level of human dignity, regardless of our own agendas.

Sometimes – perhaps even often – we forget the stories and lessons and make choices that are easier in that they conform more to the culture than to the wisdom of the ages. Choosing to act in a wise way can be so inconvenient to others, as we hear in the Wisdom of Solomon. It might even be inconvenient to ourselves such that our lives might be endangered. So we are called

again and again to make choices, knowing that the choices we make not only determine our life paths, but the paths of our children and those who look to us for guidance.

Who do we know, I wonder, that could be considered wise? And what are the characteristics that make that person wise? And from where do those characteristics originate? Is wisdom innate? Or can we evolve and develop into wise people?

Being known as a wise person is an immense responsibility. Pretty scary, actually. Wise people, after all, are still only human. And human beings are never perfect or always right. We forget that sometimes. We think that their – or our – wisdom comes from within ourselves – or that the wisdom of others comes from within them.

Let me suggest to you that a truly wise person knows that she or he is not the source of their wisdom. Rather that wisdom comes from a greater source – it comes from generations and generations of lives and stories and relationships. And more often than not, those lives and stories and relationships have had a close connection with a divinity who is seen as the source of all wisdom and the one who transcends the limits of human beings. This transcendent power, this divine spirit, has been involved with all of humanity from before the earliest cave drawings – that early art itself shows us the images of the search of those early humans for the divine.

But sometimes the smarter we get, the less wise we get. We think we don't need that wisdom that originated in the divine and that has been passed down through thousands of generations in the forms of stories and myths and fables and oral histories. We think life begins and ends with what we have here in this world and that the most important decisions we make are in concert with the culture and institutions around us. We forget that all of those things that seem so important are merely devised and given their status by human beings who insist that one's value is based in money, schools, neighborhoods, families, ethnicities, behavior, organizations, friends, or networks. All of those things, if you will, do not really tell us what is in a person's heart – they really do not tell us how wise a person is. In fact, they might even tell us how lacking in wisdom one is, for the importance placed on those things.

But the wise person is one who does not depend so much on the things of the world and the pressures of the culture. The wise person lives and shares the lessons of the ages, lives a life of faith in and knowledge of a creator who is the source of those lessons, and lives with a deep compassion for every human being, fully understanding the unbroken interconnectedness of all humanity.

The stories, the fables, the myths, the oral histories help us remember who we really are in the depths of our souls. For us, as Christians, those stories are in our sacred writings – writings that form our lives as our Creator would have us live – lives of justice, compassion, mercy – lives of wisdom. In the process, we entertain angels unawares, and we use our words to build up rather than tear down (or fall down, in the case of the turtle). But, in the end, who we are depends, as the elder said to the young man, on which wolf we choose to feed. May each one of us listen to God through our sacred writings and make the wisest choice.

Amen.

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