

Christian Poise

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“Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” – Matthew 10:16b

We’ve just survived another season of commencement speeches, when the air is thick with pieces of advice flying all around college campuses. Oprah spoke at Smith College – I mentioned a couple of weeks ago a bad piece of advice she gave that graduating class – Arnold Schwarzenegger spoke at High Point College -- and former vice president Joe Biden burned up the airwaves by speaking at Colby College, Cornell University, Morgan State University, and Harvard, all in the same commencement season.

As you can imagine, words of encouragement, snippets of collective wisdom, and calls to public service echoed from loudspeakers across the land, and Michael McIntyre, a columnist for the Plain Dealer, asked his Facebook friends to share with him some of the advice they’d give graduating seniors. Here are a few of the words of crowd-sourced wisdom McIntyre shared in his column on May 21<sup>st</sup>:

Read everything you can, be a good listener, have a firm handshake, work hard but pause to think. And don't dress like a slob.

Put down the phone. Disconnect. Live life in reality.

Learn to meditate.

If there is one thing certain in life, you will die. Live life for others and when you die you will have lived a good life.

Never be afraid to switch gears in life. Everything is reversible, except death and kids. As you learn more about yourself, never think you're stuck. Follow happiness and passion.

Life isn't fair. Nobody owes you anything. But God loves you anyway.

Despite what they tell you, you cannot have it all. Instead, focus on what you want and remember that may change over time.

Choose your friends wisely and stay the hell away from drugs.

You don't have to attend every argument you're invited to.

Keep your mouth shut.

Never ever stop reading. It's a new adventure every day. If you never are bored you will never be boring.

Find out who you are, and go be that.

Travel.

Drive across the United States. Then decide.

Bother with people.

Speak truth to power.

Be Kind.

That's some of the advice we grown-ups would give our young people today. Here's the advice Jesus gave his disciples two thousand years ago as he was about to launch them on their life's work. It's preserved in the sixteenth verse of the tenth chapter of Matthew's gospel and I take it as the text for this morning's sermon, which is my way of passing his wisdom on to you: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

If you compare Jesus' words to that partial list from Michael McIntyre's online friends, you can see immediately why Jesus was never invited to be anyone's commencement speaker. "Read everything you can" is very good advice. It's short, it's to the point, and it's harmless – everything you want in advice.

But "be wise as serpents" – what does that mean? And how are we supposed to be "innocent as doves" at the same time? How do we put these two commands together in ourselves? How do we strike the balance that is the essence of Christian poise?

Jesus' words aren't nearly as user-friendly as "Find out who you are, and go be that." When it comes to Jesus' words, we have to work to dig out their meaning, we have to pause, we have to consider, we have to ponder. We might have to treat Jesus' words more like one of Mary Oliver's poems than like directions from Google Maps. We might have to re-visit his words from time to time. We might have to revise what we first thought about them. And still we might not grasp fully what Jesus was saying to his disciples and to us.

But we believe – we don't have proof, so we believe – that Jesus' words are, in fact, addressed to us no less than he addressed them to his first disciples, and we believe that he wasn't speaking gibberish. So it's our duty as latter-day disciples to learn and to heed. Where do we begin?

Let's start by asking ourselves if we know what wisdom means. Right about now is the only time in the year when our public discourse turns itself toward wisdom, and we have commencement ceremonies to thank for that. Wisdom is in short supply in our culture right now, and it's in even shorter supply on the lips of our leaders. Why is wisdom not a requirement for leadership anymore? Why do we not demand that our candidates for office demonstrate wisdom? Politicians talk about the economy, they talk about terrorism, they talk about political polarization, but where is their talk of wisdom? And, more important, where are their demonstrations of it?

Wisdom is more than intelligence. History is packed like a sausage with intelligent people behaving unwisely. Enron told us that. The savings and loan debacle told us that. The mortgage meltdown told us that. People using their intelligence to take advantage of temporary circumstances at the expense of long-term benefit may be smart, but they're very unwise. Short-term gain, long-term loss is a word not to the smart, but to the wise.

"What does it profit to gain the whole world," Jesus asked, "and to lose your soul?" Millions upon millions of people, all across history and across every culture, have lost their souls in order to gain some fragment of the world. That fragment might be a shiny bauble; it might be a trophy spouse; it might be political advantage; it might be headlines today or tomorrow.

But whatever it is, it is not worth sacrificing your soul – your essential self – for, and that essential self is the image and likeness of God in which we are all created and which we all bear.

Some of you may have seen the photo of the young woman helping a blind man hail a cab after a Cubs game in Chicago not long ago. A with a cane was trying to attract the attention

of a taxi and a young woman saw that he wasn't succeeding. So she walked over to him and asked if she could help. He thanked her and she flagged a cab down for him. They chatted briefly, she helped him get in the cab and on his way, and then she rejoined her friends. Unbeknownst to either of them, a man in a nearby apartment witnessed the event from his window and he snapped some pictures of the encounter and posted them on Facebook with an account of what happened. The story went viral, and here's what one person wrote in response: "Such a simple pure gesture of true genuine humanity as it should be. . . ."

This person gets it – they get what genuine humanity looks like, what it means to be created in God's image and likeness and to live our lives making that divine reality the center of gravity of our essential selves. Wisdom is knowing how the world works and how to get what you want from life without sacrificing that divine essential self.

And I think that may be what Jesus meant when he told us to be innocent as doves as well as wise as serpents. Our innocence consists not of naivete or ignorance or stupidity, just as our wisdom does not consist of a head full of other people's ideas. Our innocence consists, rather, in our deliberate orientation of ourselves toward those divine ends that merit the expenditure of our wisdom. Innocence consists of the steady directing of our essential selves – our souls, to use Jesus' word – toward the divine in such a way that we do not have time, energy, or inclination to abuse our faculties of reason and strength by employing them dishonorably.

The Bible often speaks of wisdom, but it rarely speaks of intelligence, and the reason for that is because wisdom is intelligence in the service of the best – the best for me, the best for you, the best for all of us, the best for everything. That's God's will for the world – the best for everything. And wisdom helps us discern what that best might be, and innocence is the will to work for it.

We commonly associate innocence with children and define innocence as unspoiled or inexperienced. That way of thinking about innocence means that you can be innocent if you're a child or you can be found innocent of a particular offense if you're an adult, but you can't make yourself innocent in response to Jesus' command. None of us can return to childhood. Growing up is a bell that cannot be un-rung. For better and for worse, we're stuck with our experience, so being innocent as well as wise doesn't mean to pretend that we're inexperienced. It means, rather, that we live in such a way that it is God, who wills the best for the world, that determines who we are. That's what it means for the Christian to be innocent. We are wise enough to know what the world truly is, but we are innocent enough to know that God wills the best for that world.

Our wisdom puts our intelligence in the service of the best, and our innocence keeps us oriented toward God who reveals to us what that best is. When you put those two together – wisdom and innocence – you get a Christian who is poised to meet the world – and to meet it on Christ's terms and not on the world's.