

To Grow in Wisdom

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“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” -- Luke 2:52

This is a sermon about wisdom, and here's what I know about wisdom today.

In the summer of my eighteenth year, a new music teacher arrived at the high school in our little town. He was young, good-looking, fresh out of college, and single. When I wasn't working, I found any and every excuse to be at the high school from which I had recently graduated, helping the new teacher find things, file things, clean things, and repair things. And we'd talk. Or, more accurately, he listened while I talked. He was a very good listener, which is a good thing to be when you're new.

Before long, I was smitten. And not long after that, I was forlorn, because he was the consummate professional. I talked and he listened while we got the band room ready for the fall, and that was the extent of things for June, July, and August.

As I was ambling home one afternoon, Cordelia was sitting on her porch swing. Back and forth, slowly and gently, creating just the right amount of breeze for a hot and humid summer afternoon.

“Hey,” she said, “come up here and sit a spell.”

So I sat down beside her on the porch swing, as I had many times growing up two doors down. Cordelia, her husband, Herman, and her widowed sister, Victoria, were the only black people who lived in Tell City in those days, and they had for many years. The three sisters – Cordelia, Victoria, and Viola – had grown up, with their parents, in the house they still lived in when I knew Cordelia and Victoria late in their lives. Their parents were long dead, Viola and her husband were dead, and Victoria's husband, Chester, had died some years before I arrived in Tell City in 1968. That left Cordelia, known to us kids as Dee-Dee, and Herman, known to us as Van, and Vic, in the modest white house two doors down from us on Fifteenth Street.

Their house, surrounded by flower and vegetable gardens that I, on occasion, helped tend, was well cared for on the outside and immaculate on the inside, and even on the hottest of summer days in hot southern Indiana, the house somehow remained cool and comfortable in the days before air conditioning was common.

“What's the matter with you?” Cordelia asked when we'd settled into our swinging rhythm: back and forth, slowly and gently, back and forth.

“You been dragging your face around like a bag of horse feed for most of this summer. Something bothering you?”

“Oh, it's nothing,” I said. Back and forth, back and forth.

“Must be something,” she said, “or you wouldn't like look such a cloudy day all the time.”

“Oh, it's nothing,” I repeated, hoping she'd let it go.

She didn't. She sat in silence, except for the gentle squeaking of the porch swing, waiting for me to continue.

"Oh, it's just somebody I like who doesn't like me." I was eighteen and didn't realize how much I'd just told her.

"Mmm, hm," she said, knowing she was sailing in the direction of truth.

Cordelia didn't say anything for a minute so, and we kept swinging, back and forth, back and forth.

"Like or love?" she asked in a way that made it sound more like a statement than a question.

"Well, love, I suppose," I said after a moment's hesitation.

"Mmm, hm," she said again, with that tone of voice that never required her to open her mouth. We kept swinging, back and forth, back and forth. From my perspective, we were entering dangerous waters, although you'd never know it from the regular, gentle creak of the swing.

For a minute or so, Cordelia didn't say anything, and I wasn't about to. No adult had ever probed so deeply into my emotional/romantic life, and I wasn't sure I was all that comfortable with the exploration, my feelings of genuine love for Dee-Dee notwithstanding.

After another pause filled only with the sound of the creaking swing, Dee-Dee ventured back in.

"Love like boyfriend and girlfriend?" she asked. This time I paused. I could feel her questions pushing me further into a corner, and if I didn't want to be trapped into self-disclosure, now would be the time for flight, because fight, with Cordelia, was an unthinkable option.

"Yeah, it's that kind," I said, as casually as I could force myself to sound.

"Mm, hmm," she acknowledged. She wasn't looking at me, and I wasn't looking at her. As far as my peripheral vision allowed me to see, she seemed to be looking somewhere into what portrait painters and photographers and movie directors call middle space, which, in our case, meant roughly the end of the green-painted porch.

And then, without the slightest disturbance of the swing's steady, gentle movement, she moved in for the kill.

"Boy or girl?" she asked.

The moment of truth, for me, had arrived, and I could face it or flee from it into a lifetime of deception. There on Dee-Dee's porch swing, on a hot summer afternoon in a hot and humid little town in the valley carved out by the Ohio River, I faced the future and, unbeknownst to me at the time, I faced what would become the romantic music of my life.

"Oh, boy," I said, as though it were no big deal.

"Mm, hmm," she said, telling me, without opening her mouth, that what I had just told her was, in fact, no big deal.

We continued to swing, back and forth, back and forth, in that gentle, humid breeze, and now I had to wait for whatever was going to come next.

After a little while, Cordelia spoke again. To my astonishment, she asked, "Have anything to do with that new music teacher I read about in the paper?"

How she'd put my emerging sexuality, my adolescent moodiness, and that article in the Tell City News together I'll never know. I was too surprised to ask her at the time, and she's been dead now for over thirty years.

"Well, yeah," I said, "it does."

"Mm, hmm," she said, now with a great deal of satisfaction in her voice. But the surprises weren't over.

Cordelia asked me what I was going to do about it, and I said there wasn't anything I could do about it, as far as I could see. She, however, could see farther, and she

reminded me that my family would be leaving for a week in Florida shortly, while I stayed behind to keep earning and saving for college.

“He has to eat, doesn't he? Can't you ask him over for supper?”

And thus it was that I had what felt to me my first real date. Dee-Dee and Vic fried the chicken and made from it the gravy at their house. I cooked the sides at ours. About half an hour before he was scheduled to arrive, two African American women came walking across our back yards, like the magi, bearing gifts: one with a foil-covered platter of fried chicken and gravy, and the other with a vase of Dee-Dee's prized and precious roses.

They wished me luck, kissed me on the cheek, and hurried home, like the magi, by another way. I learned later that the two of them, along with Herman, shared a pitcher of lemonade while they waited and watched behind the lace curtains in their front room. They were hoping to catch a glimpse of him in the flesh.

The text for this morning's sermon is the fifty-second verse of the second chapter of the gospel according to Luke: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.”

If *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ, is the goal of the Christian life, then growing in wisdom must be part of the deal. Despite my Th.D., which, you may recall, the Wizard of Oz called a Doctor of Thinkology, I can't say for sure that I know what wisdom looks like, but after more than forty years of looking, I haven't found anything more closely resembling wisdom than what Cordelia Van Earl showed me in that porch swing on that hot and humid summer afternoon.

Cordelia showed me that wisdom has something to do with paying attention and connecting the dots. She showed me, as Luke said of Mary at the end of our lesson, that wisdom requires us to treasure things in our hearts. Cordelia showed me, as Ecclesiastes says, that there is a time to speak and there is a time to keep silent.

Cordelia showed me the kind of wisdom the boy Jesus showed a Samaritan woman when he had increased in wisdom and in years. He met her at a well, told her that she'd had five husbands, and that the man she was currently living with wasn't her sixth. She was living in sin, and Jesus didn't tell her to stop. The woman was so astonished at what Jesus knew about her, and perhaps at Jesus's acceptance of her, she thought she was in the presence of the Messiah, or as we say today, the Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul calls Jesus the wisdom of God, and he says elsewhere, in Galatians 2:20, to be exact, that it is no longer he who lives but it is Christ who lives in him.

If you put those two thoughts together, you might conclude that it's possible for us to embody not only the love of God, but also the wisdom of God. Wouldn't that be a lovely thing to see?