

“Teach Us to Count”
Psalm 90:1-6, 10, 12
3rd Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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I’m sure you’ve noticed,
but in case you haven’t noticed,
there’s a lot of counting going on these days.

A friend of mine texted me from Texas:
“Stopped by Home Depot, it was packed, hardly anyone was wearing a mask...I turned around and went home.”

Mask-counting?
Number of people in a store at any given time?

It’s true...we’re doing a lot of counting these days...

We’re counting the numbers of students who may or may not be able to be in a classroom when school starts in the fall.

We’re counting RISK.
We’re counting COSTS, of doing this or doing that...

So we come to Psalm 90.

A marvelous text, beautiful text, and a text that tells us that there is something in our lives *that we don’t know how to count!*

“So teach us,” the Psalmist writes, “to count our days, that we may gain a wise heart.”

I'm going to SPLIT that verse into two parts today.

The first part I want to discuss with you is the last part.
What does it mean to have "a wise heart"?

This is a question that's been on my mind of late.

How do we know the wisest course of action—
for one's family, for our church,
for the schools in Greenville...

For creating affordable housing in Greenville?
For dismantling systems of violence in Greenville?

According to Psalm 90, being wise has something to do with counting our days. And one of the most common ways to understand these words is to not take our days for granted, to not let our days just go by without thinking...

"You sweep them away; they are like a dream..." the Psalmist writes.

"...they are soon gone, and we fly away."

In other words, time is short, so **count your blessings**.

You've heard this before, right?
Don't forget to count your blessings.

Be grateful for health when you have it.
Be thankful for the loved ones who keep you going each day.
It's a very common way of hearing this text.

Now...there is nothing wrong if you or I read the Psalm this way. Turning Psalm 90 into a habit of GRATITUDE. A wise heart is a grateful heart...there's nothing wrong with that. It's just incomplete.

Gaining a wise heart, a heart of WISDOM—
in the Bible—goes farther than gratitude,
and I believe the Psalmist knows this as well.

Let me get at it this way.

A number of years ago, the columnist David Brooks wrote a book entitled, “The Road to Character,” and Brooks began the book by describing the difference between (what he calls) the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues.

“The resume virtues are...the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.”

Then Brooks makes a confession:

“I was born with a natural disposition toward shallowness...
I'm paid to be a narcissistic blow-hard,
to volley my opinions,
to appear more confident about them than I really am.”

And he goes on to admit that he had not—at least at that time—paid enough attention to the eulogy virtues in his own life. In his estimation, he did not have the kind of “inner light” that SOME folks he met seemed to have.¹

¹ David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, New York: Random House, 2015.

I think what Brooks was talking about—was not just character, but WISDOM.

How do we gain a wise heart?

What do we want to be remembered for, when our own eulogies are given?

I've been thinking some about that recently.

With all the protests over racial inequality, I've asked myself, in recent weeks: have I really put much energy into fighting racial injustice in my life?

Or have I just agreed that racism needs to end, but hoped that OTHER good people will put their energy into it, that some other committed group of people will solve those problems, and racism will eventually go away?

When the late news anchor John Chancellor retired in the 1990's, he was asked about the most memorable moment in his 43 years of reporting.

Chancellor didn't mention Vietnam, or Watergate.

Instead, he spoke of the Democratic National Convention in 1964.

Black delegates were scarce on the convention floor that year—coming just in the wake of the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

Chancellor recalled stumbling upon an older African-American man toward the back of the auditorium who was holding on to a pillar.

The man was weeping
 and mumbling beneath tearful heaves,
 "All my life . . . all my life."

At first the newsman thought that this gentleman had fallen.

But when he leaned in closer, Chancellor saw that the man's sport coat was riddled with cigarette burn holes. A fellow delegate had decided that this man would be his personal ashtray and then other delegates joined in.

"The pain and anguish on that man's face," said Chancellor, "is something I will go to my grave remembering."²

Wisdom—having a wise heart—
 it's not just about gratitude for what we have.

It also is a concern and commitment to rectify what others in our society DO NOT HAVE.

Wisdom has something to do with JUSTICE.
 Plenty of examples in the Bible.

Some of you may remember the words of the prophet Jeremiah. We sometimes hear them during Advent, in the days leading up to the birth of Jesus:

Jeremiah 23.5:

² After the recording of this sermon, I learned that the event described here actually occurred at the Republican National Convention in 1964. See the reference to this story in <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1993-06-20-9306220293-story.html>.

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall...deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

Shall deal wisely, and shall execute justice...

Or how about King Solomon, David’s son, known for his wisdom...but not just his wisdom. As the writer of 1st Kings puts it:

“All Israel...stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.”

A wise heart cares about justice.

Not justice in the sense of revenge.
But justice in the sense of restoration.

Social justice, economic justice, racial justice so that our community and our country can be more WHOLE.

So how do we do it?

That’s where I think the FIRST PART of this verse (Psalm 90:12) comes into play.

“Teach us to count our days...”

Teach us. Those two words imply that we have something to learn. That we do not know all that we need to know when it comes to wisdom.

They imply, at the most fundamental level—that we need to LISTEN.

If you were here in this room with me right now, I would do one of my “raise your hand” exercises:

How many of you have ever been a student before?
And you would raise your hand.

How many of you ever heard your teacher say, “Please listen, class!”
And you would raise your hand.

How many of you have ever gotten in trouble for not listening in class?

Maybe some of you would raise your hand then too!
We cannot learn unless we’re willing to listen...

I trust you were listening when our Gospel text was read.
My Bible calls it the parable of the rich fool.
In other words, the OPPOSITE of wisdom!

And what makes this person foolish, in the eyes of Jesus?
Not just that he does not share.
Not just that he assumes he has all the time in the world ahead of him.

The fool’s foolishness lies in how he listens.
Did you notice?
The only person he listens to...is himself.

He talks to himself, he imagines for himself, he has a conversation with himself, he plans for himself, and then he peremptorily congratulates himself.

He's not listening to anyone but himself.

It's why our modern monologues can be so dangerous.

That tendency for all of us, in the age of social media, to set up ECHO CHAMBERS, to find places where we can go about our lives without truly listening...and we never learn what it's like to be in our neighbor's shoes, especially if those neighbors live a few neighborhoods away from us.

But the good news of Psalm 90 is that it does not have to be that way.

We can gain a wise heart.

We can listen. We still have time!

We can learn. We still have time!

Have you met someone who truly knew how to listen?

The psychiatrist and author Robert Coles tells of the time he met Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement.

When Coles entered a Catholic Worker soup kitchen for the first time, he saw Dorothy Day...she was talking with a woman who had clearly been drinking.

The woman kept ranting and talking nonsense...and Day would quietly listen. Then Day would ask a question, and the woman would start in again on her rant and her nonsense...and Day would quietly listen.

Over and over this happened, and Coles became impatient.

Finally, Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption. And Dorothy Day walked over to Robert Coles, and she asked him:

“Are you waiting to talk to one of us?”

Coles writes:

“*One of us*: with those three words she had cut through layers of self-importance, a lifetime of bourgeois privilege, and scraped the hard bone of pride.”³

Have you ever met someone with a wise heart, someone who truly knew how to listen?

I recall the time I heard Dr. John Hope Franklin speak. It was 20 years ago, when my sister graduated from college. He gave the commencement address that day.

Dr. Franklin, you might recall, was one of the foremost historians of the 20th century.

His groundbreaking work, “From Slavery to Freedom,” is considered one of the definitive histories of the experience of black Americans.

Franklin held a PhD from Harvard, and over 100 honorary degrees. He assisted Thurgood Marshall in *Brown v. Board of Education*. He was a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995. His career was as successful as any one of us could ever hope for...

³ *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, by Robert Coles, Boston: Da Capo Press, 1989.

When he spoke at that graduation, Dr. Franklin was 85 years old. Sharp mind, engaging speaker.

And he told a story about something that occurred some 60+ years earlier in his life.

It was during his first year of graduate work at Harvard. Someone knocked on his door.

Not a student.

It was a fellow boarder, someone who was renting a room in the same house in which John Hope Franklin was living that year, and who also was a veteran of WWI.

“He politely said he did not wish to disturb me,” said Dr. Franklin, “but he had received something that he was having difficulty reading....When I took a look at the letter and saw how clearly it was written, I concluded that [this gentleman] was unable to read.”

“Pretending that I too found the letter confusing...I did as he asked [and helped him decipher the letter].”

“When I had finished...I suggested that perhaps he and I could work together to ‘brush up’ on his reading. He thanked me but said that he was certain that I did not have the time.”

“I’ll make time,” John Hope Franklin said.

And throughout the course of that busy year, this gentleman came by John Hope Franklin’s room at 5pm each afternoon, and they would work together for 30 minutes.

Every day. Every afternoon.

John Hope Franklin taught this man how to read and write.

