

Wisdom in "Every Grain of Sand"
[1 Corinthians 2:1-7, 12-13](#)
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Since Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for literature last fall, I've wanted to preach a sermon using some of his songs. They are poems, really. And they have a depth that I think we could call wisdom.

There have been 113 Nobel prizes for literature from 1901-2016. Bob Dylan's prize was given "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition." We don't always think of songs as a source of wisdom, but we should. Songs last, often because they have proven to meet a universal need, and they speak to us in a deep way.

Our scripture today talks about two kinds of wisdom: human and divine. In the Common English Bible the two are translated "the world's spirit" and "God's Spirit." Paul is talking to the people of Corinth, and he says they should not follow human wisdom, which is "the world's spirit." Rather they should seek divine wisdom, or "God's Spirit."

Generally we operate by "the world's spirit," for instance, we function as individuals instead of as communities. We do what benefits us as individuals or as nuclear families. Sometimes we broaden our care to our extended families, but rarely to the whole society. Especially in America, we have a very individualistic orientation. God's wisdom is broader than that. We need only look at the bible, where we are again and again admonished to care for the widow and the orphan and to welcome the stranger in our land with hospitality.

Right now in the United States, there is a shrinking perspective and a shrinking "spirit." Limits on who can enter our country represent an "America first" attitude and an attitude of fear. This narrow view is a human view, not God's view, as we read about God's Spirit in the bible.

Bob Dylan has written songs that denounce sins of the world: prejudice, fear, pride, and war, and he affirms that we can conquer despair. In "When He Returns," Dylan offers an apocalyptic hope. "Like a thief in the night, he'll replace wrong with right, when he returns." During the lifetime of Jesus, a Second Coming of Christ was expected literally. Theologians call it the *Parousia*. But the early followers of Jesus soon realized Christ wasn't going to come back in real life. They continued to believe that his spirit would return, and that at the end of times, he would "replace wrong with right." The idea of the Second Coming is conveyed in the prayer called "Maranatha" that says simply, "Come, Lord Jesus" (1 Corinthians 16:22: "Come, Lord"). *The Message* translates this verse in 1 Corinthians: "Make room for the Master!" I like this translation because it shows that we have a part in

affirming a future of justice and hope; we need to make room. God's wisdom will come "when he returns."

"When He Returns" Bob Dylan

The iron hand it ain't no match for the iron rod
 The strongest wall will crumble and fall to a mighty God
 For all those who have eyes and all those who have ears
 It is only he who can reduce me to tears
 Don't you cry and don't you die and don't you burn
 Like a thief in the night, he'll replace wrong with right
 When he returns.

Truth is an arrow and the gate is narrow that it passes through
 He unreleased his power at an unknown hour that no one knew
 How long can I listen to the lies of prejudice?
 How long can I stay drunk on fear out in the wilderness?
 Can I cast it aside, all this loyalty and this pride?
 Will I ever learn that there'll be no peace, that the war won't cease
 Until he returns?

Surrender your crown on this blood-stained ground, take off your mask
 He sees your deeds, he knows your needs even before you ask
 How long can you falsify and deny what is real?
 How long can you hate yourself for the weakness you conceal?
 Of every earthly plan that be known to man, he is unconcerned
 He's got plans of his own to set up his throne
 When he returns.

Bob Dylan said that he was "the spokesman for a generation" (https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/b/bob_dylan.html). Dylan's songs became popular during the 1960s. He sang with Joan Baez at the March on Washington in 1963, and many artists sang the songs he wrote, including Peter, Paul and Mary singing "The Times They Are a Changin'." The times were certainly changing in the 1960s; today the times are changing again. Protests are erupting around the country and around the world this month.

Where do we look for justice and harmony in these uncertain times? What wisdom can we cling to? Surely there is a wisdom that supersedes the political powers that be. Our faith tells us that God's wisdom is here. It is both here and it is to come. But we have to acknowledge it. We need to "make room for the Master." On the political front, perhaps making room for God's wisdom means to be vigilant and to watch and listen. Perhaps it means to put into words what we understand to be God's will for unity and peace in a poem or letter to the editor. As a church with the vision, "Dare to question, love, and serve," perhaps we need to question the trend our nation is taking in its new restrictive immigration policies. Perhaps we need to reach out to our Muslim neighbors in love. And

perhaps we need to continue our service to refugees who have arrived here in the East Bay, if we want to affirm that all are welcome here. After all, aren't we a nation of immigrants?

It's not so hard to see God's wisdom, if we just try. Bob Dylan says God knows our names, and "every hair is numbered." God's wisdom is in "every grain of sand."

"Every Grain of Sand" Bob Dylan

In the time of my confession, in the hour of my deepest need
When the pool of tears beneath my feet floods every newborn seed
There's a dying voice within me reaching out somewhere
Toiling in the danger and the morals of despair

Don't have the inclination to look back on any mistake
Like Cain, I now behold this chain of events that I must break
In the fury of the moment I can see the master's hand
In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand

Oh, the flowers of indulgence and the weeds of yesteryear
Like criminals, they have choked the breath of conscience and
good cheer
The sun beams down upon the steps of time to light the way
To ease the pain of idleness and the memory of decay

I gaze into the doorway of temptation's angry flame
And every time I pass that way I'll always hear my name
Then onward in my journey I come to understand
That every hair is numbered like every grain of sand

I have gone from rags to riches in the sorrow of the night
In the violence of a summer's dream, in the chill of a wintry light
In the bitter dance of loneliness fading into space
In the broken mirror of innocence on each forgotten face

I hear the ancient footsteps like the motion of the sea
Sometimes I turn, there's someone there, other times it's only me
I am hanging in the balance of the reality of man
Like every sparrow falling, like every grain of sand

We are a people of hope. We are seeking understanding of what that means. We do not pretend to have all the answers. I have saved a Christmas card I received. On the front are the wise men following the Bethlehem Star. The text says, "The wise still seek him." The wise know that life can be fair for all. But we have to seek fairness. The wise know that life can be more compassionate and just. But we have to seek compassion and justice. That's why we are involved in our community with Open Heart Kitchen. That's why an UMVIM team just returned from Guatemala. We know that there is so much work yet to be done in our community and world.

Our quest for wisdom often is expressed in questions, questions that critique the status quo, questions that rally us to action. Questions like, "How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?" God's wisdom is "blowin' in the wind."

"Blowin' in the Wind" Bob Dylan

How many roads must a man walk down
Before you can call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes, how many times must the cannon balls fly
Before they're forever banned?
The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Yes, how many years can a mountain exist
Before it's washed to the sea?
Yes, how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, how many times can a man turn his head
Pretending he just doesn't see?
The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Yes, how many times must a man look up
Before he can really see the sky?
Yes, how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, how many deaths will it take till he knows
That too many people have died?
The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.