

# Wisdom

## *Epiphany and Enlightenment*

Session 3: Accessing Wisdom  
*The Rev. John Elliott Lein — January 26, 2020*

### Wisdom in Review

Wisdom is “*a precise and comprehensive science of spiritual transformation that has existed since the headwaters of the great world religions and is in fact their common ground.*”  
—The Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault<sup>1</sup>

Wisdom is found in a balance of three centers of knowing: mind (understanding), heart (reconciling), and body (instinct, senses). To be identified solely with the rational mind (ala Descartes) is called “being asleep.”

It is a way, not an object; “how you get there is where you’ll arrive.” This way may include sudden epiphany or enlightenment, but usually after many years of disciplined practice.

The Abrahamic Wisdom tradition was inspired by exposure in Babylon (the Magi), taught by Jesus, followed by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, preserved by the Benedictines, and is being recovered in the Western Christian church today after reminders obtained in renewed contact with the East.

## Why do we need Wisdom?

*“So now...think, take stock; what do you really want? You eat but still hunger; you drink but still thirst; you clothe yourselves but can’t get warm, and your wages run out through the holes in your pockets.” — Haggai 1:6-7*

- We have ample *means* in the first world, but often little *depth*: “a vision rich and sustaining enough to contain all this restless striving and shape it into a more universal and subtle understanding of human purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

## Where do we find Wisdom?

*“We are knee-deep in a river, searching for water.”<sup>3</sup>*

- In this post-Enlightenment, Consumerist, Protestant-work-ethic culture we tend to think we can gain what we need either through intellectual study, purchase, or working really hard—but Wisdom is a more ancient path that requires a different approach.
- It is not an intellectual game, nor a system which can be learned and applied by simple rules.
- It’s about coming to see what is already there—training our *hearts* to see differently.
- We Christians have the riches already, in our Bible, our liturgies, hymns, icons, traditions—but we miss them if we’re not shown how to see.
- The search for Wisdom does not require moving to a monastery or going to seminary; but it does require a whole-hearted yielding to knowing and being known. The Hebrew *da’ath* describes this kind of knowing, which is the same word used for “knowing” one’s sexual partner.

*“What is truth? You can see where there is truth and where there isn’t, but I seem to have lost my sight, I see nothing. You boldly settle all the important questions, but tell me, dear boy, isn’t it because you are young and the questions of the world haven’t hurt you yet?” — Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard**

## Centering Prayer

The practice now called Centering Prayer was developed by Trappist monks in the 1960’s, associated primarily with Father Thomas Keating of recent memory. It was put together as a simple practice to introduce seekers of Eastern meditation to the riches of the Christian heritage of the first few centuries.

The general instructions are:

1. Sit comfortably with your eyes closed, relax, and quiet yourself. Be in love and faith to God.
2. Choose a sacred word that best supports your sincere intention to be in the Lord's presence and open to His divine action within you.
3. Let that word be gently present as your symbol of your sincere intention to be in the Lord's presence and open to His divine action within you.
4. Whenever you become aware of anything (thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, associations, etc.), *simply* return to your sacred word, your anchor.

*“The method consists in letting go of every kind of thought during prayer, even the most devout thoughts.” — Fr. Keating*

In centering prayer, the participant seeks the presence of God directly (aided by the Jesus Prayer, perhaps) and explicitly rejects discursive thoughts and imagined scenes. The participant's aim is to be present to the Lord, to “consent to God's presence and action during the time of prayer.”

Variations or supplements to this practice may include other Christian meditative traditions such as:

- Praying the rosary.
- *Lectio Divina*, sacred reading.
- Using a mantra such as the Jesus Prayer.
- Replacing the sacred word with breath, in and out.

## Notes

1. Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, p. xvi.
2. *Ibid*, p. 4
3. Kabir Helminski,, *Living Presence: A Sufi Guide to Mindfulness and the Essential Self*, p. 25

## Keep Reading:

- *Original Wisdom: Stories of an Ancient Way of Knowing* by Robert Wolff
- *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* by Krista Tippet
- *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—A New Perspective on Christ and His Message* by Cynthia Bourgeault
- *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* by Cynthia Bourgeault