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Recently [the NPR program "Science Friday"](#) featured a young biologist named Danielle Lee. In the course of talking about the excitement of her career, she commented that individual curiosity is the springboard of all the cumulative knowledge we have. Today's liturgy invites us to consider the difference between the search for knowledge and the acquisition of wisdom.

In her commentary on the Sunday scriptures, Sr. Dianne Bergant of the Congregation of St. Agnes says that while human beings search for wisdom, "human wisdom cannot plumb the depths of reality. The deepest questions of life do not seem to be satisfied with answers derived from experience."

The Book of Wisdom, like Proverbs, presents Wisdom as a personification of God, the God beyond human fathoming and whom we still seek. Where can we find wisdom or knowledge of God? Today's first reading makes an exceptional promise: She is "found by those who seek her," and, "She hastens to make herself known in anticipation of their desire." There's a conundrum in this: We seek her, and she anticipates our desire." It's a bit like the poem, "The Hound of Heaven." The poet, Francis Thompson, speaks of God's pursuit of him: "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; / I fled Him, down the arches of the years; / ... I hid from Him, and under running laughter." Thompson ends the poem with the insight that by fleeing God, he was fleeing his own life.

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

[Nov. 12, 2023](#)

Wisdom 6:12-16

Psalm 63

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

With today's psalm we pray, "My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God." What better response could we make to the response to the promise of Wisdom and Thompson's discovery of God's love?

Jesus' parable about the wise and foolish virgins is confusing at best. Perceptive children hear it and ask, "Why does Jesus praise the selfish ones?" and, "Why didn't they just share what they had?" These same children might make a connection between the parable and competition they learn through their school's grading system. In this practice, everybody gets ranked on a scale from knowledgeable to ... some euphemism for foolish. Additionally, the children are taught not to cheat by sharing their answers. Is this the Gospel? The reign of God as the survival of the fittest?

Our first reading and psalm subtly offer an interpretation of the strange parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Using the wisdom reading as a guide, we can come to a different interpretation of Jesus' riddle-story (parable). Wisdom says, "She is readily perceived by those who love her, and found by those who seek her." [Wisdom 6:11](#), the verse preceding our selection, says, "Desire therefore my words; long for them and you will be instructed." This suggests that seeking wisdom, that keeping plenty of oil for our lamps, is not a question of being more or less knowledgeable, nor of being stingy. The search for wisdom is a question of love and deep desire.

The Jesuit spiritual director [Mark Thibodeaux said](#), "Much of Christian spirituality presumes that our desires are bad. ... Ignatius believed that our problem was not desiring too much but rather desiring too little." Because we are made for God, the only thing that can satisfy us is relationship with God and growing in love with all that God loves. All the rest — knowledge, fame, wealth, beauty, accomplishment, popularity — are nothing more than two-bit substitutes for the love that fills the human heart.

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The wise women were the ones whose desire led them to be prepared for the long haul. Nothing they owned or hoped for mattered more than being ready when the bridegroom came. The "foolish" ones (wiser in the estimation of some), were more circumspect with their priorities, not putting all their eggs in one basket. They were ready to pay a price, but they weren't handing over a blank check.

Like the curiosity that leads to a passionate search for new knowledge, getting in touch with our deepest desire and giving it our all is what, in Wisdom's own words,

makes us worthy of her, worthy of the God who planted those desires in us and who meets us "in anticipation of [our] desire."

Wisdom turns out to be qualitatively different from knowledge. We can acquire knowledge through study, practice and even the internet. According to these Scriptures, wisdom is not so much an acquisition as it is a relationship of love. More than possessing it, it captures us. Understanding wisdom as a name for God, we realize that we may seek her, but she who embedded the desire in us longs even more to find and live in us.

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