An angel appeared at a faculty meeting of a local university and told the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord would reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selected infinite wisdom.

"Done!" said the angel, who disappeared in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. All heads turned toward the dean, who sat surrounded by a faint halo of light. Finally, one of his colleagues whispered, "Say something."

The dean looked at them and said, "I should have taken the money."

What comes to mind when you think about wisdom? Is it the inspirational quotes and proverbs that scroll across your Facebook or Instagram feeds? Is it the image of a monk, living in isolation – pondering the deep truths of the universe? Or is it the trope you’ve seen in so many movies or TV shows of the wise old mentor who emerges at the eleventh hour to teach a lesson to everyone who has been paying attention?

How many of us would describe ourselves as wise?

For me, that question was what scared me the most about doing this work as a full time gig. I’ve read the statistics. I know the demographic trends. I look out and I see a lot of you who are twice my age, and some who are closer to triple than to double. And when I look back and think about the most meaningful conversations I’ve had with my own ministers, I find myself riddled with self-doubt: what can I possibly say to anyone in this room that will be as profound, as meaningful or as lasting as the kind of things that were handed on to me? How can I offer you anything even close to resembling wisdom?

My confession this morning is that I came at this passage with more questions than answers. I wanted from Jesus what those who came from John the Baptist a few verses earlier wanted: I wanted answers to my questions. Just before our reading picked up this morning, Jesus was approached by a group sent by the newly imprisoned John the Baptist. John was facing the death penalty for doing the right thing, and all he wanted to know was Jesus, are you the one I believe you to be? Are you the one God promised to send us? And Jesus sends the group back to John with these words: The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the sick are healed and the dead are raised.

You don’t need to be a Biblical Scholar to know that that’s no answer to the question – and another sermon on another day can deal with how John must have felt when the answer to his big question was silence. But Matthew is careful to not simply let the question hang. Because sometimes a question is offered so that someone else can have the answer. And Jesus’ answer to the question of whether or not he is who the church proclaims him to be is that wisdom isn’t about what you know. It’s about what you do with what you know.

The group sent from John were guilty of one of the most basic human traits: mistaking knowledge for wisdom. They came, in effect, demanding a sign from God. “Give me the knowledge,” they said, “even in a yes or a no – that you are who I want you to be and I will be content. Give me the information that will convince my brain, and I will obey.” But evidence has never been in short supply. In fact, in the verses we skipped over (vv. 20-24) , Jesus tells us precisely that. The truth is that I could stand up here and lecture for hours on why not only does belief in God make sense, but why the belief in the resurrection is not only rational but also reasonable, and you’ll walk away with the same basic assumptions you walked in with. No one is ever really argued into or out of faith because we aren’t led by our minds – as though we were purely rational beings. We’re led by our hearts - our desires, our vision of the good life. Our loves are what drives us.

So Jesus offers us the invitation, and it’s the same invitation he’s been offering throughout the gospel of Matthew and that he offers to us today. His invitation is the call to discipleship. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. Or to put it another way, if you want to see what God is doing – if you want to watch the world change, follow me.

This is a passage fundamentally about discipleship, and so if Jesus is connecting wisdom to discipleship, maybe wisdom isn’t something we can take lightly. Maybe it is in cultivating wisdom that we encounter Jesus as he really is. Maybe wisdom isn’t about what you know, but what you do with what you know.

Wisdom is about knowing what to do with the difference between action and perception.

A man read an ad in the newspaper, "Hunting dog for sale, $2,500.00, but well worth it." He called the number and the man told him that he had to see the dog in action. The next morning they met and went hunting early. The dog flushed two birds from a clump of bushes and when they fell into the water, he walked on top of the water, grabbed the birds, and walked back on top of the water. The man was amazed, and bought the dog on the spot. The next day he persuaded his brother to go hunting with him. They flushed a couple of birds and the dog again walked on top of the water, retrieved the birds, and walked back to their boat on top of the water.

He asked his brother what he thought of the dog and the brother replied, "So, you bought a dog who can't swim."

Your actions are your own personal language – a language that only you are fluent in. Others may be conversational in you; your wife or your husband may be proficient in you; but only you are fluent. And so every day we engage in hundreds of conversations with dozens of people, all of whom are trying to interpret you. And actions that meant one thing to you can carry a very different meaning to someone else, while inactions on your part might be interpreted as slights by another. A few days ago as the demolition was getting underway, a couple of guys were tasked with the removal of the old pulpit – a task I was all too ready to undertake. When I looked at the pulpit I saw an obstruction, an intrusive blocky piece of furniture that represented a bygone era of church, where the minister was set apart and obscured from the congregation. I saw a symbol of inaccessibility. But some of you saw something else. Some of you saw the place where the word of God sat every Sunday since 1962. Some of you were reminded of the Gospel preached at your weddings and the funerals of loved ones. Some of you saw a symbol of steadfastness in a changing world. And so when I posted a picture of the demolition in action on Facebook, I didn’t consider the way it might be interpreted by some of you.

Wisdom is recognizing that your actions will be interpreted by others and recognizing at the same time that the actions of someone else might not mean what you think they do. And so there has to be a generosity at play in this. For Jesus, the question of perception was over who he chose to associate with. Some looked at his company as sinful, and lumped him in with them as a result. But Jesus knew in his wisdom what he was doing and was intentional in his choices. In wisdom, he knew that if he stopped, they would say the same things about him that they said about John. In wisdom he knew that there was no way to make everyone happy, and so in wisdom, he decided to try instead and make God happy. He chose, regardless of how it was interpreted, to try and communicate how far God was willing to go to show he loved everyone. Wisdom let Jesus keep his mission in mind – or as he put it, “Wisdom is justified by her actions.”

And so Jesus’ parting words in this passage are an invitation to think backwards – to reverse engineer your life. Wisdom begins with the only action Jesus tells us to take: Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Come to me, take my yoke, learn from me. These are the actions that form wisdom’s base.

Jewish Rabbis used the phrase being yoked to together to remind their students that student and teacher are only successful if they are successful together. Rabbis would form a partnership with their student the way two oxen would form a partnership in a field. Co-labourers in their work. And in this, Jesus gives us a glimpse of how wisdom is gained. Through intimacy with Jesus and partnership with Jesus. It cannot be one or the other if wisdom is the goal. You cannot have a wonderful prayer life or know scripture inside out and backwards, but never get involved with the work of mission. Similarly, you cannot be so involved with the work of the church that you never spend time in prayer or engaging God’s word. Wisdom comes from not just what you do with what you know, but also who you know.

So do not take this invitation lightly because Jesus is only ever moving in one direction. If you want wisdom, know where it leads. Because Jesus yoke looks like a cross, and the field you plow together is a hill that leads to Calvary. Because the same invitation to come and find rest invites us to come and die, to take up our cross and follow me.

Wisdom isn’t some esoteric idea. Wisdom is discipleship in Action. Amen.