

"If I Only Had a Brain"
 We Have What it Takes: The Mind for Stewardship
 1 Kings 3:3-12
 Luke 18:1-8
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L. Frank Baum published the book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in the year 1900, after a number of rather unsuccessful careers. The book quickly became an American favorite, and the film that came out in 1939, "The Wizard of Oz," is the movie that has been seen by more people more times than any movie ever made. If you are too young or haven't lived in the United States long enough to have grown up with Judy Garland playing Dorothy from Kansas, you'll find a brief synopsis of the story in your bulletin insert. The story takes us on a quest to get to the Emerald City (inspired by the Chicago World's Fair), to find what we think we're missing in life, and ultimately to make it back home again.

Oh, look, on the "yellow-brick road," here comes Dorothy now!

Dorothy and The Scarecrow

Dorothy (with Toto, looks around with amazement): Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore. (Music plays strains of "Over the Rainbow.") We must be over the rainbow! And I have these ruby slippers that the good Witch of the North, Glinda, gave me, and she said just to "follow the yellow brick road." And if we do that, we'll get to the Emerald City. And there, Oh, I hope the Wizard of Oz can tell us which way is the way back to Kansas!

(Dorothy walks on.)

Dorothy: Follow the yellow brick road, follow the yellow brick road....(She comes to an intersection where another road crosses the one she is on.) Now which way do we go?

Scarecrow (hanging awkwardly on a pole, with his arm pointing to the right down the road.): Pardon me. That way is a very nice way.

Dorothy: Who said that? (She looks around. Toto barks at the Scarecrow.) Don't be silly, Toto. Scarecrows don't talk.

Scarecrow: It's pleasant down that way, too. (Pointing to the left)

Dorothy (to Toto): That's funny. Wasn't he pointing the other way?

Scarecrow: Of course, people do go both ways.

Dorothy: Why, you did say something, didn't you?

(The Scarecrow shakes his head, then stops and nods it instead.)

Dorothy: Are you doing that on purpose—or can't you make up your mind?

Scarecrow: That's the trouble. I can't make up my mind. I haven't got a brain—only straw.

Dorothy: How can you talk if you haven't got a brain?

Scarecrow: I don't know. But some people without brains do an awful lot of talking, don't they? Can you get me down from here? I'm not very bright, but if you just bend the nail down in the back, maybe I'll slip off...

Dorothy: (She releases him. He falls down.) Oh!

Scarecrow (He turns toward her suddenly.): Did I scare you?

Dorothy: No, no. I just thought you hurt yourself.

Scarecrow: I can't even scare a crow. They come from miles around just to eat in my field, and they laugh in my face. Oh, I'm a failure, because I haven't got a brain!

Dorothy: I'm on my way to the Emerald City to ask the Wizard of Oz to help me get back to Kansas. Maybe the Wizard can give you a brain!

Scarecrow: Oh, won't you take me with you?

Dorothy: To Oz! (They link arms.)

Scarecrow: To Oz!

(Music: "We're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz!")

So off they go, to find the Scarecrow a brain. The Scarecrow can't understand why Dorothy wants to leave the beautiful, rainbow country of Oz and go back to the dry, gray place she calls Kansas. But Dorothy says, "That's because you have no brains! No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There's no place like home."

There is wisdom in that statement, isn't there?

Dorothy has an ability to remember the past and discern what is best for the future. She is a child, and this is a fairytale, but Dorothy exercises, nevertheless, some solid wisdom, certainly more than the Scarecrow, who doesn't even have a brain.

Here at St. John's we also remember the past and try to discern what is best for the future. Sometimes we play the Scarecrow game and complain, "If I only had a brain." It goes like this: "If we only had more children here at St. John's!" "If we only had more young men!" "If we only had a fellowship hall." "If we only had one big giver!" These are statements of wishful thinking. They tend to go along with remembering back to when we were children,

and Sunday School was booming, the MYF was "big time," and young families were flocking to church. In American society in those days, it was socially expected that you would belong to a church. There certainly wasn't soccer on Sunday—nobody even played soccer until the 80s! People memorized Bible verses and creeds and knew all the same hymns. "If only we were back in the good old days!"

But if our memory is good, not everything about the past was rosy. Like Dorothy, describing Kansas as dreary and gray, especially on the day of the twister that sent her spinning, we know that much of our past was not perfect. There were lean years here at St. John's, and people first met in the park, and had to work hard to purchase a parsonage and then build this church. There were times when St. John's had to pass the plate to pay the utilities. And in the spring of 2009, the church made the tough decision to reduce the pastor's salary to three-quarter time. I think it was a good decision, because now a year and a half later, we are paying our apportionments (to the greater United Methodist Church), whereas the previous year we did not.

There are important judgment calls in moving ahead in the life of a growing church. It takes some hard work and some perseverance, and it takes some brainpower. I think we have what it takes.

Discernment in our decisions for the future involves knowing who we are. That's why we now have a new vision. It describes us as a church, growing into a clear identity. We are a church inviting and accepting all persons, committing to social justice, outreach, and interfaith cooperation, and growing in faith through worship and education. A number of folks put their heads together, and the Church Council agreed, this is a good definition of who we are.

The vision differentiates us from other churches. Some churches are not welcoming of all persons. Some churches are not interested in social justice and interfaith cooperation. Some churches are only interested in a personal relationship with Jesus. We are certainly interested in growing spiritually, and developing a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but not *only* that.

Churches that focus only on a personal faith sometimes get caught up in looking only inwardly. I read an interesting article in *Christian Century* by Phillip Cary entitled "No Secret Plan: Why You Don't Have to 'Find' God's Will for Your Life." Some people, who might call themselves evangelicals, get fixed on trying to find God's will for their lives. We all stress about big decisions, like decisions about school, career, or relationship, but on top of those decisions, some also add the burden of the question, "What is God's will for my life?" I've pondered this question. But this author gives me a new way of looking at priorities. He says that God's will for my life is not sitting out there somewhere waiting to be found. "It's not the kind of thing you have to look for and find..." You can disobey God's will, sure. "That's easy to do—it's called sin" (October 5, 2010, p. 20). The point of the argument is that what we need is a discerning mind to make choices according to what is good for our families, our church, and our community. We need the virtue that the Bible calls "wisdom."

In terms of stewardship, this means we need to use our brainpower to do good in this community, and when we do that, we are carrying out God's work in the world. Another way to say this is to say that God's work becomes our work. The more important question than the personal one, "What is God's will for my life?" is the question, "How can we best do God's work in the world?" We need to ask God for discerning minds so that we will choose good ways to meet needs in our community and in our world.

Solomon needed guidance from God when he became king. He prayed, "Give your servant ...an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). God responded to Solomon with the words, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right...I give you a wise and discerning mind" (11-12).

This is what we need: God's wisdom, God's compassion, and God's faithfulness. There's nothing magical about it. It's no secret! We don't have to go talk to some Wizard to find it.

What we need to do is replicate God's virtues. *We* need to be wise and compassionate and faithful.

I believe more important than the personal question about God's will in my life, is the communal question, "How can we make wise choices about our resources of time and money as a community in Rohnert Park?" How can our choices bring health and healing? How can our church stand up for those who have no voice? How can our church be an agent of change in a society where a young gay man felt he had to take his own life after his roommate put a private film onto the Internet? How can our church bring wholeness to families suffering from drug and alcohol dependence? How can our church be a reconciling force in a culture that is afraid of people from other faiths and cultures?

We need a discerning mind, for sure. These aren't easy problems to solve. And there is not one and only one answer. I believe God figures we will make mistakes. We won't always make the "right" decisions. But it would be nice to have the resources—the brainpower, the willpower, and the wherewithal to make some bold decisions for the future of St. John's. It would be nice to be able to do more than just maintain our church property and pay the bills. It would be nice to put some funds into program that will reach out and allow us to fulfill our vision.

When Jesus told a parable, he told how an unjust judge refused to help a widow. But because of her persistence, he changed his mind. Even he, the unjust judge, made a decision to help the widow. If even the judge who had no respect for God or humanity could change his mind and choose good over evil, how much more we should be able to do!

We're not sure what we will encounter on the "yellow-brick road." But I think we are going to find that the Wizard really isn't so wise—when we pull the curtain back, we'll see he's just an ordinary man. Wisdom comes from God and is put to practice when we discern all along the road of life what is right.

