I am sure that you have heard the old joke about the difference between knowledge and wisdom. If not, here it is: knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit whereas wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad. It’s a good joke because it teases out the difference between two words that we often use interchangeably. And they don’t just have different meanings, one of them is fairly easy to achieve while the other quite difficult. With the advent of the internet and smartphones our access to knowledge seems to be almost limitless. If you are working on an epic poem about the life of English clockmaker John Harrison and need to know all of the words that rhymes with longitudinal your phone can tell you the answer in a matter of seconds – giving you words like irrefutable and transmutable. But while our smartphones can give us loads of knowledge, they cannot tell us if it’s a good idea to write an epic poem about John Harrison and more importantly in cannot tell us how to navigate the world in a way that is pleasing to God and to each other. To do this requires wisdom, and wisdom is not easy to come by.

Today Solomon wants wisdom and says to God, “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” To which God replies, “Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.” And while I am very happy for Solomon, I am not sure if this story helps us a whole lot because God just kind of gave him wisdom. And while I certainly think that it is a good idea to pray to God for wisdom, I also think that developing wisdom is something that we have to work on our whole life. Solomon’s story can kind of be like wanting to run a marathon and God instantly granting our wish, rather than training day in and day out for months on end. That is how it will be for most of us with wisdom. We will have to go through life studying and gaining experience and applying all of that to navigate this world in the Godliest way possible.

Let me share a story and see if it helps explain what I am getting at. Back when I was in seminary, we had a student who had a rather strict diet and was very happy to tell you all about it. He was married but did not have any children so naturally enough, like me before I had children, he knew all there was to know about how they should be raised. One day he was telling a group of us how terrible it is to give children peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He then said if you give your kids some millet bread with goat cheese smeared on it, they would never ask for peanut butter and jelly again. I said to this seminarian, “I want to put you in a room with my six year old son and have you try and convince him of this and my bet is that in twenty minutes you will come out a broken man.” Now millet bread and goat cheese may be better for you than peanut butter and jelly, but that knowledge does not work on six-year olds. That is where wisdom is needed. His point was not a bad one, children should eat healthy food, but he lacked the wisdom to make this a reality. His knowledge probably made it more likely that a child would never eat healthy. In some ways, knowledge deals with the world as we wish it would be whereas wisdom deals with the world as it actually is. All of you who are parents probably know what I am talking about. Before our children were born, we knew that they were going to be brilliant students, star athletes and geniuses with food additives. But after a while we lowered the bar and were happy if they didn’t electrocute themselves or light the dog on fire.

In many ways we can think about being wise to imitating God. Think about it like this. God has very strict rules for our behavior, just look at the Ten Commandments or the sayings of Jesus. But then look at our behavior; we sin regularly and vigorously. If God held us strictly to the standards he has set, we would all be smoldering piles of ash, but we are not because as the Psalmist says, “For he himself knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.” God knows are shortcomings and “has not dealt with us according to our sins.” Being wise in the world is knowing what is true and right but also knowing the shortcomings of humanity. Wisdom is knowing the right balance between these two. If we go too far in one direction, we get a free for all with no one caring about what is right, whereas if we go too far in the other direction, we get a nation of Karens waiting to pounce on the slightest slip up of our neighbor.

For most of us, wisdom will not come easily. It will be the gradual accumulation of experience filtered through God’s love. Our world is swimming in knowledge, but unfortunately is not very wise. As Christians may we cultivate wisdom so that we may act in the world in the way God acts this day and forevermore.