

“The Wisdom to Know the Difference”

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6-16-19 Trinity Sunday

Based upon Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-14

How much time do you spend reading the *Book of Proverbs*? If you're like most people, the answer is not much. It's not the kind of book that you can appreciate by reading it straight through from beginning to end because so much of it is composed of unrelated, two-verse-long snippets of wisdom. So, when Ellen Davis, an Old Testament scholar and professor of practical theology at Duke Divinity, was once asked to do a workshop on *Proverbs* at a church in Beverly Hills, she didn't expect many people to come. But when she walked into the room, it was packed. Curious why this was, during a break time she asked the participants why they were there and so enthusiastic about *Proverbs*. Immediately someone answered, “Oh, most of us work in Hollywood. We write commercials and advertising copy. And when we were in training, they told us to read Proverbs.” Then smiling somewhat self-consciously, the participant continued, “But now I see that most of what we write is aimed at the people Proverbs calls ‘fools.’”¹

In that moment, Davis recognized in a way that she had not before that the author of *Proverbs* and the advertising industry shared a common goal for their work: to stimulate and influence humanity's desire through the use of pithy and memorable statements. But whereas *Proverbs* wants readers to desire wisdom more than all else, advertisers are generally selling everything but. So, the idea that advertisers would turn to the book for wisdom to help their work is more than a little bit ironic, especially when you consider that within its very pages, *Proverbs* warns about the forces which try to capture foolish human hearts and minds and lead them away from wisdom. *Proverbs* does this by personifying wisdom and foolishness as two women who compete for attention as they call out from the street corners and market places trying to capture human hearts.

We can talk some other time in more depth about what if anything we should infer from the fact that these traits are personified as women. There are actually four traits personified as women in the book, two favorably as Wisdom and Valor, and two unfavorably as Folly and Promiscuity. So, the book is neither all feminist or totally sexist. For the time being, suffice it to say on this Father's Day, that the literary construct upon which *Proverbs* is based is a father sharing wise advice with his son. In the context of ancient father-son relationships, therefore, it is understandable that the father would use women to try to illustrate to his son the pathways in life that would tempt him, and those that would fulfill him. Then again, it's also possible that Wisdom is female simply because the Hebrew word for wisdom is a feminine noun.

Today's lesson from *Proverbs* is one of the longer descriptions of Lady Wisdom, also known as Sophia because *Sophia* is the Greek word for wisdom. She stands at the crossroads and outside of people's homes crying out to the people to seek knowledge, prudence, and

¹ Davis, Ellen, “*Surprised by Wisdom: Preaching Proverbs*,” in INTERPRETATION A JOURNAL OF BIBLE AND THEOLOGY: THE BOOK OF PROVERBS, Vol. 63, No.3, July 2009, 269.

understanding above all. In the verses in Chapter 8 which today's Lectionary omitted, Sophia describes wisdom as better than jewels and silver; it is the stuff that makes kings just and noble, and provides insight and strength. Then, in the verses we just heard, she shifts to a more personal argument. Wisdom is valuable, she explains, because it comes from her, and she was and is responsible for God's Creation. She was with God in the beginning, working at God's direction like a master worker to create the mountains and seas and fields. She was and is God's delight, and was ever rejoicing with God in the beauty of creation and the human race.

With this description, the text invites us to recognize that although the teachings in the *Book of Proverbs* have profound moral implications, wisdom in the Old Testament is not simply synonymous with knowledge or even good moral conduct. She is someone to know and follow, not a thing to acquire. She is the Spirit of God, "a force" according to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, "that is creative and [wills] creation to its fulfillment."² In essence, she is the means by which God calls to us to the good life, and the means by which we will fulfill God's way.

The New Testament does not disagree with this idea of wisdom, although in John's gospel, as we heard, the Spirit of God is linked more closely with Jesus Christ than with the God the Creator. The Holy Spirit, Jesus told his disciples, would keep the disciples company so that they would not feel abandoned after Jesus ascended. The Spirit would take what was his, and give it to his disciples. He, (in this case only because *pneuma*, the Greek word for Spirit, is a masculine noun), would not speak on his own, but would be a conduit for the Word of God and the Truth of God who was Christ. Still, you can see from the similarities between Christ's description of the Holy Spirit and the description of Sophia in *Proverbs*, how the Church came to recognize that our God was triune. If God and the Spirit are one, and God and Jesus are one, and the Spirit and Jesus are one, then we must worship a God in three persons. In *Proverbs* Lady Wisdom calls to people to come dine with her so that she can give them bread and wine. In the New Testament, Jesus does this. In both Old and New they are wiser than all human beings. This is why these texts were assigned by the Lectionary for Trinity Sunday. To remind us that the Spirit who inspired the disciples on Pentecost is the Spirit of Christ, who is also the Spirit of the Creator. They are one.

But today rather than focus on that great mystery that none of us can fully understand, the triune nature of God, I want us to think some more about one of the things that makes the Godhead one: wisdom. We know that the three persons are bound together by love and grace. But as Rosemary Radford Ruether has observed, wisdom, too, "is the all-encompassing divine ground of being out of which the Trinity emerges. It creates the world, guides it to perfection, and unites the creation with the Creator...."³ When we follow Christ, we gain wisdom. Likewise, when we seek and listen to the Holy Spirit who is Sophia, God's wisdom, we are faithful to Christ, encounter God, and find the pathway to fulfillment.

² Brueggemann, Walter, "ON Scripture: Walter Brueggemann on Wisdom (*Proverbs* 8:1-4, 22-31), Day1.org, May 16, 2016, retrieved June 11, 2019 from <http://day1.org/7294-on-scripture-walter-brueggemann-on-wisdom>

³ As quoted in THE LIVING PULPIT, Wisdom, July- September 2000, 33 (citing her work Mary- the Feminine Face of the Church).

Knowing all of this is important. But it doesn't tell us how we are supposed to recognize the difference between wisdom and folly, between God's truth and the world's advertising. How can we know the difference between our heart's desire and God's? That's the big question we all must wrestle with throughout our lives, not just because wisdom and folly are competitors for our attention, but also because it is urgent that we listen to the Spirit. As Jesus said in today's gospel lesson, one of the things that the Holy Spirit would do would be to teach his disciples the lessons that Jesus could not teach them before his crucifixion because they weren't ready to hear them yet. In other words, we cannot simply say that everything that comes from the Bible is God's wisdom and everything that doesn't is not. There were words that needed to be said, lessons that needed to be taught which didn't make it in the Bible, or which would change our understanding of what was in it if we heard them. God did not stop speaking when Jesus ascended, nor when the Bible was canonized. Even now the Holy Spirit is at work teaching us new truths, leading us into deeper wisdom. So, if we want to be faithful to God, therefore, we need to learn these lessons, which requires being open to new understandings taught by a variety of non-biblical sources.

The people of faith in Jesus day struggled with this as much as we do. When some of the Pharisees rejected John the Baptist's call to repentance, and then also rejected Jesus's call to follow him, according to *Luke 7:30*, Jesus equated them with children in the marketplace criticizing both him and John. The image of Jesus' rebuke was no accident. It is in the marketplace that they should have been listening to Sophia, who spoke through both John and Jesus, not drowning her out with their own prideful criticism. Unfortunately, Christians still behave as the Pharisees did today. We are so sure that our interpretation of Scripture is the right one, even when other Christians vehemently disagree. We are so busy calling out each other's faults, that we can easily miss hearing Sophia's call. Recognizing this, T.S. Eliot wrote that the "only wisdom we can hope to acquire is humility..."⁴ I think that's a little extreme in its cynicism. But I agree that humility is like a hearing aid that enables us to hear Wisdom's call better. Without it, we can both miss the lesson and cast ourselves as fools.

Once we have our hearing aids on, we need to listen carefully for the Spirit in our hearts and in the words of others, if we hope to be able to discern the difference between God-given wisdom and the slick sales pitches of the world. As *Proverbs 17:24* observes, "Wisdom is present to the person of discernment, while the eyes of the fool are at the end of the earth." Jesus said that the Spirit will never say anything on his or her own, which means that any position which is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ is not God's wisdom. Remembering that can help us rule out a lot of today's so-called wisdom, even if it's wrapped in the mantle of faith. For example, Jesus said that we must love all our neighbors as ourselves; so, any position which is not grounded in loving all people is not God's.

As we have been exploring this Spring, one of the lessons that the disciples were not ready to hear until after Jesus ascended was that the Gentiles were as beloved to God as much as

⁴ Davis, Ellen, *Surprised by Wisdom* at 273.

the Jews were. Since that first eye and heart-opening post-Ascension Spirit lesson, we have continued to move with the Spirit's help toward greater inclusivity. We have learned how slavery, and racism, and sexism, and discrimination based on orientation are contrary to the will of God. But it has been a slow crawl in part because people have forgotten that the new lessons of the Spirit are always grounded in the old lessons of Jesus. Sophia always recreates the world with the love Jesus taught and embodied.

Another reason we have been slow learners is that we have confused resistance to change with faithfulness. Jesus told us to expect change. He couldn't teach his disciples everything they needed to know because they couldn't bear to hear the truth. Rather than being easily defensive in the name of faith, therefore, we should instead be asking ourselves regularly what truths are out there that we have heard but don't want to accept. Some of them will be God's and some won't. But one truth many Christians are resisting now is that it is highly likely that the Church in fifty years will be significantly different from how it is now. Only God knows for sure. All I know is that if we remember that it is Jesus who is trying to get through to us by the Spirit when we feel the winds of change around us, then we can fear less, and learn more.

The more you listen for Sophia with the love of Christ in your heart, the more you discover that those who are truly wise in any age are those who hold his values. *Proverbs* shows us this. Written centuries before Jesus was born, it nevertheless affirms many of Christ's values as wise. For example, *Proverbs* 14:31 observes, "The One who oppresses the poor insults his Maker, and the one who honors God is generous to the needy." Wisdom and economic justice go together in *Proverbs* just as they do in Jesus' teaching. The wise in *Proverbs* are also hard working, righteous, and disciplined. They are emotionally and spiritually mature and generous. As a result, they are not easily seduced by the sales pitch of Lady Folly, who hawks the things that lead to death instead of life, like "stolen water and secret bread" instead of the bread and wine of that Lady Wisdom offers. (Prov. 9:17).

Ellen Davis has argued that we are living in a time when there is an acute wisdom crisis. It is certainly true that perhaps for the first time in centuries, knowledge is disdained as much as it is admired; humility is a vanishing virtue; and listening a lost art. But as the Spirit was with God in the beginning, and with the disciples after Christ ascended, so the Spirit is still with us now, leading us into greater understanding, faith, and wisdom. All we have to do is listen, answer her call, and learn.

Attempting to encourage this, a first-grade teacher reported on the Internet how she taught her students about wisdom by giving them the first half of a proverb, and asking them to complete it in their one words. Many of the results were as profound as they were funny. "Don't bite the hand that... looks dirty," one student wisely observed. "Where there's smoke there is... pollution," another wrote. "A penny saved is.... not much." "When the blind lead the blind, get out of the way." And my personal favorite for all who are overworked, tired or frustrated: "If at first you don't succeed, get new batteries."⁵ You see you don't have to be old to be wise. The

⁵ The original source of the classroom post has not been provided by those posting on Facebook so I am unable to cite it.

Spirit is at work in all of us, if we only have ears to hear.

What lessons do you think the Holy Spirit still wants to teach you? Which voices do you listen to instead of the Spirit? Critical questioning is essential to the acquisition of wisdom. So, think about what understandings about yourself or others you may be being invited to change. And as you struggle to discern God's Word from that of the clever advertisers of the world, keep in mind these words of encouragement from Wisdom herself, translated into contemporary language by Eugene Peterson: "Dear friend, guard Wisdom and Insight with your life; don't for a minute lose sight of them. They'll keep your soul alive and well. You'll take afternoon naps without a worry; you'll enjoy a good night's sleep. No need to panic over alarms or surprises, or predictions that doomsday's just around the corner, because God will be right there with you." (Proverbs 3:21-26, *The Message* trans.) Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit for being with us always, and for leading us even now into greater wisdom, grace and love. Amen.