

## CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

When I first looked over the lectionary lesson possibilities and spotted this morning's passage from Proverbs I thought, "This could have been ripped right out of the daily news or a Presidential press briefing."

Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice.  
At the busiest corner she cries out;  
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:  
'How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?  
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing  
and fools hate knowledge?

Woman Wisdom stands on the street corner at the entrance to downtown with a "Repent, the End is Near" sign, pleading for folks to listen to take greater care with their personal choices, presenting them with better options, ways of living that offer health and wholeness for all but it seems few if any are interested in listening. Sound familiar? How many more people – adults and children – must become critically ill or die before some folks will but a mask on and get the vaccine? How much further must we sink into the present calamity before some will recognize the error of their ways? How much more rugged individualism and runaway personal liberty must we endure before we can reclaim a sense of shared community, mutual accountability, and love of neighbor? Wisdom is crying out far too many are refusing to listen. The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth noted, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." So, let's step back from the headlines and step into the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs, particularly the first nine chapters, presents a series of instructions – parental advice, to a youth. Given the patriarchal society in which it was written, it is striking that the main voice in its opening chapters is not a man but Woman Wisdom. She, Wisdom, lays out a view of the world created by God's wisdom and bounded by a moral order. Within this ordered cosmos, Proverbs speaks of human freedom, encouraging choices within that freedom that also acknowledge limits. The book repeatedly offer a path to a life that is good, purposeful, and most importantly, aligned with God's plan. Straying from this path leads to disaster.

What does it mean to be wise? We live in a world where vast amounts of knowledge and data are available at a moment's notice by way of a few clicks on a screen, yet, true wisdom seems to be in short supply. Wisdom does not equal just being knowledgeable. It's grasping what to do with the knowledge that you have, how you approach the pursuit of knowledge, and the end or goal of what you do with it once you have it. Taking baking for example. You can readily find all sorts of advice on making the best pie crust from top chefs around the world. You can follow their instructions to the letter but it won't guarantee you'll end up with anything you'd like to share with your guests. Mastering making pie crusts may start with a tried and true recipe but takes lots of trial and error and experience before you'll regularly end up with the desired result.

- Wisdom is often also found in pithy sayings. Some examples of wisdom passed onto me that I continue to treasure include:  
From my 8<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher Mr. Forakis who wrote in my yearbook: “Remember Dave, you only get out of life what you put into it.”
- Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die
- Measure twice; cut once
- If it doesn’t work, get a bigger hammer
- And for the musicians out there: “Let loose, hang on, don’t fret the misses.”

All of us, over the years, have probably developed our own personal proverbs. A few I repeatedly remind myself about are:

- “It is better to withhold judgment than to jump to conclusions about another - you have no idea what they’ve experienced just that day before you encountered them”
- “Try to give others enough space to surprise you by acting more gracious than you would have expected.”
- “Don’t assume the worst when you can assume the best - neither may change what will actually happen but the latter will open you to greater opportunities for things to turn out well”

There was a time when wisdom by way of experience was held in high regard. These days, it would appear that if using technology is not “native” to you that is, you didn’t begin life with a smart phone in your crib then your usefulness to society has largely expired regardless of your other life experience. You can spend years study medicine, doing research, regularly reading peer reviewed scientific journals, attending conferences with your peers, but all it takes is someone with a social media presence, some charisma, and slick packaging to completely refute whatever wisdom you may have to offer.

I think part of the problem is that those who take the pursuit of wisdom seriously quickly discover that the more they know the more they don’t know and this leads to a kind of humbleness that doesn’t serve well in polemical debates. Rollo May, psychologist, author, and close friend of theologian Paul Tillich puts it well:

“It is the seeming contradiction that we must be fully committed but we must also be aware at the same time that we might possibly be wrong.”

Part of embracing wisdom is being open to new ideas and approaches, which means being open to changing your mind, which means you could be wrong. That sort of intellectual honesty won’t get you very far these days. In the battle between wisdom and folly, folly seems to have the upper hand.

One commentator offers the following definitions that may help us as we enter into the universe of Proverbs:

Wisdom is the ability to live as God calls us to in God's world. It requires, then, a certain approach to God, to ourselves, and to this world that God has made.

Folly, on the other hand, is not just a lack of wisdom, but a resistance to it.

This commentator on Proverbs and on wisdom literature, explains this by discussing the three categories of fools in the book of Proverbs. There is the simple, the fool, and then the scoffer.

The simple, this commentator writes, "is the kind of person who is easily led, gullible, silly. Mentally he is naïve [...] morally he is willful and irresponsible. [...] The simple [...] is no halfwit; he is a person whose instability could be rectified, but who prefers not to accept discipline in the school of wisdom."

The fool, one step worse than the simple, is "one who is dull and obstinate." The fool prefers "comfortable illusions" to the truth.

Finally, the scoffer or scorner is the worst of the three. His presence in Proverbs, ... "makes it finally clear that mental attitude, not mental capacity, classifies the man. He shares with his fellows their strong dislike of correction [...], and it is this, not any lack of intelligence, that blocks any move he makes towards wisdom. The mischief he does is not the random mischief of the ordinary fool, but the deeper damage of the 'debunker' and deliberate trouble-maker."

Much of the anger and pain I think many of us are feeling and expressing is due to an overabundance of folly pouring forth everywhere we look. What are we to do with this situation? How are we called to respond as people of faith? In a recent NY Times article, Tressie McMillon Cotton writes:

Like many people, I am finding it hard to muster the empathy these stories try to elicit because other images are so fresh in my mind. The maskless rallies, the red-faced anti-maskers screaming at grocery store workers, the protesters hurling invectives at the schoolteachers who are begging for masks so that schoolchildren can return to school — those images fill me and crowd out my empathy... I am concerned about what empathy does for me. I rely on empathy not to make me morally superior but to keep me tethered to what matters. Empathetic impulses give me the humility to keep asking questions, even when I do not like the answers.

... I am afraid that the onslaught of Covid denial stories is robbing me of by undermining my empathy for others. .. This is a social problem with big structural issues...I have to somehow be in community with the people who are behaving in socially responsible ways without demonizing those who are not. Demonizing them turns my community into a reactionary force, which is precisely how the vaccines and masks became weaponized to begin with. It is a classic case of not becoming what you despise by losing focus on what you value.

Our lesson from Proverbs this morning presents a stark warning about not heeding Wisdom's cry but we must hear within the broader context of love of God and neighbor. In our anger and frustration, let us not become the very thing we despise, the very thing tearing our country apart by the seams. Let us rather, heeding God's Wisdom, not neglect the gift we bring to these challenging times: the wisdom to love even when we are not feeling very loving, and the ongoing pursuit of health and wholeness for all including the scoffers, the snake oil salesmen. May how we live our lives offer a wisdom worthy of embrace by others as they seek right paths for life.

AMEN