

At the Crossroads with Lady Wisdom

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-36

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

The simple yet profound prayer first offered by 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr asks for a gift that in our complex world seems increasingly difficult to receive. Wisdom is not the same as knowledge, as the dizzying array of choices contemporary people face every day illustrates. Human beings “know” more now than at any time in history (in fact I read somewhere that the knowledge gained since 1900 surpasses the sum of everything before it), yet still we hunger for the basics: love, purpose, truth.

Dining with friends recently, one of them took drink orders. How about iced tea? Fine!...and then came a barrage of questions: herbal or regular? Orange spice or raspberry? Sugar or Equal? All this just for a glass of iced tea! Which is nothing compared to the critical decisions and choices confronting us daily. Sometimes we feel ill-equipped to make those decisions. Yet as the philosopher said, “Not to decide is to decide.” Perhaps the greatest tragedy of all would be to find ourselves living with the unhappy results of choices we never even knew we had made.

Where do you find insight and guidance? When faced with the many tasks and challenging situations which characterize our lives today, how do you determine priorities? To what—or whom—do you turn for wisdom?

The Judeo-Christian religious tradition to which we belong has personified Wisdom and given her divine power. I say “her” accurately, because in both the Hebrew and Greek languages Wisdom is feminine (you can draw your own conclusions from that!!). Understand we’re not talking about a female deity, but rather about a core divine attribute exercised for the good of creation in fulfillment of God’s plan. In his New Testament letters, the apostle Paul writes that the core meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion—the “death that brings life”—perceived by the world to be folly, is in fact the wisdom—the “sophia” of God by which we are saved.

The morning text is from the Hebrew Scriptures, and takes a less abstract approach than Paul. Here Wisdom is presented as a goddess-figure who is a bridge between God and humanity. Her divine message is intended for every person and offers an essential gift for their enrichment. Lady Wisdom stands in the heights; at the critical crossroads to deliver her message of goodness and truth. Listen for God's Word; divine wisdom for us today in the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Proverbs, the eighth chapter at the first verse. [Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-36]

Two guys talking at the water cooler, and the first one asks, "Why don't you play golf with Bob any more?" The second guy responds, "Would you play golf with someone who curses after each shot, cheats in the bunkers, makes noise while you putt, and enters false scores on his card?" "No!" "Well," came the reply, "neither will Bob."

Not all of us have the self-understanding exhibited by that *former* golf buddy! Sometimes we are not aware of our lack of insight, or we settle for ignorance because it's easier that way. Sometimes we know, but are unwilling or unable to change.

Throughout the Bible, human life is portrayed as a moral drama, in which people have freedom to make choices. But the choices are not all equally good, or even morally neutral. Some will yield blessing, while others, misery. Some will draw us closer to one another and to God; others divide and isolate us. Our decisions –private and public-- matter.

For what is true on the personal level is equally true on the community level. Ours is a society intoxicated by knowledge, by the lure of learning that takes us further into the mysteries of the universe. We have pushed outward into space, and we have probed deeply into the sub-atomic world. We have harnessed natural forces for our use, made great technological advances, conquered many threatening diseases, and discovered what makes a mind think and a heart beat. We know so much.

...and yet so little. The great global warehouse of knowledge has not served to eliminate war, childhood hunger, or despair. Our planet is compromised; its marvelous and innate order upset by human domination and greed, not to mention the nuclear and biological weaponry that could destroy it 7 times over. And who has explored the vast landscape of the human spirit? Who has insight into the human heart in which reside both good and evil, light and dark? Much of the heated debate over stem-cell research, of cloning and genetic engineering, for example, reflects the appropriate fear that our wisdom lags far behind our knowledge.

Like the proverbial bull in the china shop, we throw our new knowledge around with little recognition of its ethical consequences.

God designed the world differently from the beginning. God created Wisdom through Whom all things came into being. This Word, this "Sophia" was intended to be the light that would guide all people into life and truth. She points to the creativity and intelligent design if you will, demonstrated by God at the dawn of creation as the foundation of good. To embrace wisdom is to find life; to reject it is to choose death.

If this sounds even vaguely familiar to you, you get a gold star. The Gospel of John presents Jesus of Nazareth as the incarnation of Wisdom, described as the "Word," *who was with God and was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people...and the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth. [John 1:1-4, 14]* The wisdom of God was embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, who came to lead us into truth, to save us from our destructive choices, and help us know the fullness of life, now and forever.

The variety of images –Word, Wisdom, Christ—nonetheless presents a single picture, and offers us a path that leads to God. Today I'm going to stick with the feminine image of Lady Wisdom because it is less familiar and can perhaps provide insight by jarring us out of standard church jargon. Let us then listen to what Wisdom is saying as she stands in the crossroads.

She calls us first to self-examination. To look at who we are, and why we're here. Individually. As "church." As part of a global family. To ask questions and use the gift of our God-given intellect to assist us in decision-making. To become fully engaged with the consequences of our choices, to inquire about their benefit or harm to ourselves, to others, to our earth.

She calls us to drop the mirror, symbol of our self-absorption, and seek God. *Reverence for the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. [Proverbs 1:7, paraphrased]* Looking up into the starry night sky or out into the beauty of the created order provides as good a place as any to connect with the One who designed it all. Lady Wisdom's place at God's side and the joy she expresses remind us that the order and purposiveness God fashioned into the fabric of reality are the same gifts with which we are clothed. It was enough to make our dour Calvinist forebears affirm that the chief end of humanity is to "glorify God and enjoy God forever." That's not something we do and get done with.

It's a life-time vocation, the foundation upon which everything else is built. So much of our lives are lived at break-neck speed, as we feverishly attempt to cram it all in. Wisdom calls us to slow down; to listen as well as speak. By focusing on God, we receive insight about the true priorities that will lead to abundant life.

The pursuit of wisdom is a never-ending journey, at least this side of the grave. I actually own and have read a book entitled "One Minute Wisdom"—but I'm still waiting. The Church—reformed, and always being reformed—continues to re-think, re-evaluate, re-imagine, and repent. A saying of Gandhi gets it just right I think: Learn as if you will live forever; live as if you will die tomorrow.

No one is wise enough by himself...or herself. We need to pursue wisdom together. We do that here at Fairmount in a variety of ways: in worship, in education, in mission, in friendship. By opening our doors wider welcoming diverse people to join us. By stretching a little further than our comfort zone to address the needs of our community and world. By rejoicing in God's grace and goodness, always. By delighting in the human race not only with our words but with actions that the children of that race may receive the gifts God has showered upon us all.

Yesterday it was my privilege to conduct a memorial service for 92-year-old Theodora Dakin, mother of member Jim Dakin. A remarkable woman, she was wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother; physician and feminist and friend; compassionate healer and public servant. She described herself as "agnostic" in belief, yet was an active church member in communities in which she lived. Why? Though she held no expectation of "getting to heaven" in the conventional sense, she trusted the Spirit-filled faith community for guidance in daily living and support for helping others. From Church she learned to put her deepest truth into practice; to "let love have the last word." As I listened to the ways her family, colleagues, and former patients described her, I couldn't help but feel that here was a wise woman.

God grant us the serenity, the courage, and the wisdom so to live that love has the last word, the first word, and every word in between.

O THE DEPTH OF THE RICHES AND WISDOM OF GOD! FOR FROM GOD AND THROUGH GOD AND TO GOD ARE ALL THINGS. TO GOD BE GLORY FOREVER. AMEN!

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