

“Wisdom Cries Out”  
Proverbs 1:20-33; Proverbs 3:13-18;  
Proverbs 8:1-11, 20-21; Matthew 13:53-58

September 4, 2016  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

They say that at the very beginning of a talk you can lose your audience in the first five or ten seconds. So just saying the word “wisdom” doesn’t feel like it’s going to create heart-pounding anticipation. Wisdom is not a word that gets us cheering.

Then if you go on and say that a general meaning of wisdom seems to be “knowing how to read the ways and the moral structure of the world and live according to them so that one not only copes with life, but lives well and in an upright manner,” everybody gets lost, including me. And yet wisdom *is* a fascinating subject.

Today we hear of wisdom again—not this long intellectual definition—but we hear about Wisdom calling out in the market and at the square. It’s a fascinating thing. I was walking through the Farmer’s Market on Saturday, and as I was reading this passage I wondered what it would be like to have Wisdom calling out in the middle of that. Maybe Wisdom *was* calling out in the middle of that. Did I miss it? What would it be like? What would she be saying if she were calling out? “Come, listen! I have something to say!” Most of us would probably think, “Who is that crazy lady over there?”

How does Wisdom call out in the marketplace? If Wisdom is calling out in the marketplace, is it on the sign at the Kenworthy? Is it calling out in the conversation of friends, in an encounter with a stranger, in the encounter with a panhandler? Where is Wisdom calling out?

And then Wisdom calls out at the gate. The gate, when we think about it as I learned it in my Old Testament history, was the place of gathering, particularly for the doing of justice. It might have been a place just to socialize, but when there was something that needed to be decided, the gate was the place that it happened. They went to the gate. So Wisdom was calling out at the gate. How does Wisdom call out at the gate?

Maybe Wisdom is calling out in the City Council chambers, or in the County Commissioners’ meetings. It’s kind of strange to think about Wisdom being there, calling out. Those are usually pretty empty places. I went to a Commissioners meeting once and there were just the commissioners and a couple of us who had to be there. Where is Wisdom calling out?

It’s a fascinating thing to think about Wisdom calling out. It’s not just some concept. As we think about this passage from Proverbs, Wisdom is not only calling out, it says *she* is calling out. When we hear this personification of Wisdom, it is made into the person of a woman—a woman that the author of proverbs is suggesting we listen to, that we get in relationship to.

It's interesting to me that there are certain theological traditions that suggest that we should not sit at the feet of a woman, we should not listen to the teachings of a woman. What about Wisdom? It's clearly a woman that is being portrayed.

If you read through Proverbs, there are women on both sides of this issue. You could say there is Woman Wisdom, and there is Dame Folly. Folly ends up being sexualized at some points and sort of seduces you away. So what it suggests to me is that first of all, it was probably a male that wrote the book, but the other thing it suggests to me is that when we're thinking about wisdom, the kind of relationship we're expected to get into is not a one-night stand. It's a long-term relationship. Some would even say that if you go all the way through the book and read Chapter 31, which is often suggested is about the good wife, perhaps it's really about a marriage to Wisdom.

It's very fascinating to think about what it means to have this personification of Wisdom because it takes us away from thinking it's all about something we can simply know. In our world, in my life, I grew up thinking it was all about the facts I learn. You just put all those facts together and that would get you through life. But there's something about wisdom that suggests it is beyond us, it's Other. Maybe that's why if it were a male writing this book, he's writing about Wisdom in terms of a female, because there's a sense of otherness to wisdom that's outside of us.

You can hear that in Jesus coming to be with the people he grew up with. It's like, "How can you know wisdom?" It's almost like they are saying, "We don't have that kind of wisdom, so how can you have it?" That's because wisdom is something beyond us. It's something we get into relationship with. It's a different way of thinking. It's hard to get my hands around because when you begin to think about wisdom being something we're in relationship with, it's not just something we can analyze and write it all out. It's a connection with God or a way God connects with us. It does teach us something about understanding and insight, but it's something that we have to stay in relationship to.

In fact, the whole book of Proverbs in some ways feels to me more like an advertisement for wisdom than an instruction book of wisdom. Maybe it's telling us just enough of those memes to get us interested. After all, I keep finding ones that I really enjoy, like: "The glory of the youth is in their strength, but the beauty of the aged is in their grey hair" (20:29). Any one of those proverbs, as much as they might attract us at times, are not all there is to wisdom.

In fact, it feels like the description of Woman Wisdom and Dame Folly is in a sense saying it's really easy to find a proverb and think, now I've found the truth, and find that it really isn't all the truth. It contains *some* truth. So we go off to the next thing. That's something in our society that's easy to do. "Wow, I've found the next best thing. It's going to make everything right." Then we find not quite everything is right once we've tried it. So we go off to the next thing.

Wisdom is different than that. It's something more like pointillism, an art form where people can draw these different little points, and how big the points are and how far apart they are, and maybe the colors of the points can turn into a painting. The idea is

that each of these proverbs is a little bit like those points. It's as we put them together that it begins to take shape and form and look like something we might know, something we can relate to.

So it's as we begin to think about Wisdom it feels like it is a little like beauty. When you see beauty, you know it. You experience it. It's something that you feel is outside of you but you experience it as part of the world around us. Wisdom is a little bit like that as well. It's kind of like saying you know it when you see it. And then it begins to take shape, and perhaps as we pay more attention to it, as we look at all of those points, all those teachings, all those proverbs, we begin to have a relationship with something that teaches us something about how we live and who we are. It is, after all, a gift of God that we start finding through our reverence for God.

So there's something outside of us that teaches us, that calls to us. Why would it need to call to us? The reason I usually get called is because I'm paying attention to something else. So it's beginning to listen, to hear, to see, as wisdom might show us. So the question is, really, where is wisdom in your life? How are you listening? Where do you see it? How is it taking shape?

We're going to think about some ways that it takes shape through the Proverbs, and through scripture. But how is it taking shape in your life? Because, you see, there's this invitation that when we find Wisdom, when we get in relationship with Wisdom, we also are laying hold of the tree of life. I see it as a way of connecting with God that leads us to life. It's paying attention to all those ways that God communicates with us that take a shape, that show us the nature of life.

I'm going to leave you with that. Think about where you see wisdom in your own life. Where do you hear it? Where do you see it? Where is it beginning to take shape? Are we paying attention to wisdom, or does it feel like it's just something that we would rather not deal with?

These passages out of proverbs seem to invite us to have ears and eyes open to hear where God is speaking. And not just here in church, but at the marketplace, at the gate, wherever we might go. Amen.