

Word for the day—*wisdom*

It's interesting that the concept of **wisdom** pops up in all three chunks of the lectionary: *Proverbs*, *Psalms*, and the *Letter to the Ephesians*. It's certainly not surprising. What would a religion be if it does not guide us in the pursuit of wisdom? And what's more interesting: what does wisdom *mean* to Christians, and how do we act *wisely*?

Now I'm going to start with an aside that's only obliquely connected to the theme of this sermon, but it's a good story.

Once upon a time (about thirty years ago), I was teaching college fulltime for the first time. The place was Sterling College, a tiny "Christian" school of about 500 hundred in the small Kansas town of Sterling, about 2,000 people. This community might not be in the center of the bible belt, but it felt like it, and not in a good way.

The town fathers preached piety but had their own little gambling lair hidden on Main Street. I know this because I cleaned the place out, but that's a different story.

The college President, who commanded me to kneel and pray with him when I interviewed for the job there, later left the community under a shroud of financial impropriety.

The high school principal, when told by a substitute that a gay student was being mocked by other boys in his English class, informed the substitute that "boys will be boys," and Shan, the boy being bullied, would need to get used to it. By the way, Shan is my son. The substitute was my wife.

That's the back story to the next story I'm about to tell: the story will set up the sermon I haven't gotten to yet.

Sterling College had mandatory chapel every Wednesday. The focus of each chapel varied, but Sterling often brought in guest speakers, and often those guest speakers were alumni. Why alums? *They'd do it for free*. Even better, they might make a donation after being moved by the honor of speaking.

One particular Wednesday my first year there, the orator was a middle-aged graduate who had made a chunk of money establishing Christian radio stations in the Midwest. I don't remember his name, or which stations were his. I do remember his spiel; it was a blast targeting all things liberal, especially our newly-elected, 42th President Bill Clinton. And I particularly remember the alum concluding his speech with this offhand comment--his wife was *exceptional*.

Why exceptional? She was a graduate of Sterling, and according to him, almost all girls in Kansas were beautiful, but those who *weren't* had attended Sterling College. Thus, he told us fondly, his wife was exceptional.

If you just got lost in the “logic” of all that, don't feel alone.

At the end, faculty and students filed out looking confused and irritated, that is, except for one sociology professor, a friend of mine named John who was sitting near me. John stood up **fuming**. “I need a class to teach!” he said, with a menace in his voice that could pierce armor. He stormed out of the auditorium.

Why am I telling you all this? Because I learned a lesson from John, more than from anything else that transpired that day. John was rightfully upset, but his anger did not excuse his need to *rant at* his students, to *forgo* the curriculum he offered them in the syllabus so he could blow off steam. True, he could have decided to have a Socratic dialogue with his students about the chapel speaker's homily, that would, at least, focus on his students' needs, but I knew John well enough that he needed to *proselytize*, not *cultivate discussion*.

How does this relate to today's lectionary and today's sermon? Because I almost did a “John.” When I read the lectionary, I latched onto the fact that **Wisdom**, in the Proverbs, is *explicitly* identified as female. I thought about all the directions I could go with that idea in this sermon and all the mileage I could get with y'all, who are a pretty pro-feminist lot. Like my friend, I could use a *piece* of the lectionary to launch into a diatribe, not follow the lectionary to see where it would lead. Like professor John, I could use the opportunity of a captive audience to satisfy my desire to seem clever and cool. But I made a promise to you when I assumed the role of preacher for today, a promise that was drilled into me when I trained in the Methodist ministry. That promise is to make Christian sense out of the prescribed lectionary, not use *pieces of it* to pursue a rabbit hole of the preacher's own interest.

Yes, *wisdom* is expressed as a *feminine* noun in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; and, interestingly, *knowledge* is a word expressed in the *masculine* form in all three tongues. We'll talk a bit about what that means, but let's save it for later.

So what is *wisdom* in the Judeo-Christian tradition? Let's unpack that idea, passage by passage.

In Proverbs, we find that wisdom is *actively invitational*. Having established herself as a serious member of the community, Wisdom throws a party. She sends her friends out to announce the celebration, she puts together a barbeque, she has finest of libations made ready. Why? This is no mere housewarming party. It's a celebration of maturity and clear thinking for those who choose to follow God. And it's not just a celebration, it's a pointed invitation for the followers of Yahweh to *walk the walk* of wisdom.

Next, in the Psalms, we learn that wisdom is rooted in an *appreciation* of God's majesty. There's some terminology in this passage that is a bit odd to the modern ear. We're told that "the **fear** of the lord is the beginning of wisdom." But the word *fear* is being used here in a way it has lost in modern times. *Fear*, as the term is used throughout the scriptures, often means something akin to a combination of "respect" and "appreciate." It's closer to "reverence" than "fright" or "trepidation."

Maybe this will help us understand the idea of that *fear/reverence*. The other night, Mary and I watched a movie called *Fatherhood*. In the flick, a child is born to her parents via caesarian delivery. A couple of weeks ago, *The New York Times* ran a feature story on caesarian section. My second daughter was born via c-section. (After 24 hours of clinging to the womb. We Roses can be pretty entrenched in their ways.)

The emotion that swept through me as I think about this amazing way of bringing forth life is what the Psalms called *fear*. I was *awed*, I was *appreciative*, I had a sense of how *small* I was compared to the forces of nature. I was amazed that physicians could do such a thing in a relatively safe way. I was in dumbfounded by the product of that procedure—in my case Sarah Rose, who came out pink and healthy at eight and a half pounds.

It's almost 37 years now, but I can still see that pink, wet child, and I can still feel her weight across my arms as I was given her to hold for the first time.

That's the reaction, the emotions that the Psalms is calling for. The scripture is beseeching its Believers to worship a God who has created their universe and favored them with food, identity, and redemption. Again, I can't escape the idea of an infant as a manifestation of God. I cannot imagine a human being who sees a newborn child, regardless of how it entered into this world, and not be amazed. In fact, I think if you want to lead someone to an appreciation of God and Her miracles, *one* episode of *Call the Midwife* will surpass any number of televangelists.

Next let's look at *Ephesians*. This epistle takes on the idea of wisdom via contrast. It asks us: what is the lifestyle of the unwise, the foolish? Answer: the foolish live *ignorantly, ignoring God's will*. If you read back a bit in chapter 5 the scriptures develop this idea of foolishness further. There we learn that the foolish are *intellectually incurious*; they don't spend the energy to wonder about God and their place with God. They are vengeful and enjoy righteous anger (which soon becomes *unrighteous* anger if you hang onto it). They speak foully.

Now *Ephesians* isn't referring to profanity here, or not primarily. Instead, it's talking about insulting other people, putting them down. Now that speaks to *me*. I'm pretty good with a cutting remark, or at least a smart aleck insult. *Ephesians* is telling me to knock that garbage off, to direct my criticisms to the *ideas* someone else expresses, not the person themselves. Try that the next time you fire up Facebook, even if you are going to type about one of Iowa's senators.

Ephesians does have one pretty explicit "don't": Go light on the booze. That is *debauchery*, and debauchery is *messy*. Someone has to clean up after it. Ask any parent whose kid has gone on a bender, or any roommate whose roomy trashed the bathroom. And then there are the thoughtless things people say to each other when we're drunk. Even worse, inebriation takes a false place in our psyches and dulls our rain so crowds out *real* joy. That *real* joy should be an appreciation of God's world and the gifts we receive herein.

So now let's circle back to the alluring idea of *wisdom* being *feminine* in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek; and that idea being in contrast with *knowledge*, which is *masculine*. What connotations come up when we think of *wisdom* being infused with the *feminine* and *knowledge* being connected to the *masculine*?

One thing that comes to my mind is that the femininity is associated with *creation and harmony*, with *bringing things together*, with finding connections and commonalities. Knowledge has a different focus. Knowledge is about counting things, about *separating* things into *discrete* categories. Knowledge is a collector, a *warehouse*. Wisdom delights in finding connections. Knowledge likes to stack things in piles.

From a theological perspective, this way of looking at wisdom plays up the *synthetic* nature of Yahweh.

Synthesis is at the heart of creativity. Through *synthesis*, things *come together* to make new and more complex things. Let's think about the creation story from a synthetic perspective, a feminine perspective. God doesn't just *separate* light and dark, She uses that process as a *step* to making land and water; and from that, *molding* life forms; and from those life forms, She invents increasingly complex ones until She gets to humans.

Now that's the way it is on *this* earth, but I have a hunch. I'm guessing God has got some pretty lifehopping planets elsewhere. That's the way a woman is: her work is never done.

Maybe the only thing distinctly masculine about the creation story is that after six days work, God takes a *whole day* off. The image of a Jehovah taking the day off does make for a good picture: imagine this substantial, elderly dude with flowing hair and beard reclining in a hammock. The hammock swings under his considerable weight. His gown, once white, is spotted and smeared with the work of the previous six days. And there might even be a little gray and brown stain in his beard at the corner of his beard where He let the cigar he smoked to celebrate his work burn down a little too close.

Benediction

Lord, we thank you for your call to wisdom. It is a call expressed in many voices: those voices sing the world you have given us; they trill from the lungs of a child when she takes first breath; they whisper in the physics that makes this planet Earth spins like a top around the sun at about a thousand miles an hour, while holding us *snug* against Her, but not crushing us.

Amen.

Lectionary for 8.15.21 NRV version. **Proverbs 9:1-6**; Psalm 111;
Ephesians 5:15-20

Proverbs 9:1-6

⁹ Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.

²She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.

³She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town,

⁴“You that are simple, turn in here!” To those without sense she says,

⁵“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

⁶Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

Psalm 111

¹Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

²Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

³Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful.

⁵He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.

⁶He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.

⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

⁸They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name.

¹⁰The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.