

## "WOMAN WISDOM"

Proverbs 8:1-36

York Center Church of the Brethren

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Who is the wisest person you know? Not the smartest person. Not the most educated. The wisest. What is it about that person that makes them wise?

When I think of the wisest people I know I realize that it isn't so much what they know that makes them wise, rather, it is who they are. If this is the case then wisdom isn't about accumulating knowledge; wisdom is about accumulating experiences. It is about building character. Wisdom is not something we can accumulate it is more about how we relate to others; it is about how we engage life. Wisdom is a way of being and seeing in the world. At its most basic, wisdom is about our relationship with God.

The dictionary defines "wise" as *"marked by deep understanding, keen discernment, and a capacity for sound judgment."* The dictionary says that *"wisdom is the ability to discern inner qualities and relationships."*

So, I ask you again. Who is the wisest person you know? Some of the wisest people I know never graduated from high school, never took the SAT exams. They don't have a long string of letters after their name. Most of them are people you have never heard of. And yet, their wisdom has touched many people and influenced many lives, including mine.

You may be surprised to know that the Bible's understanding of wisdom has very little to do with the way our culture defines it. In the biblical tradition wisdom seeks to grasp the divine plan behind the whole creation. The wise sages of ancient Israel, and in most of the cultural traditions of that time in the Ancient Near East, considered wisdom to be the personification of the divine; an agent of God. In fact, in biblical literature, wisdom is not merely a quality of human life, wisdom is a facet of God's personality; a crucial part of God's very being.

In scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, in the original Hebrew and Greek texts, the words used to describe wisdom are feminine. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for wisdom is "Sophia." In the Wisdom writings, especially Proverbs and Job, wisdom is depicted as a heavenly messenger from God who brings divine teaching and care to the people. In the New Testament wisdom is often associated with the Holy Spirit.

The wisdom celebrated in the book of Proverbs is the result of life experience, serious discernment, and the revelation of God. It welcomes mystery and ambiguity in accepting that we cannot completely know God; in calling us to always examine our understandings in light of new insights and experiences; and in knowing that wisdom can be interpreted in various ways. This wisdom is not carved in stone, but is, instead imprinted on the human heart by the love and grace of our Creator God.

I have found Eugene Peterson's introduction to the book of Proverbs in THE MESSAGE to be especially helpful. It is lengthy but worth hearing. This is what he wrote,

*"Many people think that what's written in the Bible has mostly to do with getting people into heaven- getting right with God, saving their eternal souls. It does have to do with that, of course, but not **mostly**. It is equally concerned with living on this earth- living well, living in robust sanity. In our scriptures, heaven is not the primary concern. Earth is not a tag-along afterthought. 'On earth as it is in heaven' is Jesus's prayer.*

*Wisdom is the biblical term for this on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven everyday living. Wisdom is the art of living skillfully in whatever actual conditions we find ourselves. It has virtually nothing to do with information or knowledge. A college degree is no certification of wisdom- nor is it primarily concerned with keeping us out of moral mud puddles, although it does have a profound moral impact on us.*

*Wisdom has to do with becoming skillful in honoring our parents and raising our children, handling our money and conducting our sexual lives, going to work and exercising leadership, using words well, and treating friends kindly, eating and drinking healthily, cultivating emotions within ourselves and attitudes toward others than make for peace. Threaded through all these items is the insistence that the way we think of and respond to God is the most practical thing we do. In matters of everyday practicality, nothing, absolutely nothing, takes precedence over God.*

*Proverbs concentrates on these concerns more than any other book in the Bible. Attention to the here and now is everywhere present in the stories and legislation, the prayers and the sermons, that are spread over the thousands of pages of the Bible. Proverbs distills it all into riveting images and aphorisms that keep us connected in holy obedience to the ordinary."*

Proverbs is preoccupied with daily life. It helps us to ask the question: "What must we do to live full lives in obedience to God?" For the writers of this Wisdom literature, their point of reference is the role of God whose presence permeates every detail of human life.

Here are some of the pithy sayings in Proverbs:

- *"A wise child makes a glad father, but a foolish child is a mother's grief.*
- *"The wise of heart will heed commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin.*
- *"Whoever belittles another lacks sense, but an intelligent person remains silent."*
- *"A gossip goes about telling secrets, but the one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence."*
- *"To guarantee loans for a stranger brings trouble, but there is safety in refusing to do so."*
- *"Train children in the right way, and when they grow old, they will not go astray."*

Remember, like with all biblical writings these words were written at a specific time in history to a specific group of people. Each generation is called to discern the wisdom that speaks to their own situation and needs.

Proverbs written today might sound something like this:

- Don't text and drive because a human life is worth more than asking, "what's up?"
- Be careful what you post on Facebook for it will never go away.
- Eating junk food will desecrate the temple of God that is your physical body.

- Do not be a bully for all people are beloved children of God.
- It takes a congregation to raise a child.
- Don't ruin the earth, it is the only home you have.

In all of my reading and preparation this week, one of the things that surprised me about Proverbs is that it does not have a pessimistic view of human existence. Just the opposite, in fact. Proverb's call for wisdom sends us on a quest for a full and complete life in harmony with God, with our human community, and with God's created world.

Wisdom reminds us that life isn't a burden to be endured but a blessing to be enjoyed. Proverbs affirms that life is about joy and delight. And at the center is Woman Wisdom.

Some of the most exquisite poetry in scripture is written to describe "Woman Wisdom." We find her today in chapter eight. She takes her stand by the city gate, right next to the farmer's market, where the street preachers set up their soap boxes, where teachers hang out a shingle and hope to recruit a few new students. She takes her place in the midst of ordinary human life- in the most populated high-profile spaces of life to broadcast her message. It is a message intended for every woman and every man. It is a message that contains the gift of love.

*She says, "Don't miss a word of this- I am telling you how to live well. I'm telling you how to live your best life."*

She declares that order, structure, and sanity are part of the very fabric of God's creation and a reflection of God's own nature. We learn a very significant fact about Woman Wisdom, she was "in the beginning" with God when the world was created. She participated in God's creative work! And it was a time of joy and delight.

Listen to these verses again from The Inclusive Bible.

*"God gave birth to me at the beginning, before the first act of creation. I have been from everlasting, in the beginning before the world began. Before the deep seas, I was brought forth, before there were fountains or springs of water; before the mountains erupted up into place; before the hills, I was born- before God created the earth or its fields, or even the first clods of dirt."*

*I was there when the Almighty created the heavens, and set the horizon just above the ocean, set the clouds in the sky, and established the springs of the deep, gave the seas their boundaries and set the limits of the shoreline.*

*When the foundations of the earth were laid out, I was a skilled artisan standing next to the Creator God. I was God's delight day after day, rejoicing at being in God's presence continually, rejoicing in the whole world and delighting in humankind." (Proverbs 8:22-31)*

I love the beauty and intimacy of this poetry! This text harkens back to the creation story in Genesis, chapter one, *"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth."* And it calls us forward to the Gospel of John, chapter one, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God."*

Proverbs is not interested in helping us to secure our place in the afterlife. It is focused squarely on helping us to navigate the daily, normal, unremarkable life here on

earth. And yet, Woman Wisdom makes it clear that in the presence of God there is nothing unremarkable on earth.

When we pay attention to Woman Wisdom, we will encounter the divine presence as we actually live in this world, in the non-heroic moments, in loving our neighbors and ourselves, in healing past pain and present sufferings, in taking risks to right wrongs, and promote justice, in parenting well, in caring for the earth. In other words, the very gift and task of daily life is to notice the presence of God and to rejoice in it- take delight in it- that is Wisdom. And it is the journey of a lifetime.

We are living in a time when it may be hard to see the joy and delight of God's creation; hard to acknowledge divine Wisdom; hard to feel the constant presence of the Holy Spirit. But maybe right now is when we especially need to be attentive to the delight and joy in God's creation and God's presence with us. There is no doubt in my mind that the Holy Spirit of God is moving in and through us, suffusing us with wisdom we could not attain on our own.

I leave you with these words of Woman Wisdom:

*"So, my dear friends, listen carefully; those who embrace my ways are most blessed. Make a life of discipline and live wisely; don't squander your precious life.*

*Blessed the man, blessed the woman, who listens to me, awake and ready for me each morning, alert and responsive as I start my day's work.*

*When you find me, you find life, real life. When you find me, you find God's good pleasure."*

I hope that one day, when someone is asked to name the wisest person they know, they will name you.

May it be so.

Amen.