

“Wisdom’s Child”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 30, 2010

Trinity Sunday
Rev. John Wahl

Romans 5:1-5
Proverbs 8:1-12

An unusual character steps forth from the pages of scripture for us this week; so unusual that no one seems to be able to explain exactly who (or even what) she is – except that she is a "she," this "Woman Wisdom," "Lady Wisdom," or, as Eugene Peterson translates it, "Madame Insight." Although “she” predates by centuries the appearance of Christ, scholars also associate this “Lady” with the Word in the prologue to John's Gospel (that is, with Jesus Christ), and with the Advocate (the Holy Spirit) in that same Gospel.

And yet, our earliest Christian ancestors had no "New" Testament, so the books of the Old Testament were the scriptures that nourished the first Christians. They adopted and adapted the biblical text to their own reality: they applied the ancient Word of God to their own day and to their leader, Christ. Engaging this text from Proverbs, and this unusual biblical character, then, is a good way for each of us to become aware of her roots in the Old Testament and, through her, to experience the biblical heritage.

Most people know what a "proverb" is, even if they've never opened the Bible to the Old Testament book that carries that name. Still, many folks confuse sayings from the Bible's book of Proverbs with wise sayings from other writings from the past: perhaps the most familiar example is the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," which does not appear in Scripture but in Benjamin Franklin's 18th-century *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Of course, there are plenty of proverbs in this particular book of the Bible, although they don't really begin until the stage has been set by nine chapters of a long, introductory poem, and this week's passage is part of that poem. In these introductory chapters, the listener – "my child" – is exhorted to learn the "proper" way to live so that good things will follow: prosperity and security as well as fairness and justice. It offers us the chance to reflect on the ways that God – through this unusual character “Lady Wisdom” – comes to us, speaks to us, and teaches us the character of God.

Trinity Sunday, which we celebrate on the eighth day of Pentecost, is a time for theological reflection. It helps us to think about the question: “who is God and how is God made known to us?” As Christians, we proclaim that the character and nature of God was revealed to us through the person, the message, the teachings and the sacrifice of Jesus. In the church, we call this incarnational

theology – God made known to us by taking on a human body. As John’s Gospel says, “the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” (John 1:14, *The Message*)

Richard Boyce writes, “The deeply personal and communal knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ helps us accurately see the fingerprints of God as the architect of the large and small events of our lives.”¹ Wisdom is one of those things that we know both because it is passed along to us – such as the wise sayings we learn from our parents and grand-parents – but it is also that which we experience. Ellen Davis says that “the very capacity to desire wisdom and ultimately to acquire it – or better, as the biblical imagery suggests, to enter into lifelong relationship with ‘her’ – is perhaps what most distinctively marks us as being human, as the term *homo sapiens* (which we can compare to the Latin word *sapientia*, ‘wisdom’) suggests.”²

This past week, I had the opportunity to take part in a gathering of fifteen pastors who were selected to be Thompson scholars at Columbia Seminary in Atlanta (Thompson being the name of the generous benefactor who helped to pay our way). Together, we discussed theology and how we continue to live out the incarnation of Christ as the church. To be the church in today’s world, we need to incorporate both ancient and modern wisdom – that which has been passed down to us as well as that which we can observe, experience and learn for ourselves. Past and present wisdom both inform the way we communicate and share the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.

One of my fellow Thompson scholars this week in Atlanta was Adam, who is a Columbia grad who now pastors a church in Minnesota. In July, he will be attending his seventh General Assembly meeting when it gathers in Minneapolis – serving as a reporter for the *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine. He is regarded as one of our denomination’s brightest minds on church and mission and serves on a committee which has been charged with compiling a new hymnal. His blog is read by thousands of Presbyterians and other Christians every week. And he is all of twenty-five years old.

And so, wisdom is not simply a function of age. We all have experienced times when wisdom is shown in the child, just as it can be seen in those who have acquired more life experience. In Proverbs 8, we hear as Lady Wisdom stands up in the midst of the people and proclaims: “to you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.” (Proverbs 8:4) Wisdom, we are told, calls out to us not just from within our religious institutions, but from the public places: from the heights and

¹ Richard Boyce in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 3

² Ellen Davis in Kate Huey’s “Weekly Seeds”

the byways and the city gates. It calls to us from the crossroads with a message not just of knowledge, but also discernment – the ability to judge what is good and right in God’s eyes: the pursuit of justice instead of gold; of compassion and not fine jewels. Wisdom does not just wait for us to come and find her, but calls and seeks us out.

Shirley Guthrie, who taught theology to many of these Thompson scholars when they were students at Columbia Seminary, wrote that, “if the Christian faith claims to speak of the truth, it must have some correspondence with the truth we can learn from the natural sciences, philosophy, modern psychology, and the attempts of artists to grasp the mystery of life. God is not the prisoner of the Christian church. We must expect God to be present and at work also outside the sphere of those who know about and depend on Christ and the Bible.”³

We all have human wisdom – some call it intuition or life experience – but we all have wisdom, even if it often lies beneath our consciousness. Wisdom is the sum of our experiences, the perspectives and insights that are part of our core being. But, as we are innately wise, we are also innately connected with God as revealed to us through God’s incarnation in our midst.

"Wisdom," Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "is not gained by *knowing* what is right. Wisdom is gained by *practicing* what is right, and noticing what happens when that practice succeeds and when it fails. Wise people do not have to be certain of what they believe before they act. They are free to act, trusting that the practice itself will teach them what they need to know....Wisdom atrophies if it is not walked on a regular basis."⁴

Wisdom, the Scripture requires us to understand, is the craft of taking all the learnings of our past and our present and be willing to be guided by them into the future. Wisdom leads us from one point to another in life until we learn what we’re supposed to learn, until we do what we’re supposed to do, until we each become what we’re supposed to become. But, the wisdom available in nature and in the public square will only go so far. The image of Lady Wisdom as God’s helper and revealer helps us to understand that God’s message is not static: the Good News was not just spoken from above, but instead that the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood. To more fully see God’s fingerprints on our lives, we learn to appreciate the mystery and reciprocity of the Trinity – with Father, Son and Holy Spirit all freely giving and receiving within the very being of God.

³ Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Alter in the World*

Our God is an incarnational God who came to live among us and was made known to us in Jesus Christ. But, before, during and since the Christ's life on earth, God has also been revealed to us through Wisdom, who is not really a person but a personification for the sustaining love of a God who is at the same time both one and three – revealed to us as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Douglas Donley writes: "I thank God for Wisdom. She is the great sustainer. We all need Wisdom that does not spout platitudes but gets deeper and sustains us during the dark nights of our souls. When you are lost and alone, remember that your wisdom is connected with a Wisdom that has been there since the beginning of creation. It urges you forward. It calls you to claim your true self. It sets you free to become the child of God you were called to be."⁵

Thanks be to God for the Wisdom we have learned and for the wisdom that we have lived. And thanks be to God for coming to us as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three in one; bound together by and revealed us to us through love. AMEN.

⁵ Douglas Donley in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 3