

THE HEART'S WISDOM

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Proverbs 2:1-8; James 1:17-27

“Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice....

‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?’”

Proverbs 1:20, 22

One of the things Claire and I have been doing in recent weeks is going through the books in our library. The students of Princeton Seminary run a huge used book sale every year — a fundraiser for mission projects — so we’ve been culling volumes we no longer need.

That’s not an easy thing for book lovers like us, but when you get to a certain age you realize that certain books you purchased many years ago, fully intending to read some day, will — realistically speaking — probably never get read.

That’s more than a little humbling: both in terms of the stewardship issues of buying books you never did read, but also as a reminder of your mortality. A friend of mine back in seminary had a license-plate holder on his car that said, “So many books — so little time.” He was in his twenties, and surely was thinking of how many hours there are in a day. When you’re in your sixties, the phrase “so little time” takes on a different meaning.

The decision of which books to box up for the book sale and which ones to leave on the shelf is made a little easier by the fact that so many older books — the classics — are available in electronic format. You no longer need to devote a couple of inches of shelf space to a book that you can call out of cyberspace with a few clicks of your computer keyboard. And those e-books are searchable, besides!

The role information plays in our lives is so very different than it was for earlier generations. You may recall, a couple months back, when I preached a sermon about John Witherspoon — the Presbyterian minister from New Jersey who signed the Declaration of Independence — I told you about how, when he came over from Scotland, he brought his library of 300 books with him. He came to this country to become President of the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University. Because the University library had only about 1,000 volumes at the time, when Dr. Witherspoon added his personal collection, it made a huge difference.

Princeton's Firestone Library now boasts over 11 million volumes. As for the Seminary — since 1817, distinct from the University — its library has 1.2 million.

And that's just the books. Take into account the fact that libraries — even our local public libraries — are now hubs for accessing the Internet, the amount of data available to us, in this 21st century, is absolutely mind-boggling.

We human beings proudly think of that profusion of data as something new. But it's really not. A great many millennia ago, God created a computer capable of handling vast amounts of data. Today's scientists call it deoxyribonucleic acid — DNA for short. The astronomer Carl Sagan estimates that each human DNA chromosome contains 20 billion bits of information.

That's a lot of data. Twenty billion bits is equivalent to about 500 million words. Print those words out on paper, and you'd have two million pages. If a typical book contains 500 pages, that means the information in a single DNA chromosome would fill four thousand volumes — a small library.

God, you see, has been in the knowledge business a lot longer than we have. Our “computer revolution: is only a few decades old. But the Lord who, as Psalm 90 says, has “been our dwelling place in all generations,” is more ancient than creation itself:

**“Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God....**

**For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.”**

Or, as the great hymnwriter, Isaac Watts, later paraphrased this psalm,

**“A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone,
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.”**

Yet for all the vast knowledge of our “immortal, invisible God only wise,” there is one thing God values more than knowledge. That is *wisdom*.

In our everyday speech, we often treat knowledge and wisdom as though they're the same — but they're not. Knowledge, you and I can gather on our own, storing it up in our brains — or on our computers. Wisdom, though, is a good bit more slippery. Even when you or I seek it, wisdom often eludes us; it comes chiefly as a gift.

Albert Einstein is reputed to have said, on the subject of wisdom, “Any fool can know. The point is to understand.”

The ancient Chinese sage, Confucius, said something that turns out, in the end, to be rather similar: “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.”

Ouch! But you can relate, I'm sure.

This morning's text from Proverbs is all about wisdom: "Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice...."How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?"

Hello! Who's this, now? Who's this woman, crying out from the street-corners? She speaks with such authority.

Her name is Sophia. Well, that's what Greek translations of the Hebrew scriptures call her. Sophia is simply the Greek word for wisdom.

In the book of Proverbs, Sophia plays the role of muse for young Jewish men who are studying the scriptures. Sophia's job is to lead these aspiring students of God's word along the right paths.

"My child," Sophia says, in chapter 2,

**"if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding...
if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures —
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;**

from his mouth come knowledge and understanding...”

Wisdom is heart-knowledge. You can't capture it. You can't shelve it in a library or burn it to a computer hard disk. You can only seek it — humbly, and reverently: hoping it will come to you.

The more I dig into the book of Proverbs, the more amazed I become at the wondrous breadth of this Hebrew concept of wisdom. Today I'd like to sketch out just a few of its many facets.

Three things are true about biblical wisdom:

One, wisdom is utterly *honest*: it can live as easily with doubt as it can with certainty.

Two, wisdom is *practical*: it belongs not so much to the ivory tower of the university, as to the day-to-day knowledge of hearth and home.

Three, wisdom is *relational*: it's not a storehouse of dried-out ideas. It's grounded in a living, personal relationship with God. That, I think, is why the author of Proverbs chooses to personify wisdom as this mysterious woman. Those who are truly wise are in relationship with the source of all wisdom.

Let's look first at wisdom as honest searching. The truly wise people of our world are willing to admit they don't have all the answers. It's only fools who

pretend they have answers to everything. You all know the name of Thomas Alva Edison — one of New Jersey's finest. Edison was one of the most brilliant scientists and inventors in history; yet he once admitted, “We don't know the millionth part of one percent about anything in our world.” And this from the man who invented the light bulb, the movie projector, the phonograph and hundreds of other useful items!

Any person of spiritual wisdom is bound to admit that “we don't know the millionth part of one percent about anything” in the heavenly world, either. At best, the Bible allows us to glimpse God — and we Christians believe that in Jesus Christ we see God as nowhere else — but our visions are only glimpses. They're like the figure of a person illuminated for an instant by a strobe light.

I don't have an answer for why there's such a thing as cancer in our world, or how we can prove God's existence, or why it is that the evil seem to prosper and the virtuous so often live in poverty. These are great, important questions — and the search for their answers occupies my life, as it should well occupy yours. The wise person, Proverbs says, is a seeker — one who's able to live with the ambiguity of not having all life's answers wrapped up in a neat little parcel.

There are churches you can go to where they spoon-feed you crystal-clear answers — but they're not churches of true wisdom. In this life, as Paul admits in

First Corinthians 13, we see “through a mirror dimly.” Only when the perfect comes will the imperfect pass away. Only “then shall we know fully, even as we have been fully known.” Wisdom is honest about ambiguity and doubt.

Wisdom is also practical. The Hebrew word for “wisdom” is descended from a word meaning “skillful.” The shining example of a wise person, to the Hebrew mind, is not a philosopher or a college professor, but a person who’s good at practical things. The wise person is one who can make things happen.

A wise person is like a good cook. Think of all the things a cook has to do. There’s knowledge involved, for sure — knowledge of weights and measures, of cooking times and recipes, but there’s so much more. A truly good cook is able to improvise, to prepare an excellent meal even when a key ingredient is missing. If an extra guest shows up at the last minute, the good cook can quickly set an extra place, and stretch the recipe to feed one more. The good cook delivers everything to the table at the right time, piping hot — all the while making the guests feel welcome and at ease with one another.

The practical nature of wisdom — and how it is different from knowledge — comes out in this little story. It seems a young Navy ensign was given, for the

first time, the task of taking a destroyer out to sea. Now this ensign had graduated from Annapolis at the top of his class. He knew the rule-book inside-out. The ensign issued his commands. The sailors moved crisply to their stations. The destroyer left the dock flawlessly; the ensign established a new time record for getting a ship under way. But then a sailor arrived on the bridge, with a radio message from the captain: “My personal congratulations upon completing your underway preparation exercise according to the book and with amazing speed. In your haste, however, you have overlooked one of the unwritten rules — make sure the captain is aboard before getting under way.”

Wisdom is all about knowing those unwritten rules: what some have called common sense.

Wisdom is also concerned with human relationships. The eager ensign would have done a lot better if he'd paid attention to his most important relationship — the relationship with his captain. Wise people, according to Proverbs, are very aware that their life touches others — that they are interconnected in a great web of human relationships.

At the heart of Proverbs is this mysterious figure, called by some the wisdom-woman. In chapter 8, she speaks of her origins:

**“When he established the heavens, I was there....
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.”** [Prov. 8:27, 29-31]

Sophia, the wisdom-woman, is in close relationship with God, always. She

almost seems to be God's alter ego, yin to his yang

In case this sounds strange to you — and I'm not surprised if it does — it's because the book of Proverbs, like the other wisdom literature of the Old Testament, is sadly neglected.

Perhaps only a female figure could convey the message that our relationships are important: that we are not isolated individuals, hoarding knowledge as power and using it for our own ends. The fabric of our human relationships must be maintained. That is the way of wisdom.

In our New Testament lesson this morning, Jesus turns to his disciples, asking a very blunt — and very relational — question: “Who do people say that I am?”

“Some say John the Baptist, others, Elijah. Still others, one of the prophets.”

Then Jesus looks right into their eyes — right into their souls is more like it — and asks the million-dollar question: “But who do *you* say that I am?”

Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah.” As he utters those words, the Galilean fisherman crosses the invisible line between knowledge and wisdom. No longer is he making a detached, intellectual observation: he’s revealing his heart’s commitment. He’s declaring his heart’s desire, and he’s acting on it.

As the kids of this congregation go off to Sunday School each week — and, later, as they show up for Confirmation classes — we’re teaching them about the Bible, yes, and a whole lot of other things, but at our best we’re also teaching them wisdom, in the biblical sense. The heart of that wisdom is to grow into relationship with God, through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We’re hoping they’ll learn about the Bible, to be sure, but knowledge of chapter and verse is of little importance if it does not issue in the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and savior.

“Happy are those who find wisdom,” says Proverbs chapter 3,

**and those who get understanding,
for her income is better than silver,
and her revenue better than gold.
She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her....
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy.”**

Let us pray:

**You be our wisdom, O God,
be our true word.
May we ever be with you,
and you with us, Lord.
Heart of our own hearts,
whatever befall:
still be our vision,
O ruler of all.**

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