

“Living Wisdom”  
September 12, 2021  
Scripture: Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38

If you’ve ever received an e-mail from Dr. Jeff Faunce, the man behind the camera this morning, you may have noticed several aphorisms at the end, including one that he attributes to his son Jacob. It goes “knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad.” It’s not as poetic as Proverbs but it’s worth remembering. Now, I don’t think the image of Lady Wisdom calling from the city gate is meant to convey information quite that mundane, and I certainly hope the consequences for ignoring tomato wisdom aren’t as severe, because ignoring Wisdom’s call leads to disaster: “For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”

A pretty simple choice! All we have to do is heed Wisdom’s call, do the right thing, follow the rules, and everything will go well. A lot of wisdom literature in the Bible is rooted in that belief. Life is a series of choices that are simple and clear: right or wrong, good or bad. And those who choose to do good will always prosper while those who choose to do bad will always be punished. Because that’s how the world really works, right? If only...

The writers of scripture weren’t naïve. They knew what the world is really like. If you’ve ever read Job or Ecclesiastes, also pieces of wisdom literature, you’ll find a challenge to that traditional worldview. Proverbs takes place in an ideal world, like the movie High Noon or The Avengers; a place where all the ambiguities are smoothed out and you can always tell the good guys from the bad and everyone gets what they deserve in the end. But if we move past that make-believe world and look at what happens to those in the Bible who actually do heed Wisdom’s call, the portrayals are very different.

Name me, for instance, a prophet whom everyone loves. Name one prophet who responds to God’s call and has nothing but ease and prosperity. I can’t think of one: Elijah, Jeremiah, Amos, Isaiah, they all are rejected for the message they bring, rejected for following the path of Wisdom. So, what is that path anyway?

There are a couple of elements of wisdom that are especially important. One is actually illustrated in that saying of Jacob’s. Wisdom teaches us awareness of the consequences of our actions. Wisdom informs us that nothing we do happens in a vacuum. We’re part of a vast network of relationships where whatever I do affects everyone around me and maybe even others in places I’ll never go. What does wisdom say about our use of resources and care for the planet? Over the last year and a half what has wisdom told us about our effect on others when we fail to take precautions during this pandemic?

When we follow the path of wisdom we discover we’re not alone and life isn’t only about us. That awareness leads us to empathy and compassion. We’re moved to live for others, to walk with them in their pain and be their advocates in the world. That’s what Jesus means when he

tells Peter and the disciples they must take up their cross. Taking up our cross is about letting go of living only for ourselves and living for those the world rejects.

And that brings me to the other element of wisdom. Wisdom calls us to know ourselves fully, to become our true selves. The foolishness Lady Wisdom decries at the gate is the life of illusion the world teaches us to lead. It's life defined by material gain and meaningless pursuits like social status or fame. Our true selves are found when we follow the path of wisdom. Jesus calls his disciples to identify with him, to become his presence in the world. Our identity, our true self, is found through sacrifice, through the cross Jesus carries.

Living that wisdom is the challenge Jesus makes to his disciples over and over. Sometimes they do well, as when Peter recognizes Jesus as Messiah. Other times, they fail; as when Peter rebukes Jesus in the very next breath. Our lives are a constant movement along and veering off the path of wisdom. Listening for her call, recognizing the presence of Christ in the world is a discipline we must practice every day. We do that together, as a community. Just as none of lives for ourselves, none of is alone in this journey. We are on this path together. And while each of us must take up her cross, none of us bears it alone.

Understanding that we are part of a great company of God's people, a multitude that spans centuries and transcends tradition or heritage or religion, allows us to continue walking even when we stumble. Wisdom can light our path if we're willing to live it. God will empower us to be Jesus' disciples for the sake of a world longing to be free of foolishness and illusion. Open your hearts; listen for Wisdom's voice calling you; and follow Jesus on the path of compassion and sacrifice and be set free.

Amen