

Pentecost 17 (B – 2018)
Proverbs 1:20-33

Today, we start on a journey through the Wisdom books of the Old Testament - from now until Thanksgiving. We'll touch on Proverbs today, next week, and then one more Sunday; then Esther, the Book of Job, and finally the story of Ruth, whose husband, Boaz, is an ancestor of Jesus and thus an appropriate lead-in as we start our preparations for Christmas.

The Book of Proverbs, with Job, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon are classic wisdom writings. They do not contain references to the temple, the priests, or the covenant. In fact, there is nothing in them that would offend the non-Jew. They do not speak of heavenly rewards or divine punishment, but instead, speak of how to achieve a happy existence in this life. The goal of life, according to this non-religious theology, was to achieve fullness of life, characterized by well-being and happiness. People who cooperated with this order of life were wise. Those who did not were fools. Nice guys finish first.

The Bible reading for today contains many such wisdom sayings.

While from a Christian standpoint, the Proverbs may seem like *religion-lite*, they still have much to teach us about God's nature and what it means to follow Jesus.

Let's review our Bible reading from today: Proverbs 1:20-33. In the reading, Wisdom is likened to a woman climbing up on a soapbox in the middle of traffic and shouting to anyone who will listen. To the ancient reader, this, indeed, was a shocking metaphor! A lady of breeding stayed home. When she had to venture out it was always with a veil, hair put up, and with a chaperone. The idea of a lady walking the streets raising her voice (v. 20), shouting in the middle of town (v. 21), and speaking to men at city gates (v. 21) was unthinkable.

We heard how Proverbs, while not referring directly to God, still reveals the character of God. One sees here how very serious God is about making himself known among beggars, sellers, farm hands, criminals, and the well-to-do of every town. There is an especially beautiful quality to Wisdom as we read about her in the scripture today. The Wisdom of God takes on a feminine dimension in the holy writings. In Greek, the name for Wisdom is "Sophia." Some have said that this text, among others shows that God is both male and female, but also neither.

This week's reading from the Book of Proverbs proclaims the importance of discerning the voice of the Lord (and its personification as Wisdom) amidst the cacophony -- and the dire consequences that come if we choose to ignore that voice which "cries out in the street." Proverbs suggests that if we "hate knowledge" and do not "choose the fear of the Lord" we will be condemned to "eat the fruit of [our own] way."

Of course, not everyone in American society is going to be drawn to wisdom. Given our individualism, wanting to find truth for ourselves; and the on youth and

staying young, Americans are intuitively less and less inclined to rely on the wisdom handed down by a community and by elders to orient their lives. Even if people want to hear the wisdom of God, competing voices make it difficult.

One rather frustrating Sunday morning the teacher of the junior high class decided to try a little experiment with her students. What made the morning difficult was that some of the students were having a hard time concentrating on the lesson, while other students were struggling to keep quiet. The teacher asked for three volunteers, explaining that all they had to do was talk, which certainly would not seem to be a difficult task for thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds. Of the three students who volunteered, one was a talkative girl who other classmates affectionately nicknamed "Motor-mouth." Her consuming interest was hair styles along with the latest fashions. She would have no difficulty talking. The boy who volunteered was interested in sports; he would share the latest scores and the statistics of his favorite teams. He would have no difficulty talking either. The third student who volunteered was more reserved but with some persuading agreed to participate.

The three students stood before the others and were given final instructions: all they had to do was talk for two minutes without stopping. The only catch was that all three had to talk at the same time. The teacher, looking at her watch, told the students to begin talking. The first girl began predictably talking about the latest fashions, including what was "hot" and in style and what was not. The second student began a play-by-play account of the baseball game he had watched the evening before. The third student told of coming to church that morning with his family and seeing a car broken down on the side of the road.

When the two minutes were up, the out-of-breath students stopped talking. When the teacher asked the rest of the class what they heard, the students were somewhat puzzled. No one could recall in detail what the three had said at the same time. Some picked up parts of what the three said, but no one could recall what all three had said. There were some in the class who listened closely to what one student said and were able to recall with some accuracy what was said, but no one knew what all three had said.

Then came time for the lesson. The wise teacher explained to the class that in life there will always be many voices crying out for attention. The students themselves would have to choose which voices they would listen to. This was one lesson that the students would remember for a long time.

Hard enough to be listened to or heard in the middle of any busy city intersection, our Bible reading is a metaphor for the many voices that clamor for our attention in the busyness of our world. It can be difficult to know who to listen to, who to believe and who even to pay attention to.

Thankfully, Lady Wisdom or God if you wish, is no shrinking violet. She does not wait for people to come to her, but instead goes to them. She does not sit in comfort in a quiet corner of the temple, but seeks out places where people

congregate—the streets, the marketplace, busy corners, and the entrance of the city gates.

City gates were especially busy. They were the only way to enter or leave the city, so people had to go through the gates to attend to their fields during the day and return through the gates at night. City elders administered justice at the city gates. Prophets delivered prophecies there. Merchants conducted business there.

When Lady Wisdom arrives at these busy places, she cries out—makes an impassioned plea—pulls out all the stops to try to persuade the foolish to move to the camp of the wise. She assumes that the situation is not hopeless—that God has provided foolish people with the capacity for wisdom—that they can choose wisdom—and that their unhappy situation will reverse itself if they do so.

The underlying assumption here is that simple people can choose to be enlightened—that scoffers can choose to lay down their scoffing and to embrace belief—that foolish people can choose to become wise. These people are set on a disastrous course, but it is a course of their own choosing. They have had more than adequate opportunity to understand their plight, because Lady Wisdom has made it plain to them. They could change course, but refuse to do so.

If these foolish people decide in this moment to embrace wisdom, is it too late? From the tenor of Lady Wisdom's comments, it would appear that the time for decision has come and gone—but perhaps there is still one last chance. Lady Wisdom is still hoping for repentance—for turning around—for choosing a better way. She is not yet saying that the door is forever closed, but rather warning that the door will soon close. She is hoping that some might yet hear her call and respond—take her outstretched hand—heed her wise counsel—listen to her reproof. She has not come to destroy or to revel in destruction, but to save. She has come with the hope that some will want to be saved and long to know God and know God's wisdom.

There's a story about a proud young man who came to Socrates asking for knowledge. He walked up to the philosopher and said, "O great Socrates, I come to you for knowledge." In response, Socrates led the young man through the streets, to the sea, and chest deep into the water. Then he asked the young man, "Now tell me, what is it that you want?"

"Knowledge, O wise Socrates," said the young man with a smile.

Socrates put his hands on the man's shoulders and pushed him under the water. Thirty seconds later the wise philosopher lifted his pupil out of the water. "What is it again that you want?" he asked. "Wisdom, O great and wise Socrates" the young man said under labored breathing.

Socrates again took the man and held him under water, this time longer. Thirty seconds passed, thirty-five, forty, forty-five. Finally, Socrates let him up. The man gasped for air as Socrates asked him, "What do you want, young man?"

He labored to answer. "Knowledge, O wise and wonderful . . ." To this

Response, Socrates then plunged the man under water, this time holding him for close to a minute. As the young man came up panting for oxygen, Socrates asked him, "What do you want?"

"Air!" the young man screamed. "I need air!"

"When you desire wisdom as you have just desired air, then you will have it".

Most people would probably say that they desire wisdom. Yet not many actually desire wisdom as that young man desired air. Wisdom is something you identify when you see it, but may have difficulty defining it. Perhaps wisdom could be defined as the ability to live in right relation to how things actually are. The Scriptures proclaim that such ability begins with fearing the Lord, but it does not end there.

Throughout Proverbs it is the "fear of the Lord that is the beginning of Wisdom," a thought set forth in verse 29 of our Bible reading today. The one who is truly wise observes not the ways of the world, but the desire and will of God, as those are set forth in the scriptures. The wise person "fears" God, that is: obeys him, stands in awe of him, searches out his ways and will, in a constant daily companionship. Thus, in the New Testament, finally, Wisdom is given only through Jesus Christ, who is our wisdom, according to Paul (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30; cf. Colossians 2:2). We are, says Colossians, to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:1-2). In our Lord Jesus, by the teaching and guidance of his Spirit, we find true wisdom.

We can't be wise without God. But with God, focused on Him and His Wonderful Gift, we have a chance to embark on a joyful journey - one that is open, full of awe about God, filled with God, and because we are not so full of ourselves, filled with kindness and concern for the poor. It's a lifelong journey, which if you have not already begun it, by the grace of God can begin today.

A wise old owl sat in an oak;

The more he saw the less he spoke;

The less he spoke the more he heard;

In our reading from the Book of Proverbs today, Wisdom is poetry. Anyone who devotes himself or herself to the acquisition of, listening for and hearing, Wisdom will find a blessing from God and will be loved by God in a way that we don't often hear about in the scripture. Usually, the biblical mandate goes the other way around. We are usually the ones called on to love God. But in this instance, once we are devoted to Wisdom, something especially beautiful happens to us. Anyone who seeks Wisdom will look closely into the nature of God's very being because what we see there is a reflection of the Glory of God. Anyone who desires God's wisdom must listen for Wisdom's voice. My hope is that in this room and those beyond, no matter your age, is filled with wise old owls who are open and listening for the voice of wisdom, that you might come to know God and God's desire and love for you.