

**“Lady Wisdom”
June 16, 2019
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Today we observe Trinity Sunday in the church which is the only Sunday in our liturgical calendar where we focus on a doctrine of the church rather than a season or event such as the birth or resurrection of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity is actually quite complicated to understand and difficult to describe without slipping into one sort of heresy or another. Three distinct persons but one God. We tend to place emphasis on the functions of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer in an attempt to tell them apart, and yet these three attributes can actually be ascribed to all persons of the Trinity.

To further muddy the waters, today’s lectionary offers a text from Proverbs which is a personification of Wisdom. Some scholars say the person of Wisdom described in Proverbs 8 is Jesus Christ, and some say it’s the Holy Spirit. Both sides have strong arguments, but rather than try to shoehorn Wisdom into one person of the Trinity or the other, I propose that we meet *her* on *her* own terms. You heard that right, Wisdom is personified as a woman in this scripture; so ladies, feel free to remind the men in your life that Wisdom comes in the form of a woman. I mean, we’ve dealt with our fair share of male pronouns over 2,000 years of church history, am I right? I’m teasing, of course, but not really.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I spent some time with the Message Bible’s translation of this text. For those of you unfamiliar with the Message, it is a translation or paraphrase of the Bible written by Eugene Peterson who, I’m sad to say, died this past year. Eugene was one of the great Presbyterian ministers and theologians of our time, having faithfully served a congregation while writing many brilliant books as well as offering his personal translation of the Bible called The Message. I was quite taken with his translation of Proverbs 8, and I will be reading that text in lieu of the New Revised Standard Version you have in your pew. To fully appreciate his choices for translation, however, I encourage you to pull out your pew bible and read along with the NRSV on page 590-591. Listen now for the word of the Lord:

*1-11 Do you hear Lady Wisdom calling? Can you hear Madame Insight raising her voice?
She’s taken her stand at First and Main, at the busiest intersection.
Right in the city square where the traffic is thickest, she shouts,
“You—I’m talking to all of you, everyone out here on the streets!
Listen, you idiots—learn good sense! You blockheads—shape up!
Don’t miss a word of this—I’m telling you how to live well, I’m telling you how to live at your best.
My mouth chews and savors and relishes truth— I can’t stand the taste of evil!
You’ll only hear true and right words from my mouth; not one syllable will be twisted or*



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skewed.

You'll recognize this as true—you with open minds; truth-ready minds will see it at once. Prefer my life-disciplines over chasing after money, and God-knowledge over a lucrative career.

For Wisdom is better than all the trappings of wealth; nothing you could wish for holds a candle to her.

12-21 "I am Lady Wisdom, and I live next to Sanity; Knowledge and Discretion live just down the street.

The Fear-of-God means hating Evil, whose ways I hate with a passion— pride and arrogance and crooked talk.

Good counsel and common sense are my characteristics; I am both Insight and the Virtue to live it out.

With my help, leaders rule, and lawmakers legislate fairly; With my help, governors govern, along with all in legitimate authority.

I love those who love me; those who look for me find me.

Wealth and Glory accompany me— also substantial Honor and a Good Name.

My benefits are worth more than a big salary, even a very big salary; the returns on me exceed any imaginable bonus.

You can find me on Righteous Road—that's where I walk— at the intersection of Justice Avenue, Handing out life to those who love me, filling their arms with life—armloads of life!

22-31 "God sovereignly made me—the first, the basic— before he did anything else.

I was brought into being a long time ago, well before Earth got its start.

I arrived on the scene before Ocean, yes, even before Springs and Rivers and Lakes.

Before Mountains were sculpted and Hills took shape, I was already there, newborn; Long before God stretched out Earth's Horizons, and tended to the minute details of Soil and Weather, And set Sky firmly in place, I was there.

When he mapped and gave borders to wild Ocean, built the vast vault of Heaven, and installed the fountains that fed Ocean, When he drew a boundary for Sea, posted a sign that said no trespassing, And then staked out Earth's Foundations, I was right there with him, making sure everything fit.

Day after day I was there, with my joyful applause, always enjoying his company, Delighted with the world of things and creatures, happily celebrating the human family.

32-36 "So, my dear friends, listen carefully; those who embrace these my ways are most blessed.

Mark 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, to say nothing of God's good pleasure.

But if you wrong me, you damage your very soul; when you reject me, you're flirting with death."¹

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

When I first began to ponder the lectionary texts for this Trinity Sunday, this scripture grabbed me by the shoulders, even after reading the NRSV that doesn't call us idiots or blockheads, at least not directly. It seems to me that wisdom has become an endangered

¹ The Message, Proverbs 8.

species these days, and I thought it would do us well to spend some time pondering it. While we live in the Age of Information, I think many of us can agree that this hasn't necessarily led us to a progression of wisdom.

The amount of knowledge and its accessibility these days, however, is staggering. When I was a child, if I had a curiosity about something, I had to wait until I could get my hands on a World Book Encyclopedia before I could learn any more about a subject. Nowadays, as soon as a question crosses my mind, I give it a Google on my phone, which is always at hand. I no longer have to wait or depend on my memory to access an unimaginably vast data pool to get some answers. One would think that this would enable us to be the wisest generation yet, but we don't always use all that information in a wise way.

I believe that many in our society have missed the distinction that wisdom is more than just the accumulation of information or knowledge; wisdom is the product of both knowledge and experience. It is the coordination of information and its deliberate use to improve well-being.² Robert Sternberg and his colleagues at Yale University have conducted scientific study around the concept of wisdom. Based on his research, Sternberg defines wisdom as that which results from people utilizing their intelligence to seek a common good. He believes a wise person balances his or her own interests with those of other people and of larger entities such as family, community or country.³

In his book cleverly entitled *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid*, he suggests that intelligent, well-educated people are particularly susceptible to four fallacies that inhibit wise choices and actions. As I describe them here, I encourage you to think about where you have seen these fallacies at work in our world. The first is the Egocentrism Fallacy which involves thinking that the world revolves or should revolve around you which leads to acting in ways that benefit yourself without regard to how that behavior affects other people. We see this in traffic every day, am I right? I personally have witnessed three separate car accidents take place right in front of me over the past two weeks, all caused by licensed drivers who were not thinking about any of the drivers around them.

The second fallacy is the Omniscience Fallacy which is believing that you know all there is to know on a subject and therefore do not have to listen to the counsel of others. We are all familiar with people who are the know-it-alls that are more interested in telling you what they know about a subject than hearing anyone else's thoughts. This fallacy prevents maturity or any sort of evolution or growth in a particular area of knowledge.

The third fallacy is the Omnipotence Fallacy which is believing that your intelligence and education somehow make you all-powerful. We often see this in authority figures who abuse their power and influence in the areas of law or healthcare. Finally, there is the Invulnerability Fallacy which is believing that you can do whatever you want and you will never get caught or held accountable.⁴ We tend to see this play out among children,

² <https://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletters/authentic happiness coaching/wisdom>

³ Sternberg, R. J. (1998). A balance theory of wisdom. *Review of General Psychology*, 2, 347-365.

⁴ Sternberg (2003). *Why smart people can be so stupid*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

politicians, and celebrities, and I'll let you draw your own conclusions about where this fallacy is most prevalent these days. On the surface, the thing that all these fallacies seem to have in common is ego. In order to overcome these fallacies, there must be some sort of practice of self-awareness and humility grounded in the desire to pursue wisdom.

And that is where Lady Wisdom comes in. As these fallacies run rampant and threaten the health and wholeness of all of humanity, clearly we are called to re-acquaint ourselves with the Ways of Wisdom. Our lectionary only recommended select verses from Proverbs 8, but it seemed important for us to study the whole chapter to get a better grip on the origins, core values, and nature of Wisdom. To get an adequate picture of Lady Wisdom, I found it helpful to break down the chapter into three main movements.

The first movement covers verses 1-21 where she introduces herself and reveals her location, audience, and ethics. We learn that she announces her presence in the thick of everything, at the main intersection of town. She is not a fringe character or superfluous creature but rather she is at the center of everything. Her values are the at the heart of a life well-lived. Wisdom's address is targeted to "all that live" (v. 4) which is to say that she isn't just talking to the theologians or the well-educated or the priests. She is talking to everyone, even the ignorant and simple-minded. No one is let off the hook from the words of Wisdom. She then sets her words apart as truthful and righteous. She makes it clear that she cannot abide pride, arrogance, evil or fake news. There is no room for any of that nonsense in wisdom. She also spells out the cost for wisdom in lifting its importance supremely higher than jewels, money, or any material possession. Finally, she identifies herself as integral to being a just and righteous ruler.

In the second movement, she seems to anticipate some pushback or question to her authority, because she then begins to establish her credibility. She was created by God before all of creation. In fact, she is the very first act of creation which places her as the foundation and a guiding principle for everything that comes after. Once God begins creating the heavens and the earth, she is right by God's side. In fact, the NRSV names her as a master worker, an architect of sorts, of creation. She is co-creating with God to make sure everything works and has its place. And while we often think of wisdom as being associated with serious, dour people, she dispels this myth by naming her joy and delight at God's creation and particularly of humanity. So while she may have gotten a little sassy by calling us idiots and blockheads, she actually delights in the human race and calls us her children (v. 32). Wisdom is our mother.

In the final movement of this chapter, she lovingly spells out the secret for happiness. And aren't we always in hot pursuit of happiness? "Happy are those who keep my ways," says Lady Wisdom. And her ways are truth, justice, and righteousness. Her ways grant life, not death. I don't think any of us would argue with this, and most of us would say we seek daily to employ wisdom. Yet even as we try to remain committed to Lady Wisdom's values, we often still get confused about the relationship between knowledge and wisdom.

Albert Einstein is typically associated with the development of the atom bomb during WWII through his equation of $E=mc^2$ even though he was not actually granted security

clearance to work on such a project. While Einstein encouraged President Roosevelt in a letter to investigate the technology before the Germans did which would ultimately lead to the Manhattan Project, he later stated, "had I known that the Germans would not succeed in developing an atomic bomb, I would have done nothing."⁵ While he was seeking to make wise choices with his discoveries, at the drop of the first atomic bomb, he grieved the course that was taken. Like many of us, he struggled with the reality of obtaining knowledge and how it may potentially be used for good or evil.

Even today, we watch as governments, corporations, and individuals use obtained knowledge without the parameters of Wisdom guiding them so they may increase their profitability and self-interest. A utility company uses information and knowledge to cut costs in a way that ultimately pollutes drinking water sources as Lady Wisdom weeps over the creation she helped to create. A friend's father is dying in the hospital, because of a war waged between the hospital and Medicare over costs. Lady Wisdom poses the question, "What is the value of a human life vs. gold, silver, and jewels?"

While it would seem we have to choose between wealth and wisdom, that isn't necessarily the case as Wisdom tells us that "Riches and honor" are with her, "enduring wealth and prosperity" (v. 18). To be sure, there are more examples than can be named of the ways we have neglected Wisdom in modern life, yet there are also beautiful examples of ways that people have taken knowledge and put that knowledge to use for the greater good.

A few years ago, I read an article about a Dutch nursing home that offered free rent to university students if they would spend 30 hours a month acting as good neighbors to the nursing home residents. The community had two separate and seemingly unrelated problems: the rising depression of the elderly and cost prohibitive housing for students who are not yet employed. Rather than medicating the seniors and incurring more debt among students, Lady Wisdom offered guidance in joining these groups together in powerful, transformative ways.

Just last week, I read about a school in Iowa that allows students to fulfill their PE requirement by doing lawn work for older adults who were unable to do it themselves. Once again, Lady Wisdom made a way for students who needed physical activity in the face of rising obesity rates to connect with senior citizens who want to stay independently in their homes as long as they can. As one who hustled her way out of more kickball games than I can count, I would have jumped at the chance to do yard work for someone in need.

So how can we hear the voice of Wisdom through all the complication and noise of modern life? Well, you'll be happy to know that Lady Wisdom gives us a formula in verse 34: "Happy is the one who *listens* to me, *watching daily* at my gates, *waiting* beside my doors." First, we are invited to stop talking and to *listen*. She locates her voice at the main intersection of town, so I would suggest that we can hear her speaking throughout our world. That might require, however, that we listen not only to our tribes, but also to other

⁵ <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/einstein/peace-and-war/the-manhattan-project>

peoples' tribes. Spend some time listening to people who don't sound or look like you. Lady Wisdom locates herself somewhere in between.

Second, we are supposed to *watch daily* which means that watching for Wisdom is a daily discipline. It is not something we do every now and then when a big decision comes across our plate. It is a daily process of keeping our eyes, our hearts and our minds open to what she might be telling us. Finally, we are to *wait* beside her doors which means we need patience. In our fast-moving, instant gratification society there is pressure to make quick decisions about matters and people. But Lady Wisdom invites us to listen, to watch daily and to wait as she reveals the path to happiness, freedom, and life.

On this Trinity Sunday, whether you believe Wisdom is located in God, Christ, the Holy Spirit or across all three, as people of faith we are called to be wise. We must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the conventional wisdom of the world that puts self before others and institutional survival above human thriving for all. Our world continues to groan under the pain of sin and death, yet we can bear witness to health, healing and wholeness guided by a Triune God, joyfully co-creating new and abundant life with Lady Wisdom at God's side. Amen.