

“At the Crossroads”
August 16, 2009
Proverbs 8:1–7 and 9:1–6
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A reading from Proverbs, chapter 8 verses 1 through 6 and chapter 9 verses 1 through 7:

“Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;
Beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out;
‘To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.
O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it.
Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right;
For my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips.

Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town.
‘You that are simple, turn in here!’ To those without sense she says,
‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.’”

It is once again an honor to stand before you this morning and share a word with you as we worship together. I know we don’t often hear sermons based on a text from the book of Proverbs...in fact, I can honestly say that I have never heard one before. Perhaps you haven’t either. Truthfully, we probably don’t often find ourselves even *reading* from the book of Proverbs, so what I am attempting to do this morning might best be described as somewhat of a journey into uncharted territory. I hope that we can journey together.

When we were growing up, my younger brother Greg would often make fun of me for a wide variety of things. I know, I know, I’m the older one, I should be the one making fun of him, but that’s just not how it usually worked between us. You see, I was always a straight-A student, praised for being intelligent, always reading book after book, but my brother used to point out to me, rather astutely, that I sometimes lacked common sense. I could solve complex algebraic equations, but I couldn’t give you directions to the grocery store. He’d say, “Hilary, you’re book-smart, there’s no denying that, but I have common sense, you know, street smarts...” I would, of course, try to defend myself and maybe even try to make fun of him for something in return, but even then I knew that there was some truth to what he said. He was wiser than I was, in the sense of being cunning and personable and generally connecting the dots and seeing a bigger picture. Over time, my level of overall maturity began to catch up with my level of intelligence, and so, after many years and countless different life experiences to help shape my thinking, I hope that I’ve gained some of that common sense that I once lacked.

And this idea of common sense, and more profoundly, the idea of wisdom, is really what much of the book of Proverbs is attempting to address. When you think about Proverbs, you may think about the lengthy section of about twenty chapters or so that consists mainly of brief, one or two liners that we often dismiss as just quaint sayings from bygone days...you know,

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall...”

“Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisors they succeed...”

Or my personal favorite, “Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it...” etc.

While there is certainly enduring wisdom in most, if not all, of these sayings, and while we can learn much from them by reading them with an eye for themes and placing them in tension with one another, our text for this morning draws us to the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs, specifically to parts of chapters eight and nine, so that we might examine the concept of wisdom as we encounter it personified in the figure of a woman.

As early as chapter 1 verse 20, after what appears to be the introduction of an address from a father to his son, we read that “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks...” Reminiscent of the tradition of the biblical prophets speaking God’s message to the people of the city, Woman Wisdom cries out in the street and raises her voice to speak at the busiest corners and intersections. The content of her message is a powerful indictment of those who choose to follow their own ways rather than the way of wisdom that has been handed down to them. Woman Wisdom is loud, she is forceful, and she stands amidst the crowds at the intersections of the city streets proclaiming her message unabashedly and unapologetically. Later, the father-narrator asks, “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand.” Then we find that Wisdom invites those who are *not* wise to her great banquet, calling from the highest places in the town, compelling them to come in, to eat of her bread and drink of the wine she has mixed, so that they might lay aside their immaturity and walk in the way of insight.

Wisdom personified as a woman challenges us to understand the dynamic and interactive nature of true wisdom. Wisdom is poetic and polyvalent; it’s not a checklist of do’s and don’ts that we can adhere to meticulously without even thinking. Wisdom grows and maybe even changes; it is not stagnant or static. It requires us to draw on our own experiences and the experiences of those around us and engage in keen observation and reflection. We have to ask questions and critically examine the beliefs and ideas that we hold to be true. The wisdom that we have accumulated stands with us in the streets as we go about our day-to-day activities and it stands with us at the crossroads, when we must choose which way to go.

We often seek and pray for wisdom and discernment when we stand at the crossroads of a major decision in our lives...which career to pursue or job offer to accept, whether or not to have children, where to live and which house to buy, whether or not to remain in a relationship. These are inarguably important decisions that require us to gather information, reflect on our experiences, seek the wise counsel of friends and family, and perhaps pray for divine guidance in the end. And yet, wisdom is forged long before we reach these major decisions, these crossroads, if it has been forged in us at all, by the ways that we have handled ourselves in the ordinary,

seemingly mundane, everyday decisions of our lives. Wisdom calls out in the streets, making a claim on us as we run into the grocery store to buy a gallon of milk, as we push our children on swings at the playground, and as we sit down at night to balance the checkbook and pay the bills. We grow in wisdom as we reflect on what it means to live with compassion, integrity, and faithfulness in the smallest decisions and actions that make up our day-to-day lives. We do not set aside these events and daily activities in order to find wisdom; instead we encounter and cultivate wisdom precisely in these moments, if we pause to recognize their deeper meaning and see them as integral parts of a bigger picture.

In her commentary on the book of Proverbs, Christine Roy Yoder notes that this book of the Bible, perhaps more than any other, is for the ordinary of days and that it invites us into an ancient and ongoing conversation about what is good and wise and true in life. How can we discern right from wrong in a world of fiercely competing claims? What values do we treasure and why? What makes for strong families and just communities? What characterizes a good neighbor, loving partner, or trusted friend? The book of Proverbs acknowledges the ordinary as the arena in which we develop our moral character and work out our faithfulness step by step, day after day.¹ While its authorship is often attributed to Solomon, known for his wisdom, it is almost certain that the content of the book of Proverbs originated from the wider community of Israel and the growing wisdom that passed from generation to generation. Thus, we are reminded once again that we do not make our decisions and choices in a vacuum; instead, we draw on the wisdom instilled in us by parents and grandparents, teachers and pastors, friends and strangers. We discover and cultivate wisdom in community...

In the text, Wisdom stands in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the city, where the people are, where community is possible. She cries out from the street corners and the highways. She invites us to come in to her great communal banquet, so that we might eat bread and drink wine together, learning and growing in wisdom together. Wisdom as a relational figure reminds us that the nature of truth and integrity and faithfulness are deeply relational, embodied in the smallest and largest interactions and experiences that we have with one another.

And yet, our examination of Woman Wisdom would be incomplete without an examination of the other relational figure in the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs: Woman Stranger, or the Loose Woman. She is the temptress, the adulteress, the prostitute, the woman whose existence threatens the formation and stability of good families and who stands in sharp contrast to Woman Wisdom. This foolish woman is also loud; she also calls out to those who pass by on the streets and from the highest places. “You who are simple, turn in here!” The bread and water that she offers are stolen goods, further adding to her symbolism as a forbidden pleasure. The father-narrator of Proverbs warns his son about this woman and firmly instructs him to stay away from her, because hers is the path to destruction.

The contrast of Woman Wisdom and Woman Stranger provides a concrete embodiment of the life decision that must be made at the ultimate crossroads. Will the young man choose wisdom or folly, the straight path or the crooked one, morality or immorality, life or death? In many ways, the two women resemble each other...they stand in the same places and speak the same words of invitation to passersby. However, we, like the young man receiving instruction

¹ Christine Roy Yoder, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), xxi.

from his father, must look further than merely first impressions and opening lines to distinguish between them. Again we see that the choices we make, from the smallest to the largest, require us to probe deeply and exercise discernment.

Despite the poetic power of these images of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, we also need to be critical of these symbolic personifications because of their implications for the ways that we understand real, live, women. While it may be tempting to celebrate the depiction of holy wisdom as a woman, it comes to us at a cost. It necessitates that we also accept the depiction of temptation and immorality in the figure of a woman, and that we continue to perpetuate the false, stereotyped polarization of women as either wholly good or wholly evil.

Thus, with regard to the idea of wisdom more broadly, we are reminded of the dangers of dualistic thinking, reminded that decisions are complex and our choices are not black and white. They will always be far more nuanced than that. Without reflection and discernment, we risk falling into the trap of rigid either/or thinking, limiting our options and the options of those around us unnecessarily, and often harmfully. When we come together as a community to make decisions for our church, or our city, or our nation, we must resist the temptation to denounce those who disagree with us as completely wrong or evil. Are there really only two sides to the debate, or two paths for us to choose from? In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom may represent one of two paths, with Folly representing the other, but the very fact that they are symbols points to their non-literal meaning and reminds us that each encompasses a broad range of choices. Although Woman Wisdom takes her stand at the crossroads, her path to life is a wide and forgiving one.

Finally, as we seek to exercise discernment and grow in holy wisdom, I think we will find that wisdom is also paradoxical. It stands with us at the crossroads of our decision-making, and yet we can never own it or hold it fully within our grasp. It is here among us, as we learn and grow together in community, but it is not yet fully realized in us. Like the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus in the gospels, it is among us and within us, but somehow also “not yet.” The more that we learn and grow, the more that we realize we how much we have yet to learn. Yet Wisdom continues to call out to us, and to invite us to her banquet, so that we might lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight.

May we seek wisdom, for the largest, most-intimidating decisions as well as for the smallest and most routine activities of our days. May we grow with one another in community, learning together even as we eat and drink with one another. May we live and walk in the way of understanding as we go out from this place today. Amen.