

Wisdom in an Age of Information

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

September 26, 2010, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Proverbs 1:1-7; 20-33

Luke 7:31-35

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Even though some of us in this sanctuary have not darkened the door of a classroom for decades, there is something about the fall of the year that smells of freshly sharpened pencils and of glue on recently bound textbooks. Laptops, I realize, have rendered most of what I remember about the beginning of a school year obsolete! Nevertheless, autumn remains the season when we turn from the sensual pleasures of toes dug into oozing sand or long naps taken in a hammock strung across newly mowed grass or walks on the soft pine needle carpet of well-worn trails to the trials and tedium [for some], the duties and delight [for others] of higher learning. Likewise on this Sunday we turn in Scripture from a season when we teased the truth out of agrarian parables to the seldom considered wisdom of Proverbs.

Ellen Davis, Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke, in an article ruing the absence of Proverbs in the pulpit, recounts a day-long workshop on the same at a church in Beverly Hills. “It was early autumn, and the day dawned crystal clear and slightly cool [a day not unlike this one on the opposite coast], perfect for being in the garden, at the ocean, or on the hiking trail.” Davis’ expectations were minimal—not unlike mine on beautiful Sunday mornings: “the planning committee and a few of their loyal friends, perhaps” might show. Yet the room filled and the conversation became so lively that she could not help but wonder why aloud. “Oh, most of us work in Hollywood,” said a woman without hesitation. “We write commercials and advertising copy. And when we were in training, they told us to read Proverbs.... But,” she continued “now I see that most of what we write is aimed at the people Proverbs calls ‘fools.’”

Davis goes on to observe that proverbial wisdom and the advertising industry are after the same thing: increasing your desire either for something you do not have or for more of what you already possess. Says Davis, they are both forms of the poetry of acquisition. In the case of the ad men on *Mad Men*, the desire created is a desire for something tangible: that gorgeous Cadillac driven by Kate Walsh whose sultry voice declares the real question of human existence to be, “When you turn your car on, does it return the favor?”

In the case of wisdom literature, the desire is also for a life well-lived, but here the desire turns on things intangible: ‘honesty, diligence, trustworthiness, self-restraint, a right relationship with God, a right attitude toward wealth and poverty.’ Lest we miss the acquisitive nature of these intangible desires, we first meet Wisdom [a disembodied voice often personified as a woman] standing in the market place—on the busiest corner of the city—crying out in our text to young men readying themselves for adulthood. You could say they are her target demographic. From the content of her cry, we can surmise that Wisdom’s ancient audience has mistaken the truth held in solution by her simple-sounding proverbs for things more immediately gratifying: possessions and wealth and the accompanying social status: stuff that can be stored up in barns [back to parables]. They have abandoned the life given them by

God to live for the unexamined life, the life of selfish gain.

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?” she wonders. Apparently a few millennia have not been too long for the human race. In this marketplace I imagine the voice-over played not by Kate Walsh but by the Creator of the heavens and the earth, a voice we mute at our own peril, that intones, “Fool, this night your soul is required of you!” It is the tag line left unsaid at the end of every thirty second spot on television, the pop-up flashing off and on like spam invading narcissistic Facebook postings, the words mysteriously appearing after each hastily composed tweet. Though we do not hear, Wisdom shouts at us still in the marketplaces of our lives!

Note how the scene is repeated in Luke’s seventh chapter where Jesus, with the help of two proverbs, calls his audience to account as Wisdom once called to her pupils. “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not weep.” It is a proverb Jesus puts in the mouths of Pharisees and lawyers as he likens them to children whining in the marketplace. They whine because the teachers and prophets sent to them by God are neither spokespersons for the present age nor sycophants of the wealthy and powerful. The ideologues to the left despise John for his ascetic life while the ideologues to the right reject Jesus for his excess, especially when it is lavished on the poor. “Wisdom,” Jesus concludes in a proverb, “is justified by *her* children.”

What, then, characterizes the children of Wisdom? As our young rise early for class each morning while we are left to wonder in the middle or at the end what has been worth our lives, Alyce McKenzie, a professor at Perkins, finds in Wisdom literature four characteristics of the children of wisdom. The first is the bent knee. Unlike a life made sure of itself by the accumulation of information or an ideological worldview impervious to doubt, Wisdom requires her students humbly to inhabit the depths and endure the tensions of what earlier generations knew as dialectic conversation: the investigation of truth through dialogue with a truth outside one’s self. To wit: when a claim is made on the one hand, one is compelled to listen long enough to consider a claim that seems to be its opposite on the other hand, wrestling into the night like Jacob as a seeker of the truth whose name we do not know.

We can only begin to grasp the intangible value of such dialogue [and the sustained attention it requires] by considering its tangible opposite. In an article on wisdom literature written by an associate professor of Old Testament named Walter Brueggemann in 1972, Brueggemann begins by noting the “unhealthy polarization—the tendency to choose up sides and to struggle for control” of the culture that characterized the common life some four decades ago. He goes on to define polarization as “the assumption that one party possesses all the truth so that nothing can be seriously discussed or negotiated. It does not include taking a stand or having intellectual or moral courage,” he says. “Rather it refers to the destructive way in which such a stand is held and such courage is exercised.” I daresay a so-called Tea Party bankrolled by the richest of the rich but crying in the marketplace as though its voice represented the only truth—or the gridlock that is the two-party-take-no-prisoners serial monologues read into the Congressional Record so that nothing can be seriously discussed or negotiated--the polarized marketplace of our day only exacerbates our present love of being simple. We are indeed fools who despise wisdom and instruction.

On the other hand, says our text of the bent knee, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The paradoxical truth contained in the proverbs of old, wrote Old Testament giant Gerhard von Rad, counseled the young to become familiar

“with all the rules which might somehow be effective in life. Ignorance in any form will be detrimental to you [says Wisdom, on the one hand]....Experience, on the other hand, teaches *you that you can never be certain*. You must always remain open for a completely new experience.” If you hold the claim of a stable moral order and the messy experience of our mortal lives in tension, as proverbs by definition do, being at once conventional and subversive, you may find yourself trembling with knees bent before the presence of the living God. Then you will know only, says von Rad, that “You will never become really wise [because], in the last resort, this life of ours is determined not by rules but by God.” In other words, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This, says McKenzie, is the first pillar of the house of Wisdom, the primary characteristic of the children of wisdom: the knee bent.

The second is the heart open which means, for Wisdom, listening and attending to God and the world. Once again, note the dialectic of God and world. I think of Karl Barth admonishing us to have the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other, though I think the mind more than the heart is thus opened and engaged. Rather I find it is the poet who literally pries the heart open when it is closed in on itself, when there is no room for the Spirit that begets understanding to dwell. “*Every day,*” writes Mary Oliver, “*I see or I hear/something/that more or less*

*kills me
with delight
that leaves me
like a needle*

*in the haystack
of light.
It is what I was born for—
to look, to listen,*

*to lose myself
inside this soft world—
to instruct myself
over and over*

*in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,*

*the fearful, the dreadful
the very extravagant—
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,*

*the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help
but grow wise
with such teachings
as these—
the untrimmable light*

of the world,

*the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?*

If proverbs are indeed the poetry of acquisition, then poets ready our hearts to acquire wisdom: to listen and attend to the created universe even as the work of God's Spirit readies our hearts to listen and attend to God's address in the words of Scripture and in God's Word and Wisdom made flesh. But poetry, like proverbs and like dialectic conversation, requires time and occasion. Davis tells of a friend who "while driving happened upon a radio program that was reading through the Bible sequentially; that day they were somewhere in the middle of Proverbs. After fifteen or twenty minutes of listening to a string of two-liners, he had to pull off to the side of the road until he could stop laughing." Davis' point is that we must slow down to give wisdom time to work her way into the heart, into the biblical center of our soul.

So the knee bent, the heart opened and the third characteristic of the children of wisdom is "the spirit cooled" which is the discipline of self-control; and the fourth like unto the third is "the voice reasoned," which subverts conventional wisdom: self-control and reason. I like to think, in this season when we turn to higher learning, that the study of the "liberal arts," the intellectual disciplines once credited with the reformation of the church, still have something to do with the character of the children of wisdom. I remember in my own life "those rare and strange people who possessed the skill of taking the upheavals of thought that emanate from [the chaos of an unexamined life] and representing them in the form of story, music, myth, painting, liturgy, architecture, sculpture, landscape and speech....It is probably dangerous to enter exclusively into this realm," warns David Brooks, "and risk being caught in a cloister, removed from the market and its accountability. But does it not make sense to spend some time in [their] company...--...rehearsing different passions, experiencing different sacred rituals and learning to see in different ways?" Does it not make sense to cultivate self-control and reason? asks Wisdom in the marketplace.

My friends, because we are dwellers in a time when knees do not bend and hearts do not open before another point of view; when spirits burn hot with exclusive truth and voices eschew reason in order to be right, let us desire more and more to live as children of wisdom, who need not fear the truth, wherever it is to be found, because we have found our lives in him who became for us wisdom from God, even Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

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