

“The Call of Wisdom”
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15
A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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Today is Trinity Sunday – and the scriptures for this morning point, if not directly to the doctrine of the Trinity, than at least to the *mystery* of God. We hear about God in intimate terms – as a comforting presence who speaks to our hearts and leads us into love and peace and truth. We hear about God as distant and *grand* – creator and ruler of all we know and all we do not know. We hear about the time before time, glimpsing territories of God’s life and being we have yet to fathom. Like the doctrine of the Trinity, today’s texts give us a kind of *toehold* on the mountain of God – but just a toehold. If you think about God as a mountain, you have to realize the summit has no flag, and the flanks are often covered with clouds. The clouds part some days; we can see meadows and cliffs, cataracts, even a path. But then the fog descends again; we have to come to terms with how little we see, how little we *know* about God.¹

Still, I want to help you think today about things we *do* know, things we *can* know, and some of the *ways* we come to know them. So often we talk in church about Jesus, and the ways that God is clearly revealed in him . . . rightly so! Today I would like also to turn to Proverbs and to wisdom’s call coming to us from the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads and city gates. She also speaks to us of God. Wisdom can blow away the clouds that cloak God, sometimes, revealing things we do well to know . . . *paths* God wants us to follow.

The proverbs are part of the wisdom literature of Israel. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis makes Proverbs sound like the book for me – maybe also for you; she says it’s a book “for unexceptional people trying to live wisely and faithfully in the generally undramatic circumstances of daily life, on the days when water does not pour forth out of rocks and angels do not come to lunch. The Israelite sages are concerned with the same things we worry about, the things people regularly consult their pastors and friends about: how to avoid bitter domestic quarrels, what to tell your kids about sex and about God, what to do when somebody asks you to lend them money, how to handle your own money and your work life, how to cultivate lasting friendships. In short, the sages whose saying make up Proverbs are interested in the art of living well – with others, with ourselves, with God.”² That’s what wisdom makes possible – a good life, a faithful life, a more confident climb on the mountain of God.

One of the remarkable things about wisdom is that it’s everywhere! We often think of wisdom as something attained by just a few – often by older people who have

¹ The image of God as a mountain – and some of the phrasing around that image – is from Rebecca J. Kruger Gaudino’s essay on Holy Trinity Sunday in *New Proclamation, Year C, 2007*, David B. Lott, ed. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2006. 82-29.

² Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 2001. 92.

more experience in life. But according to Proverbs, wisdom is available to everyone of every age. When Personified Wisdom speaks she says, “To *you*, O people, I call; my cry is to all that live.”

Wisdom calls out to us, Proverbs says, first of all from the natural world, which she saw God create, *of* which you might consider her the architect. Nature reveals God’s wisdom. As Jesus directed his disciples’ attention to the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, so wisdom calls us to learn of God’s character and intentions from the world God created and the creatures God made to fill it.

- Like a bird who strays from its nest is one who strays from home, the proverbs say. *Consider the birds.*
- Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another. *Consider water.*
- Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people. *Consider the lion, the bear.*
- Consider the *ant*, you lazybones. Learn from its ways. *Consider . . .*
- the field overgrown with thorns
- the moon and stars
- the eagle in the sky
- the locusts marching in rank

All kinds of things can reveal God’s wisdom.

Some traditions learn from nature more readily than Presbyterians tend to do, but *we* can learn from *them*! An old Ute Indian prayer asks things like this:

Earth teach me stillness as the grasses are stilled with light
Earth teach me humility as blossoms are humble with beginning.
Earth teach me caring as the mother who secures her young.
Earth teach me courage as the tree which stands all alone.
Earth teach me limitation as the ant which crawls on the ground.
Earth teach me freedom as the eagle which soars in the sky.
Earth teach me resignation as the leaves which die in the fall.
Earth teach me regeneration as the seed which rises in the spring³

Stillness, caring, limitation, regeneration – such are the lessons of wisdom, calling out to us from the grasses, the birds, the waters of the earth because God made them in wisdom and put wisdom there.

But wisdom calls out to us from other places, too – including places of which people are the architects. From the intersection of roads we travel each and every day. In

³ Ute prayer quoted in *Earth Prayers from Around the World*, Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, eds. I found it in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, Scribner, NY, 1996, p 163.

the places we work and shop; at the deli where we meet each other for lunch; at the courthouse where we go to seek justice and the capitol where laws are made; at the beginning of each journey and the way that we come home. As biblical scholar Christine Yoder says, “[Wisdom stands] at the centers of political, military, and religious power; the hubs of commerce, justice, and social exchanges. She is alongside the paths where people come and go, heads down, feet hurried. She is in the doorway, at the threshold, between the city and the outside world. [She is right in the middle of this community], in the heart of everyday life, and she raises her voice in the cacophony of noise. Wisdom calls out to people where and as they are, from the very place it is hardest to be heard: amid the clamor and commotion of an ordinary day.”⁴

Wisdom speaks to my heart and yours – to the hearts of all people – calling us to see what is true and good and lasting – what makes for *life*. The problem is that our hearts are so often set elsewhere. We are thinking about the next task, the next opportunity, some obstacle in our way. From carpool to school, store to work we are rushing. From one desire to the next we are driven. We scarcely stop to feel or consider what God might be saying to us in the midst of our every day.

But we are always learning something. We are always learning wisdom *or* foolishness; that’s how the proverbs boil it down. We are learning peace or frustration. Faith or fear. Kindness or selfishness. And what we *learn* informs the way that we *act*, the way that we *live*. To live in wisdom leads to blessing; to live in foolishness leads to a curse. Wisdom to love, foolishness to hatred . . . wisdom to life, foolishness to death. The stakes are *high*, according to the proverbs. That’s why wisdom is so *urgent* when she calls. She has crucial things to offer us; she wants to make sure we know.

This is graduation time for many of you. I think that is why I have *fixed so* on the image of wisdom as a teacher. That, and the fact that I finally saw Taylor Mali read his poem “What Teachers Make.” That poem has been around for years, so you may have seen it – or some sanitized version of it, in an email or editorial. Taylor speaks with a wisdom-like passion about wisdom-like values. He didn’t mean it this way, but it is as good a representation of divine wisdom as I think I’ve ever seen.

Taylor’s poem is written in response to a worldly kind of foolishness – the short-sightedness that believes a person’s value lines up with her salary, the foolishness (also rudeness) that would cause someone to belittle a teacher with a small-minded question about money: *what do you make?*

You want to know what I make? [the teacher says.]

I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could.
I can make a C+ feel like a Congressional medal of honor
and an A- feel like a slap in the face.

How dare you waste my time with anything less than your very best.

⁴ Christine Roy Yoder, *Proverbs*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2009. 90.

I make kids sit through 40 minutes of study hall
in absolute silence. No, you may not work in groups.
No, you may not ask a question.
Why won't I let you get a drink of water?
Because you're not thirsty, you're bored, that's why.

I make parents tremble in fear when I call home:
I hope I haven't called at a bad time,
I just wanted to talk to you about something Billy said today.
Billy said, "Leave the kid alone. I still cry sometimes, don't you?"
And it was the noblest act of courage I have ever seen.

I make parents see their children for who they are
and what they can be.

You want to know what I make?
I make kids wonder,
I make them question.
I make them criticize.
I make them apologize and mean it.
I make them write, write, write.
And then I make them read.
I make them spell definitely beautiful, definitely beautiful, definitely beautiful
over and over and over again until they will never misspell
either one of those words again

[*I make a difference*, Taylor says. *What about you?*]⁵

Good teachers make a difference for their students, so their students can make a difference in the world. For all the world, that sounds a lot like the wisdom of the proverbs.

Wisdom calls to us where we are and as we are – but always with an eye to what we can be. She bids us to wonder and learn and criticize. She calls us to love and care and apologize. She expects us to work with pride, to speak with courage, to affirm what is beautiful and good. And into each day, each thing, each encounter, she knits clues – clues about how to do this . . . clues about *God*, and the paths God might call us to take. If we will just pay attention, we'll see. The scriptures promise: we'll see hints of wisdom everywhere – able to teach us, ready to say, "I make a difference. I do. Now, what about you?"

⁵ <http://www.taylormali.com/index.cfm?webid=13>