

All Souls Parish, Berkeley

September 16, 2018

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Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 9, B

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

I remember the thrill I experienced when I first read the passages in chapters 1, 8, and 9 in the Hebrew book of Proverbs where the wisdom of God is personified as a holy woman, consort of God, and partner at the very beginning of creation. It explicitly opened for me the feminine dimension of the Divine.

In the first chapter Wisdom Woman is a public presence, calling out in the busiest sector of the city to anyone who will listen to her. She warns, cajoles, and challenges everyone to heed her call and listen to her counsel lest disaster result instead of a secure life. “How long will you clueless people love your naiveté, mockers hold their mocking dear, and fools hate knowledge? You should respond when I correct you. Look, I’ll pour out my spirit on you. I’ll reveal my words to you. I invited you but you rejected me; I stretched out my hands to you, but you paid no attention.” (CEB) In the ninth chapter Wisdom built a house with solid

pillars and issued an invitation to everyone to join her feast “and walk in the way of understanding.”

In these and other passages holy Wisdom urgently calls upon her hearers to let go of their simplistic ways of self-centeredness and foundationless living that will inevitably lead to disaster. Instead, she offers sure ground, true knowledge, and wise counsel that brings a deeper way of life and a secure relationship with the Divine.

So, how do you go about listening to her? What are your spiritual practices that help you build a relationship with holy Wisdom? This is a pop quiz! Let’s hear from three of you... So think about the ways you can listen and receive guidance from Wisdom. I want to give you an example of one of my own practices that I adapted from a classic sixteenth century Ignatian form of meditation practice which uses our capacity for imagination to enter into spiritual reality:

It was this past Wednesday when I went to a room in my house where it would be quiet and I drew the window blinds to dim the lighting. I started a recording of a monotonous drum beat which helps

me keep my focus during my meditation, then relaxed and asked God's help and began my soul journey into spiritual reality:

I am walking on a dirt path up a small hill. I am going to visit the Wise One. This is a familiar place to me since I have made this journey many times before. There is meadow on my left and some trees and then the ocean on my right. I am nearing the top of the hill and on the left side I see the house where Wisdom lives. I see a row of flowers with bright red petals lining the side of the house, and then I go up two steps to the porch of the modest wood frame house. I knock on the door and a woman's voice calls out for me to come inside.

Wisdom has taken different forms so I'm never quite sure what the appearance will be. This time Wisdom appears as a woman in her early fifties, with a bright smile, short blond hair, green eyes, and wearing a simple brown shift with some green trim on the collar and short sleeves. She welcomes me with a hug and we move into the homey living room. She gestures for me to sit in a comfortable chair near a coffee table. She asks me if I want some cheesecake and coffee or tea. I tell her

cheesecake sounds great but I must pass on her offer because of time.

She sits across from me and waits for me to begin.

I say, "I've come to ask you what you think my people at church need to hear." She replies, "Well, there is the Global Action Summit in San Francisco. Certainly that is an expression of the importance and urgency of the care for this world, and the need for respect and interdependence of your species with other life forms, and how the planet, God's creation, is sacred." I acknowledge that is an important topic of interest to many of us.

I also mention to her, "I'm also concerned that we are drawing such hard and fast lines politically and socially that it is hurting us all. We are becoming very suspicious and mistrustful of what are true and reliable sources of information. Things feel pretty chaotic. What are we to do?" She is quiet and thoughtful for a moment. Then she looks at me with deep sincerity. "You need to know that God, that wonderful Mystery, is always very close by and wants to be your guide. But the mistrust and divisions, the chaos and political strife, is a symptom of the

fear and self-centered interests that get in the way of your connection with this One who is closer to you than your breath.”

After she says this I become aware that it is time for me to return to my ordinary world of consciousness. So I get up and thank her for our conversation and her counsel. We say goodbye to each other and then I walk outside, and down the path, and return to my room and ordinary consciousness.

That was my mediation visit to Wisdom. I left the journey with two topics to reflect upon and bring to you. I also decided that I should allow more time in future visits in case I get offered cheesecake! (Wisdom’s never done that to me before.)

So I ask you—does it make sense to you that recognizing global climate patterns and environmental conditions ought to be a major factor in our lives worthy of reflecting upon at church and seeking Wisdom’s guidance? It’s certainly not a new topic here at All Souls and the diocese under Bishop Marc Andrus’ leadership sees this as a concern calling for deep conversation and action. In the midst of this issue, do you hear the

voice of Wisdom calling us to knowledge grounded in God's love for
the whole of creation and expecting responsible actions?

In the poem "Inventing Sin" the Appalachian poet George Emma
Lyon gives voice to our frustrated God. Listen to her:

God signs to us
we cannot read
She shouts
we take cover
She shrugs
and trains leave
the tracks

Our schedules! We moan
Our loved ones
God is fed up
All the oceans she gave us
All the fields
All the acres of steep seedful forests
And we did what
Invented the Great Chain
of Being and
the chain saw
Invented sin

God sees us now
gorging ourselves &
starving our neighbors
starving ourselves &
storing our grain
& She says

I've had it
you cast your trash
upon the waters –
it's rolling in

You stuck your fine finger
into the mystery of life
to find death

& you did
you learned how to end
the world
in nothing flat

Now you come crying
to your mommy
Send us a miracle
Prove that you exist

Look at your hand I say
Listen to your sacred heart
Do you have to haul the tide in
sweeten the berries on the vine

I set you down
a miracle among miracles
You want more
It's your turn
You show me

She's not going to let us off the hook, you can be sure of that.

But if you remember, there was another related concern that came up in my visit to Wisdom that I should share. Frankly, we are in a sickening state of affairs in our political and social divisiveness.

Mistrust, suspicion, and confusion abounds. We lack a common basis for evaluating what is true and what is false. It is as much a spiritual condition as it is a social and political one. This too is a situation where we are reaping the whirlwind of what has been planted long before, and perpetuate it as we run crazy in self-absorbed fear and self-centeredness.

T.S. Eliot asked:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

(from “Choruses from ‘The Rock’” 1934)

God knows, we are flooded in information—way more so than when Eliot wrote this in 1934. Digital access to information and instantaneous mass media gives us more information that we can possibly process and make meaningful. But what is the basis we use to evaluate the information we receive to sort out what is true knowledge

and what is trash? And what should we consider as important for determining how we use the knowledge we acquire?

Here is where Wisdom calls to us: “How long will you clueless people love your naiveté, mockers hold their mocking dear, and fools hate knowledge? You should respond when I correct you. Look, I’ll pour out my spirit on you. I’ll reveal my words to you.”

The early church theologians recognized Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God’s Wisdom. Jesus’ demand that followers take up their cross and be willing to lose their life in order to save it sounds very much like Wisdom’s call. Are our lives simply our own to do with as we please; or is there a disciplined Life that we are invited into that leads us beyond separateness into a greater shared meaning and purpose? As Wisdom Woman might say, “You choose dear. And remember that choices have consequences.”