

“Wisdom Personified”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoe
Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 13, 2009
Scripture: Proverbs 1:20:33

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *God of Wisdom, God of Truth, as a people we are quick to amen every wise word, every trusted saying, that we hear in our gatherings, but we are slow to acknowledge those words in the week to come. Illumine the dark corners of our lives, this day, and blow your life-giving breath into our midst, that we might live in your Wisdom. Amen.*

If someone were to ask you, “How do you imagine God?” what would you answer? What is the first word which comes to your mind when I say God? Would it be Creator? Or would you answer, “Love” or “Mother”? Maybe your answer would be “Friend”, or “Shepherd” or “Defender”. When you are praying, how do you experience God? As strength? As light? As comfort? As all-encompassing?

How do you imagine God? Is God a strong warrior who will help you fight your way through hard times? Does your image of God give God great majesty, high and lifted up? Or is your image of God close and intimate, embracing, soothing and accepting you through it all? Some people imagine God as a place and a shelter, a cave or a river, a mountain or a harbor. Some imagine God alongside them seeking justice, among us in acts of compassion. If someone – maybe a someone like me – were to ask you, “How do you imagine God.” How would you answer?

It’s not an easy question to answer, is it? And that is because our images of God are often formed unconsciously. They are formed by the lullabies your mother sings, or what your father reads to you when you are still at his knee. Your image of God may be formed by your grandmother, a strong disciplinarian whom you

still remember. Or, maybe your image was formed by Sunday school where you had to wear scratchy grey flannel pants or dresses with tights.

Our images of God are created by bits and pieces of human experience, the good and the hard, whether the world welcomes us or seems a hostile place, the shocks we experience, the hard-knocks, the care we receive or the care we do not. Our images of God are a complex mix of unconscious material and human experience. They reflect life’s most intimate moments and our hearts’; deepest longings, so our images of God are often difficult to determine, to describe, or to talk about.

It is also not uncommon for our images of God to change over the course of our life time. When you were a child, you likely pictured God as an old man with white hair and a white beard – something like the pictures you saw of Santa Clause. Then as you grew and matured, it is likely that you gave up that image and began to see God in a different way. Our images of God often reflect who we are, where we are, and how we are. After all, we are made in God’s image, right? Our images of God may also change through study and reflection.

I know there are times when the need I turn over to God is wisdom. There are many times when I have prayed for and hoped for good judgment, the capacity for understanding and direction. So when Solomon, the writer of the Book of Proverbs talks about God as Wisdom, I though I might understand. But Wisdom in this book and as imagined in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures is totally different from the way we would ordinarily think about wisdom.

First of all, the Hebrew view of Wisdom is feminine. And Wisdom has a life of her own. She is strong and she is proud. And she would be impatient with those of us who plead for help in understanding and direction. Wisdom cries out in the street and on the square. She shouts, “how long, O simple ones, will you be simple?”

“I will laugh at your calamity.” “I will mock when pain strikes you, because I have called you and you refused, because you have ignored all my counsel.” Wisdom, as she is presented in the Bible, is a serious teacher, strict and harsh and she is not into second chances or forgiveness. She demands that we pay attention. She proclaims, “All the words of my mouth are righteous, there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.” Wisdom seems not only proud, but here she appears almost arrogant. I don’t know about you, but his is not someone I would want as a parent, or a teacher, or even a friend.

Still, though, it is hard to turn away from her. She is intelligent, holy, unique and manifold. Even though she is sometimes angry, she is incisive, irresistible and active. She is penetrating, for she is pure and she is subtle.

Wisdom is a woman who knows her value and wants us to know her value, too. She is committed to the task of learning constantly and to seek understanding of the world in which we live. She is out on the streets and calls us to think about what is happening in Dunedin, but also in Haiti, to realize what goes on in Washington, but also in Belize. She is relentless in her expectations, demanding, unwavering in her standards for perfection. Then, she promises that disciplined learning and attention will be rewarded.

William Willimon, to whom I refer often for insight, tells the story of the time when he was serving as a college chaplain. He recounts the story of a student of about 20 years of age, complained to him about “our” generation’s inability to be parents. “Your generation”, this young man said, “didn’t tell us anything!” As Willimon thought about that statement, and as I thought about it, too, it occurred to both of us that parents are not the only ones who are not very good at giving advice.

The Bible, too, tends to be rather cagey about his matter of giving advice. As I am sure

you realize, most Sundays, our Scripture readings consist of stories about Jesus and his disciples. And that is fine. But sometimes, don't you just wish the Bible would just come right out and tell us what to do, how to live, which step to take?

Now, as I am sure you know, there are books in the Bible which refer to rules – the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, or even in places like Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. But there does seem to be this deep awareness with scripture that rules, even divinely authorized and given rules, are never enough. For so many of the deep moral dilemmas of life we need more than rules.

The original founders of the church made *prudence* one of the most noble of the ethical virtues, a gift that is at the heart of all virtue. They were talking about that practical wisdom which goes beyond the mere keeping of rules. That is the wisdom which biblical wisdom extols.

The founders of the church seem to know that while you can't always come up with a rule for every dilemma in life, if you are not going to make a mess of your life, you do need some moral compass, some virtuous ability of discernment and guidance that is called wisdom.

The book of Proverbs says that wisdom is more important than all wealth, fame, and power in the world. While the economic downturn in which we find ourselves may malign the fact, for the most part, it is a relatively easy thing to pile up a great deal of money. Most hard working, reasonably intelligent people can do it. But wisdom – to know how to move through life in a noble way, to truly understand yourself, when you can be trusted and when you cannot be trusted in certain situations, to know the difference between one situation and another – where do you acquire that sort of knowledge? That sort of knowledge is so deep, so rare and so precious, that the Bible

speaks of wisdom as nothing less than a gift from God. Wisdom here is personified as a lovely woman who comes to us, speaks to us, and beckons us to come to her and receive guidance.

Proverbs repeatedly says that riches are not as good as wisdom. There are dozens of "better than" statements in Proverbs – this way is "better than" another way, the way of riches. You know that. We have all known people who have accumulated a great deal of wealth, and who became miserable because they lacked something essential - wisdom. This, in my observation, has been the case with those individuals whom I have known who have inherited a huge amount of wealth. Their parents, or grandparents, accumulated a great many riches over the course of their generations, but their heirs lost their entire inheritance is just a couple of years. Their parents may have accumulated their wealth through the exercise of prudence and wisdom, but the wealth was lost because of the next generation's lack of wisdom.

When wisdom personified speaks, wisdom says, "I was with the Lord when everything was made. Before the mountains were created, I was there; Before the seas were made, I was there." In others words, wisdom existed from the foundation of the world. Wisdom is that which does business with the very foundations of reality. Wisdom is built into the fabric of reality because wisdom helped make the world. Wisdom is personified in Proverbs. But...what if wisdom is a person? What if wisdom is personal? There is One who stands before us and says, "Come unto me all of you who are heavy laden." He also says, "I am the way, the truth, and the light." It is He who was called the "Logos", which can also be translated "the Wisdom of God." And it is He to whom we should turn when we want to know the Wisdom of God. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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