

Proverbs 8: 1-5, 22-31
Wisdom of Solomon 9: 9-18
John 16: 12-15

Wisdom's Call
May 22, 2016
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Last week I told you that I love the English language. This week I want to say: I love ...information. I have a weakness for books with titles like The Order of Things: Hierarchies, Structures and Pecking Orders, which lists things like the Seven Hills of Rome, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and the Seven Dwarfs. It's a weakness: this desire to collect facts, dating back to when I used to read the Golden Book Encyclopedia with a flashlight under the covers when I went to bed as a child.

Many humans love to collect information, useful and useless. It is programmed into us. But we would do well to make a distinction between knowledge of facts and knowledge of reality. We would do well to remember the nature of wisdom. Our traditions and our Scriptures can help us here...even the ones that seem rather fanciful and fantastical.

So I wonder, who is this woman who calls out to us from street corners in the book of Proverbs, and who labors with God at the time of creation?

Her Greek name is Sophia. In the Bible she is the female aspect of the sometimes mysterious and elusive wisdom of God. She is one way that God's presence and activity shows up in the Hebrew Scriptures. I say "she" because the grammatical gender is female in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin: *Hokmah, Sophia, Sapientia*. As a sister, mother, a loved one, both chef and hostess, both preacher and judge, she appears in the book of Job, then in Proverbs, then in other literature. She is powerful, ordering and delighting in the cosmos. Her essence pervades the world, both the natural and the human world, as an active force for goodness. This sounds like an important role, right? But many churchgoers have never heard of her.

When many people turn to the Bible to assert that a woman's role should be quiet and submissive, Sophia speaks up. She is actually yelling on street corners, not staying at home, asking us to follow her in the dance of creation, inviting us, no - luring us - into the best that life can be.

The writer of Proverbs gave her a speech that was read earlier, where we get a different view of creation from the more familiar Genesis story. We are led to understand that God created first this spirit of wisdom, then used wisdom in forming and ordering the rest of creation. It sounds more like a dance than anything else. Sophia is a master worker next to God, but also a spirit of joy, delighting in all the world, but especially in human beings. Could anyone doubt that the world is a wonderful place, when Lady Wisdom was so intimately involved, and so happy from the very beginning?

If nothing else, we can learn from this that God intended and intends this world to be a place of beauty and joy, and that the intricate ordering of the natural world can be for us a source of wisdom and wonder. If we follow Lady Wisdom in her dance of creation, we experience the joy, the labor, the responsibility, the delight of God's creative presence. This may involved learning facts,

but more importantly, it involves following a moral and a spiritual path. Sophia is concerned with what we **do** with our God's given knowledge.

Our Gospel reading takes us from the sparkling morning of the first day to the somber evening of the Last Supper. Jesus speaks to his disciples of an unknown future.

I start with a note about Jesus' role in John's Gospel. He is the "Word of God" or "the Logos of God." You may remember the first few words of this Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word..." Christ was seen as having been with God from the beginning, much as Sophia had. In fact, some scholars believe that he saw himself as a latter-day personification of that figure from Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon. He is a revealer, he interprets Scripture and experience to his followers in unexpected ways. He interprets life and ethics. He shows us a way of looking at the world and a path to take through its dangers and pitfalls. He has performed this function so completely for his disciples that they cannot imagine life without him.

And yet he is human: he is living a finite human life, and he knows that the end is near. What does he offer to his followers in his absence? He does not stand at the city gate like Lady Wisdom here, but speaks in lower tones to his closest friends.

He suggests that God will continue to speak to them in new ways. The message will be revealed gradually, as needed, because, as he says, "they cannot bear the many things now." This word from God may even change and require re-expression over time. "The Spirit of Truth" – also called the Advocate, the Comforter, the Paraclete, the One Who Walks Beside Us – will not be constrained by the limits of one human life. The Spirit of Truth is not a set of facts by which we control faith and keep it in check. It is an interpreter of Jesus' life and a lens through which we understand our world. It is not static: rather it dances, encourages, and invites us into deeper understanding and more faithful living.

This Spirit offers us a challenge. Accepting and living by this Spirit requires a deep engagement with both past and future, and an openness to hear our friends and our enemies. The Constitution of the United Church of Christ reminds us of this. In its preamble, it says, "The UCC affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God." We are asked to dance between our roots in Scripture and tradition and a nitty-gritty involvement with the pressing issues of our time. We are expected to feel energy, joy, and discomfort and we move into this dance. We do not stand still and secure in our own safe enclaves of personal conviction, but respond to the call to change and be changed.

The best Christian preparation for the future is not an exact foreknowledge of what is going to happen. It is a deeper understanding of what Jesus means in our own time. The Spirit of Truth does not guide us to precise formulae of theological statements, but allows us to interpret the unfolding of God's creation in our lives and in the world.

All indications are that we have not seen the last surprise in God's plan to bring all creation, us included, into habits of justice and peace and love. We experience this as an invitation. In the 9th chapter of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom invites us to a symbolic meal of bread and wine. We are continually being invited to learn more – not learn more information – but more about possibility. Just as Lady Wisdom invited us to a table, Jesus invites us to a table of love and sacrifice. The Spirit

of Truth invites us to understand the things that are to come, and to bring forth, to give birth to, new possibilities for our own day and age. How do you respond to these holy invitations?

Let me suggest three spiritual attitudes for us to practice. One is humility. We don't need to grovel. Humility is **not** low self-esteem. But a healthy awareness of the limits of the individual intellect can actually be a liberating feeling. Humility helps us to listen to other people: people may be a source of wisdom for us. Humility puts a check on our customary tendency to worship our own opinions. Lady Wisdom can use our humility as a unique tool for our education. The complacent mind, completely satisfied with its own powers of reasoning and understanding, can be completely closed to God's surprises.

Another spiritual attitude for us to cultivate is curiosity. You will not find this on any list of virtues in the Bible. But I think that an active, searching, inquisitive approach to our past, present and future, a respectful curiosity about those with whom we disagree will serve us well. Curiosity is in itself a kind of invitation. If we hear God's invitation into habits of justice and peace and love, we can begin with holy curiosity about how those things are showing up in our world. Let's be curious about the surprises God has for us in the future.

Then there is the spiritual practice of gratitude. Judy Pond shared these words of Sam Keen with us shortly after her house burned down – perhaps an unlikely moment for gratitude, but a great teaching moment.

“The more you become a connoisseur of gratitude, the less you are a victim of resentment, depression, and despair. Gratitude will act as an elixir that will gradually dissolve the hard shell of your ego — your need to possess and control — and transform you into a generous being. The sense of gratitude produces true spiritual alchemy, makes us magnanimous — large souled.”
In every season, in every change of life, let's remember to be grateful and “large-souled.”

The last spiritual attitude that I'd like to encourage is joy. You might say that this is not a practice: it isn't something we can will ourselves to feel. That is true. But I suspect that there is more joy (and maybe more hilarity) waiting for our notice. More joy in creation's wonders; more joy in the kindness and quirkiness of our neighbors; more joy in the eternal companionship of God than we ever allow ourselves to see. Later in the discourse to his disciples about the coming of the Spirit of Truth, Jesus says, “So you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” We can re-capture that primal delight of Sophia, dancing at the dawn of the world.

So take with you today, not a book of interesting facts, or arcane information, but the Spirit of Truth, and the holy attitudes of humility, curiosity gratitude, and joy. Amen.