

Wisdom on the Street Corner  
Based On Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 and James 3:13-18  
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Cape May Presbyterian Church  
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I will never forget a conversation with two friends back in grad school. One guy was spouting off a whole lot of very sure, not very well-informed opinions. He was famous for it, actually. You know those people who consider themselves experts on pretty much every subject? And the other guy, a good friend of mine, listened for a while and then said, in an older brother kind of way, “Dude, you need to read more.” I thought it was a very succinct way of telling the Expert, maybe stop talking just long enough to go get yourself some wisdom. I’m not sure it had the desired effect, but still, it stays in my memory.

In the book of Proverbs we see wisdom personified as a wise woman, interestingly, calling out to anyone who will listen, ready to teach anyone who is willing to learn. She insists that she was there with God, helping as God created the world. So the figure of Wisdom becomes identified with the *logos*, the Word that John’s gospel tells us was there at the beginning. Wisdom is the Word and the Word is God’s creating power, the creating power that, according to John’s gospel, took on human form in Jesus.

This is Trinity Sunday and that relationship between Wisdom and the Word and Jesus and God—not to mention the Holy Spirit—speaks to the mystery that is the Trinity. A mystery I will not attempt to explain this morning. Partly because I can’t and partly because I don’t think we have to understand it. For today, at least, we just have to understand that part of who God is, is wisdom. And the wisdom that is God is in creation. It is built in, baked into the natural world. So that if we contemplate any part of the world God created long enough, with open enough minds, we will understand more about who we are and who God is and how things work. We will become wiser. Wisdom is, from one angle, the intricate ways in which God’s creatures relate to one another, the ways in which they form systems and interdependence.

Hippos walking through the Okavango River in Botswana carve channels out from the reeds and plants, actually changing the river’s course. The animals shape their environment as much as they are shaped by it. Wisdom is, in part, seeing the ways in which we are part of those systems; we too are shaping our environment and being shaped by it.

Later in the same chapter of Proverbs, we are told that there are built-in rewards for those who pay heed to the wisdom they are offered, and that, on the contrary, “Whoever hates wisdom loves death.” It’s the last line in this chapter, a sort of final warning. Whoever hates wisdom loves death. There is wisdom in creation; there is wisdom on offer in our own experience; those who disregard that wisdom, the poet tells us, have turned away from life, and are dealing in death.

But what exactly is wisdom, what exactly should we be learning? From what I can understand, wisdom has to do with wonder—so “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). First we acknowledge our lack of expertise, that there is incomprehensible beauty out

there--in nature, in culture, in love and relationship. First, we understand that God is great and God is good, as the grace of my childhood meals expresses it. Further down that road is where wisdom lives.

It is easier, always, to say what wisdom is not. Wisdom isn't knowledge, or it isn't only knowledge. My friend was right that reading more is at least part of the answer when the problem is foolishness, ignorance, or vanity. If things work the way they should, gaining in knowledge can make us wonder and consider and process. When knowledge becomes a lens on the world around us, when it imbues us with a sense actually of how little we know, then it is something like wisdom.

But consider Mark Zuckerberg. He has a lot of knowledge—he was intelligent and well-read enough to figure out how to make Facebook work and how to make it incredibly profitable. But Zuckerberg lacks wisdom. He doesn't seem to have any sense of how his business affects people's lives, of how his invention has been used to do evil as well as good, or even how he might treat his employees humanely and fairly.

If wisdom isn't knowledge alone, it also is not cleverness. The wisest person isn't the person who can outsmart the competition. Mind you, the Bible loves cleverness. Jacob, Joseph, Jael, Esther, David, these are all people whose cleverness is something the Bible encourages us to admire. Cleverness is what enables the people of God to survive in this story, even if that cleverness sometimes involves outright deceit. Cleverness is a survival strategy—when you can't be stronger, you have to be smarter.

But wisdom isn't a survival strategy. It doesn't pit one person or group against another. The book of James contrasts wisdom with “selfish ambition.” Being clever is about getting ahead, about landing on one's feet. Wisdom doesn't have that kind of self-interested aim. Gaining in wisdom on the contrary means gaining in generosity, in awareness that my neighbor is as real, as much a person, as I am. Wisdom promotes life, but it isn't always money in the bank. It isn't always clever.

Finally, wisdom isn't cynicism. We sometimes talk as though it is. We talk about people being older and wiser, or sadder but wiser.<sup>1</sup> But neither age nor bitter experience make us wiser, in and of themselves. Wisdom surely isn't achieved when we stop believing in positive change, when we give up on politics or on justice, when we decide that loving our neighbor is for suckers. The wise people are not the people who've simply stopped caring.

If we're lucky in this life we start out wanting to do good and to be good—we start out well-intentioned, but never wise. Often we get hurt in the process of trying to do good, we get insulted or we get tired or we may even get punished for doing good. And that's when we have a choice. We can become cynical and embittered, and conclude that doing good is stupid, that looking out for *numero uno* is the smart way to live. Or we can get wiser—we can use the hurt to learn. We can find more understanding of how good really happens, how it's more complicated than we thought.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Sadder but Wiser Girl,” from *The Music Man* was in my mind while I wrote this.

For example, as people who grew up without the internet or cell phones, we can do a lot of complaining about kids today, what they'll never understand, how they are failing to relate to one another because they're stuck on their phones. We can be nostalgic for the past and cynical about the future. Or we can listen more. We can pay attention to the things the younger generations understand that we did not, we can see the ways in which they are better at keeping in touch with each other, better informed about the world. We can dismiss them or we can learn from them—it's obvious which path would make us wiser.

Wisdom in Proverbs calls out for humanity to “Learn prudence, acquire intelligence” (Proverbs 8:5). Basically, just learn! Surely a great part of what wisdom is, is the awareness of all that we do not know, the willingness to continue changing, developing, learning. Wisdom isn't a closed and locked box full of treasures that we carry around, full of pearls of wisdom, so to speak, that we can pull out when the situation merits. It isn't a collection of slogans or bywords, sayings that rally my side and alienate yours. Wisdom is not a possession at all. It's more like a river running in a dry land, a river you have to climb over rocks and up hills to access. It can serve our needs and the needs of our neighbors, refresh us, bless us, lead us to peace. But only when and if we take the trouble to find it, if we take the time to climb up there and bring down some of its water. If wisdom means peace; if it is the understanding that leads toward life, and away from the dealings of death, then we need more wisdom. We need to make that effort, to believe wisdom can be found and to find it, to bring back bucketsful for ourselves and our neighbors. Because we are living in a dry place, where we are literally dying of thirst.