

Trinity Sunday
Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31
June 16, 2019

Holy Wisdom

According to the liturgical calendar, today is Trinity Sunday. If that were not enough on our plate, today is also Father's Day. This overlay of the liturgical and cultural calendars doesn't happen very often, and when it does, I'm usually on vacation, and some other preacher has to cope. If there are connections to be made between the doctrine of the Trinity and the observation of Father's Day, it will not be I who makes them. That will be up to the Holy Spirit.

The text for the sermon is the 8th chapter of the Book of Proverbs. It's likely that you haven't heard many sermons based on the Book of Proverbs. (If you have, you didn't hear them preached from this pulpit). Proverbs comes under the category of "Wisdom literature," which doesn't get much air time on Sunday morning.

That's a shame, really. There is some really helpful advice in the Book of Proverbs, most of it expressed in pithy little sayings called – well – "proverbs." Basically, Proverbs is a collection of the advice of a father to a son, instructing the son on how to honor God and handle himself in the rough and tumble world.

Here's a good example. These words date back to the period when Israel was returning from exile in Babylon, but any parent will tell you they have a familiar ring.

**Go to the ant, you lazybones;
consider its ways and be wise.
Without having any chief or officer or ruler,
it prepares its food in summer
and gathers its sustenance in harvest.**

**How long will you lie there, O lazybones?
When will you rise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber
a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed warrior.¹**

¹ Proverbs 6:6-11

Forgive me for saying so, but that sounds like a parent addressing a child who promised to get a summer job but prefers to sleep late.

While it's true that the Book of Proverbs contains plenty of gold to be mined, the entire book is surrounded with yellow tape on which is printed in bold letters, "Caution! Danger! This material contains high levels of testosterone. Enter at your own risk!"

We must be careful because the young man in this book is advised to choose between two poetic personifications, both female. One is named "Folly" and the other "Wisdom." "Folly" is portrayed as a "loose" woman who hangs out in the shadows, enticing young men to spend time with her on her perfumed bed. Her "**lips drip honey,**" the young man is told, and "**her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end, she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.**"²

"Don't hang out with Lady Folly, my son," warns the voice of the father. "**Keep your way far from her and do not go near the door of her house.**"³ Instead, seek the company of Wisdom. Wisdom leads the way to worldly success and spiritual contentment. In short, Lady Folly leads to death. Lady Wisdom leads to life.

Hence the yellow tape. This way of characterizing women is dated and highly problematic. It reinforces dehumanizing stereotypes that portray women as either adulteresses or paragons of virtue, either Mae West or Snow White. If that's all were to the Book of Proverbs, we would do well to give it a wide berth.

But if we hang in there, we will arrive at chapter 8, where we come upon a poem in praise of personified Wisdom that explodes the stereotypes of chapters one through seven. Chapter 8 moves beyond those tired old female-phobic tropes to see Lady Wisdom in a new light.

Picture the world as it is being formed. God is the architect and builder. Spread before God is the building site. The mountains haven't been made yet. They're lying over there in a pile, Everest lying sideways on top of the Matterhorn, the Rockies crowded up against the Himalayas. The rivers are all tangled up there in another corner like a skein of yarn. The oceans are corked up in a big thermos by the drafting table.

² Proverbs 5:3

³ Proverbs 5:8

God is surveying the site. Where to put the Milky Way? How much distance should there be between the Atlantic and the Pacific? Should the Mississippi flow north or south? A lot of decisions need to be made when you're building a universe.

Standing right there beside God, wearing a bright yellow hard hat, is Lady Wisdom. "Sophie," the angels call her on the work site, short for Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom.

Sophie is God's right-hand *woman*. She's right there, from the start, checking the blueprints, carrying out the orders, putting on the final touches. It's her job to see that the universe makes some kind of sense. Gravity is in her portfolio; so is the law of cause-and-effect. She makes the world comprehensible and reliable. She's the agent of rationality and good sense.

Here's what Sophia – Wisdom -- says about herself in the Book of Proverbs:

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.

Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.

Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth - when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil.

**When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.⁴**

⁴ Proverbs 8:22-31

Sophie in her hard hat. Lady Wisdom at the dawn of creation, God's daily delight who herself delights in the human race. If that sounds to you a bit like the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, you are not the first person to think so.

It also sounds a bit like the Word of God, the *Logos*, the second person of the Godhead. I can't help but think that when the Gospel writer John sat down to compose the poem that serves as the prologue to his Gospel, he had the eighth chapter of Proverbs in mind:

**In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being . . .**⁵

Was it Lady Wisdom who was present in the beginning with God or was it the Word, the divine *Logos*? Is it Wisdom in whom God takes such delight, or is it the Word? Scripture resists a systematic answer.

In a way that is startling – even gender-bending – these two poems invoke the wonder and mystery of the Triune God. They point to an inter-relationship within the very being of God. God who is Creator of All, God who is Wise Spirit, God who is Word made flesh – all three dance together as one, weaving in and out in a divine troika. When you see one at work, you see all three at work. When you experience one, you experience all three, and each delights in the other.

Through the doctrine of the Trinity the church gives voice to its experience of God's self-revelation.

- The prophet Isaiah encounters God in a vision, "**high and holy and lifted up.**" Instantly Isaiah falls to his knees in awe.⁶
- The writer of Proverbs paints God handing over the blueprints of the universe to his protégé, Lady Wisdom. Every day, says Proverbs, God takes delight in her.

⁵ John 1:1-3

⁶ Isaiah 6:1

- The storyteller of Genesis, chapter two, portrays God playing with the rich red earth, like a child with Playdough. Play leads to creation as God forms the first human being and breathes into that lifeless lump of clay the breath of life.⁷
- The prophet Hosea envisions God walking along beside a toddler as she holds on to one thumb. “I taught you how to walk,” God says to God’s children. “I held you to my cheek. How could I give you up?”⁸

Today let us marvel at the utter *spaciousness* of the Triune God, the God who plays in the mud, the God who is beyond our grasp yet near as the next breath we will take, the God who taught us how to walk, the God who will not let us go.

And if, to mark this day, you rejoice to call God Father, then

- Think of the father whose daughter is ill. He sleeps on the floor beside her bed, ready to hold her in his arms should she cry out in the night.
- Think of the father who shows up at every swim meet, knowing full well that his child will never place first.
- Think of the father whose strength is revealed in gentleness, whose might is expressed in loving-kindness.
- Think of the father who gathers his long robe, hoists it around his knees, and, casting dignity aside, runs to down the dusty road to welcome the prodigal home.

To call God “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is not to squeeze God into categories or limit the One who is limitless. It is to rejoice in the spacious communion of the Holy Three: The Father who is womb of creation, the Son who is love made flesh, the Spirit who blows where it will and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

To that same Holy Triune God be glory on this day and forever.

⁷ Genesis 2:7

⁸ Hosea 11:3