

# The Wisdom of the Cross: A Sermon

Proverbs 9:1-6

Psalm 147

Ephesians 5:15-20



The theme of wisdom is prominent in today's lectionary readings. The selection from Proverbs begins "Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars." (Prov. 9:1) This is part of a lengthy section of several chapters in Proverbs in which wisdom is personified in the figure of a woman who appeals to the reader to flee the way of folly and pursue the way of wisdom instead. This is not surprising, since Proverbs is one of those books in the Old Testament that is classified as "wisdom" literature. But the theme appears in our other texts as well. The Psalm tells us: "Great is Our Lord and mighty in power/ There is no limit to his wisdom." (Ps. 147:5, 1979 BCP translation) In Ephesians, Paul writes: "Look carefully how you walk, not as unwise but as wise." (Eph. 5:15) Although it is not as immediately evident, even the gospel passage in John echoes this wisdom theme, I think. We'll look at that in a few moments. I would like to speak a little about this theme of wisdom this morning, first in Scripture, but also how it applies to our own lives as Christians.

When the Bible speaks of wisdom, it often does so by contrasting the two different paths of Wisdom and Folly, or sometimes by contrasting genuine Wisdom, with a "worldly wisdom," that thinks it is wise, but is actually foolish.

Unfortunately, as it so often does, the lectionary greatly shortens our readings this morning so that it is not obvious, but the original passages all make this contrast. In Proverbs, the first half of the chapter portrays Wisdom as a female character who calls out to a young man: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight." (Prov. 9:5). In the last part of the chapter, Lady Wisdom is contrasted with Folly, who is also portrayed as a female figure, and who uses much the same invitation: "The woman Folly is loud," says Proverbs. "She sits at the door of her house, . . . calling to those who pass by . . . 'Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!' And to him who lacks sense, she says: 'Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.'" (v. 13-17) Similar invitations, but with very different consequences.

In the Psalm, the contrast is evident: "The Lord lifts up the humble, he casts the wicked to the ground." (Ps. 147:6)

Paul makes the same kind of contrast in the Ephesians passage in a way that seems consciously to echo the passage in Proverbs. There is the same image of walking in a path, and of two different paths. Earlier in the chapter, Paul had written, "[W]alk in love, as Christ loved us," (5:1) and "Walk as children of light . . . Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness . . ." (v. 8, 11). In verse 15, he writes, "Look carefully how you walk, not as unwise but as wise." There is the same kind of contrast between two kinds of feasts. Paul contrasts those who "get drunk with wine," with those who are "filled with the Spirit." (v. 18)

Finally, in John 6, there is a contrast throughout between Jesus, who is portrayed as the Bread of Life, and both his opponents, as well as those followers who desert him, in a way that has a striking resemblance to the passage from Proverbs. Jesus offers true bread and true wine, but some prefer another feast.

This comparison between two paths, one of wisdom and one of folly, is echoed by many of the great writers of the Church. One of the first writings outside of the New Testament, *The Didache*, begins by contrasting two ways: the way of life and the way of death. St. Augustine, in his *City of God*, wrote of two cities, The City of God, which was characterized by love of God, and the earthly city, characterized by love of self. One of the most humorous theological tracts ever written was Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*, in which he makes fun of the foolishness of his own time, particularly in the church.

Identifying the Way of Folly in our own time and culture is not that difficult, because people have not changed that much between the time that Proverbs was written, the time of Paul and Jesus, the times of Augustine and Erasmus, and today. The words change, but the tune remains the same. In today's culture, I would suggest that the examples of Augustine's earthly city are fairly obvious. Of course, there are the scandals that you can read about in the newspapers, or watch on the television news, or, these days, on the internet: crime, wars, the latest celebrity scandal about who is now cavorting with whom, or who has just checked into the Betty Ford clinic – again! And there is always sex. We can always depend on sex to provide people with endless paths of foolishness, much of it embarrassing, but much of it destructive of people's lives.

But I am going to focus on things that are probably closer to home to most of us here, and, because of that, in some ways more insidious. First, there is consumerism. We live in a culture where we're told that who we are and why we matter is directly related to how much stuff we can accumulate. Consumerism works like the Woman of Folly in the book of Proverbs. It promises us everything. It seduces. It prepares a great feast. Then we buy the stuff, it makes us happy for awhile, and then, we discover that last year's model is now out of date, and we've got to get the new one. And we ask

ourselves how we got so much clutter. I think it a good idea for all adults to be required to do a complete move every few years or so. When my wife Jennie and I moved from Connecticut so that I could teach at TSM, we packed everything we owned, and we were amazed to discover how much stuff we had accumulated that we really didn't need, and some that we had forgotten that we had. And some of it is still unpacked in boxes in our basement.

Then there's power and prestige, and the need to be in control. This is the great temptation for anyone who has ever had a job. It does not matter whether you are the teenager who has just been hired for that first job at McDonald's or you're Donald Trump, or somewhere in between, whether you're an entrepreneur, a construction worker, or a teacher. The temptation to weigh one's worth by where one stands in the totem pole of work is always there. Did I get that raise I deserved? How did old Smedley manage to get promoted over me when he's obviously less qualified? Why do I work for such a jerk? But, of course, the power and control problem is not restricted to the workplace. It's there in families and neighborhoods and churches. Anyone who has ever had to negotiate with relatives about cooking Thanksgiving dinner, or been involved in discussing who gets Grandma's china after she dies, or has been in a church choir or served on a vestry has been there. It was only after I had served on a vestry that I finally became convinced that original sin really is universal. We don't need the Bible to know about this problem. The popularity of television shows like *The Office*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Simpsons* or *Desperate Housewives*, or comic strips like *Dilbert* and *Blondie* testify to its universality.

Finally, there's contempt. This is not a new temptation, but I think that the prevalence of the internet has made it more obvious. It may just seem that way to me, but I think that, in the last decade or so, our culture has reached a new low in terms of general nastiness. I will be really glad when the

current election cycle is over.

Identifying the path of folly is not all that difficult. But where do we find wisdom? This leads to my next point. The New Testament picks up this wisdom language of the Old Testament, but also does something interesting with it. The book of Proverbs identifies Wisdom with the imaginary figure of a woman. The New Testament identifies Wisdom with an actual person, with Jesus Christ. According to the New Testament, Jesus is wisdom come in the flesh. If you want to find wisdom, he's where you look. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: "[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness, and sanctification and redemption." (2:30)

I would suggest that John's gospel deliberately plays up on this wisdom imagery, especially as it is found in Proverbs: John's gospel begins by saying that Jesus is the Word who was with God, and became flesh. (John 1:1, 14) Or, we could paraphrase: "In the beginning was Wisdom, and Wisdom was with God, and Wisdom was God. And Wisdom became flesh and dwelt among us." Throughout John's gospel, Jesus speaks of himself in "I am" sayings that echo the way that Wisdom speaks in Proverbs. As Wisdom invites her hearers to a banquet, so Jesus says in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." In today's lectionary reading, he says: "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."

How does Jesus exemplify wisdom? Jesus walks a path that is different from the path that the world thinks of as wisdom. Jesus represents what might be called "cruciform" wisdom: the wisdom of the cross, which is a very odd kind of wisdom indeed. What does it look like when Wisdom becomes flesh? There are two passages in John's gospel that illustrate the

point nicely. The first is the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in John 4. We're all familiar with the story, so I won't go into details. But in this story, Jesus asks for a drink of water from a Samaritan woman who had been married five times, and was now living with a man to whom she was not married. When he did that, Jesus circumvented the conventional wisdom of the day. Jews did not speak to Samaritans. Men of good reputation did not find themselves alone with women who had been married five times. Rabbis of good reputation certainly did not discuss theology with such women.

In the story of Jesus' washing of Peter's feet, he demonstrates that he has a very different notion of what it mean to be "Lord." In Jesus' time, people wore sandals, so there was a very practical need for the washing of feet. But the washing of feet was a very low status task. It was done by servants or slaves. When Jesus washed Peter's feet, he was sending a message about status, and Peter did not like it, so he tried to stop him. Jesus sums up his point at the end of the passage: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him." (John 13:13, 16). The cross is, of course, the supreme example of how Jesus demonstrated his lordship by acting as a servant.

The synoptic gospels tell the same story of how Jesus exemplifies wisdom by subverting the false wisdom of the world. The Sermon on the Mount, and particularly the beatitudes, summarize Jesus' reverse logic from that of a world that equates wisdom with wealth, power, and pride: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven . . . Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth . . . Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy." (Matt. 5:2-11)

We find this same notion of cruciform wisdom in Paul. In 1

Corinthians, Paul contrasts the world's wisdom with the wisdom of the cross: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (2:21-25)

We find the same logic in the Ephesians passage from the lectionary reading today. At the beginning of the chapter (not in the lectionary reading), Paul writes: "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (5:1-2) At the end of the passage, from this morning's lectionary, Paul makes the wisdom connection: "Look carefully how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil." (vs. 15-16) How do we do that? By being filled with the Spirit, "giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (18-20) What does that look like? Unfortunately, the lectionary leaves out the last verse, which it saves for next week: "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." (v. 21) Paul is not talking about a hierarchy in which everyone else submits to those in charge. Everyone gives place to everyone else.

For Paul, the path of wisdom is the same path that Jesus walked, the path of being a servant. That puts those who follow Jesus at direct odds with what most people think of as wisdom. "Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" is not the way to get ahead in life. The Collect for today gets it just right: "Almighty God, who hast given thy only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin and also an example of godly life: Give us grace that we may always most

thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavor ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life.”

How might this cruciform wisdom of the cross address the “received wisdom” of our culture, today’s Way of Folly?

First, consumerism. “Money can’t buy happiness” is a proverb that everyone knows, but few really believe. Money may not buy happiness, but having money is a lot better than being both miserable and poor. The gospel has an uncomfortable lot to say about wealth and how we use money. Jesus said: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt. 6:19-21) It is interesting that when Paul addresses slaves about the possibility of getting their freedom, he seems to encourage them to do so, but then reminds them: “For the one who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise the one who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.” (1 Cor. 7:22-23) Money gives us the illusion of ownership, but in fact, we too often find that we become slaves to the things that we own. We cannot live without them, yet they do not make us happy. We place our self-esteem in the stuff that we have, but we never have enough stuff to convince us that we’re okay. We forget that we are of infinite worth because we have been bought with a price.

Second, power and control, both in the work place and in our families. I think for many of us modern people, this is the area where it is hardest to resist the world’s wisdom. The temptation to “get ahead,” to control our spouses or our children, is almost irresistible. Perhaps it is harder for Christian husbands and wives and parents because we expect more from our Christian families. But the logic of cruciform



wisdom completely subverts this. The language of the cross is about relinquishing power and control and prestige. The cross is not about getting what we deserve, or, being in control. The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are a gift we receive, but do not deserve. And those in our lives, whether in the workplace or our families, have received that gift, just as we have. And we are not in control or our fellow workers, and especially not our spouses or our children. God is. Again, Paul gives us the cruciform example of Christ's servanthood: "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Eph, 5:2) Not "be in control," but "walk in love." Finally, there's that word "submit": "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." (v. 21) Submission is mutual. It's for everyone, including those who want to get ahead or think we should be in control. Mutual submission completely undermines our jockeying for power and control.

Finally, contempt. That's the uncomfortable one, isn't it? I cannot think of a single practice that is more characteristic of our current culture, and is most at odds with the Jesus who prayed "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," (Luke 23:34) Jesus was uncompromising on this one: "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matt. 5:22) I think the only answer here is love and forgiveness. We need to forgive those whom we hold in contempt for not living up to standards that we cannot live up to ourselves, and we cannot do that unless we love them the way that God in Christ has loved us, the way of the cross. We need to ask forgiveness for not forgiving when God has forgiven us. And we need to be grateful that God never holds us in contempt. "God shows his love for us," Paul writes, "in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8) If God loves us, and Christ died for us, while we were still sinners, walking in the path of folly rather

than the path of wisdom, then, with the help of God's grace, perhaps we can learn to suffer fools, even love them, because, after all, the wisdom of the cross makes fools of us all.