

# STREET SMARTS<sup>1</sup>

Proverbs 1: 20-33

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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Have you ever known anyone named Sophie? Sophie is a form of the Greek word %Sophia,+which means wisdom. When the Greek translators of the book of Proverbs found this ancient Jewish personification of wisdom as a woman, they called her Sophia, wisdom.

I

At this time of year our city is filled with young people who have come here to seek more than an education, more than a degree. Many come here ultimately to seek wisdom. Can this city provide wisdom? Can our institutions dispense wisdom? These are significant questions not only for educational institutions, but also for churches. Religious institutions have always insisted that they play a role in seeking wisdom. Religious institutions have never been content to leave the search for wisdom to schools and libraries.

You may have heard the story about an angel who suddenly appears to a dean at a university faculty meeting and says that because of the dean's exemplary behavior, she can have a choice from three wishes: infinite wealth, wisdom, or beauty. The dean immediately chooses infinite wisdom. The angel disappears, and the faculty sits there staring at the dean. Finally, a faculty member says, %Dean, say something wise.+ And the dean responds, %I should have taken the money.+

Our physical location between a great university and a great library has symbolic significance. On one side of us is a library of universal renown, a depository that documents early American life like no other library in America. On the other side of us is a great university that is known for its superb preparation in the disciplines of science and technology. One looks back at our history; the other looks forward toward technological innovation and creativity. Other universities in our city also have their own special role to play, but at the corner of Park Avenue and

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Salisbury Street we are lined up one, two, three three institutions that play a role in wisdom.

Our role is to declare that there is a divine element in wisdom, to insist that wisdom is more than technological innovation on the one hand and preserving our cultural past on the other. There is a moral and spiritual side to wisdom that draws from the great wisdom traditions that have been handed down to us through scripture and tradition, as well as through the lives of countless wise men and women who have influenced us through the years.

Many centuries before Christ, wisdom was personified as a woman. Plato, following his teacher Socrates, understood philosophy as *philosophia*· love of wisdom. In the front of the ruins of the great library at Ephesus, the library where I suspect the original letters of Paul were collected at one time, there is a statue of a stately woman. The inscription at the base reads in Greek· %Sophia.+ In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Emperor Constantine built a great church in Constantinople that he named Hagia Sophia· Holy Wisdom. For a thousand years it served as the focal point for Eastern Christianity.

## II

So when we read from the first chapter of Proverbs about wisdom personified as a woman, we are not surprised. Let me point out, however, some insights about this text that bear directly on our own search for wisdom in our day.

Where do we find her in this text? I mean physically, where is Sophia located in this text? Her location has significance! Here in this personification of Wisdom as a woman. Where do we find Sophia? She is right in the middle of the market place! She is standing, not on some remote mountaintop, not in some lonely spiritual retreat, not separated from the grit of everyday life; nor is she in some ivory tower. She is on the busiest street in town at the same level as the people. She is in the street, in the square, in the market places of life. She is where all kinds of people do their daily living. She is not tucked away in some remote place.

It is a mistake to believe that we cannot find wisdom in the stress of our daily living. Here the text places her squarely in the place we least

expect to find wisdom, as if the author is trying to remind us that wisdom comes in the ordinary daily routines of life, in doing our job, relating to people, caring for our neighbors, dealing with finances, going to meetings and being responsible.

Furthermore, Sophia (Wisdom) is not just whispering her message. She is *crying out in the street*. She is standing at the busiest corner of our lives and speaking loud and clear. That is to say, divine wisdom is not some esoteric, impenetrable truth that can only be understood by people who have been initiated into the special language of wisdom. Look at the language she uses: *How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?* She is not speaking to the cultured elite, as much as we might like to think that wisdom resides only with them. She is speaking to ordinary people who walk the streets around her. True wisdom, in other words, is not arrogant and separated from ordinary people.

I should add that Sophia, Wisdom, is not presented here as some demure wallflower; not as some shy and blushing debutante; not as some quiet companion living in the shadow of her husband; this lady is the epitome of a competent, self-assured woman. She asserts herself; she even threatens, laughs, mocks, and intimidates! So much for the image of near-eastern women hiding behind a veil! Here is Lady Wisdom on Main Street at noontime speaking her mind for all to hear!

### III

But the surprising thing about this text is that after all her shouting on the street corner; after all her warnings and admonitions that have rung out loud and clear; the result is nothing. The people clearly ignore her. Not a head is turned; not an eye is lifted. The bustle of business and traffic goes on as before. Deals are made; clients are seen; classes are taught; money is exchanged; stocks are bought and sold; nothing changes! Life goes on as if no voice of warning has been lifted!

It is only after the people completely ignore her that disaster strikes. There is panic and calamity and distress and anguish, all accompanied by the mocking laughter of Sophia, Lady Wisdom. It is a personification of Wisdom that serves as a warning, but is frankly less than appealing. If divine wisdom mocks us when we fail, what appeal is that?

Yet with this image of Sophia, Wisdom, we must gratefully remember that years later would come One whom we would call Incarnate Wisdom, one who would look at the city not with mocking laughter but with tears of love. This incarnate wisdom is the one whose name we bear as Christians, the one who calls us to follow his way of life. He is described as the wisdom of God. As a child, we are told that he *increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*<sup>2</sup>

But this wisdom of God was too wise for people to hear, and he became a victim of capital punishment. Years later, in referring to Christ's death, the Apostle Paul would write to the church in Rome: *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*<sup>3</sup>

Writing to a church at one of the busiest intersections of the Mediterranean world, he would say: *...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is greater than human wisdom....*<sup>4</sup>

#### IV

Knowledge cannot guarantee wisdom; financial strength and military superiority cannot guarantee wisdom; good health and beauty and long life cannot guarantee wisdom; high fashion and reputation cannot guarantee wisdom; summer homes and winter retreats cannot guarantee wisdom; not even a formal theological education can guarantee wisdom!

One of the last writings in the New Testament includes this promise: *If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.*<sup>5</sup> What an audacious statement! What I think it means is that asking God to give us wisdom sets us out on an exciting journey, an adventure the likes of which not even Sophia, Lady Wisdom, could predict!

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 2: 52.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 11: 33.

<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 1: 23-24.

<sup>5</sup> James 1: 5.