

THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER¹
Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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If I were to ask you to think of someone whom you consider truly wise, your thinking would be wide-ranging and fascinating. It would include people both living and dead; it would include some parents, grandparents, teachers, and friends, those with extensive formal education and those with little. Unfortunately, neither formal education nor life experience insures wisdom. You would not be confined by gender, race, culture, or religion.

Today I invite us to think together about wisdom, and to think in terms of wisdom as the ability to know what really matters in life. Our guide in this is introduced to us in our text: *Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?*

I

Just a word about the feminine imagery in this passage. It is important that wisdom is personified in this passage as a woman, and this in a culture in which all women, especially those considered lower class, were denied many of what we know as the rights of full citizenship.

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This woman stands right in the most public of places—at the crossroads, at the city gate—and not in some safe and secluded place where secret teachings are shared by a select few. One paraphrase of this text is by Eugene Peterson, who brings this image to life for us today: “She’s taken her stand at First and Main, at the busiest intersection. Right in the city square where the traffic is thickest, she shouts, ‘You...I’m talking to all of you, everyone out here on the streets!’”²

And just as if she is establishing her credentials for speaking on wisdom, she claims to have been present with God in creation itself. Right from the start, she claims, she was in on the beauty and drama of the creation, so she must have insight about how it all works. Here is what Lady Wisdom says: *The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago....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.*

Two things especially prominent in this passage are the presence of wisdom in God’s act of creation, and second is the immense joy of it all. God is not pictured here as a divine grump who laboriously created the

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.

world. God is pictured as having a ball doing it. God is pictured as delighting in the world of things and creatures.

Could it be that one of the starting points of true wisdom is a spiritual practice that is much neglected in our frantic, overly-electronic, fast-paced world: paying attention to the beauty of creation? Listening for God...being observant...stepping aside from the flow of daily life and entering attentively into the depths of the present moment. Another word for this is reverence. The world is in need of reverence.

The current ecological disaster in the Gulf reminds us of our fragile relationship with God's good creation, and it leads us to reflect on the balance between wisdom and technical expertise. Technology itself is morally neutral, but the use of technology cries out for an ample supply of wisdom. Lacking wisdom, technology can lead to tragedy. As the catastrophe in the Gulf demonstrates, it can have a devastating impact on the creation, both human and animal. Wisdom would call on our whole culture to balance our much needed education in technology with the study of literature, music, drama, and philosophy in the liberal arts tradition, including religious studies, which we know from both history and experience is one of many pathways to religious faith.

Here is a prediction: our rush toward technological advancement in a consumerist culture will ultimately lead to a recognition that technology must have a balance with wisdom. If the church can remain faithful and keep its integrity, the current exodus from religious faith will see a reversal.

II

There are real illustrations of this happening now. For example, Tony Schwartz was the co-author with Donald Trump of the book entitled *The Art of the Deal*. It is the story of how the son of a moderate income real estate developer in New York wheeled and dealed his way to a multi-billion dollar empire. It is a swashbuckling, greed-is-good, chest-pounding, self-promoting account of how to make the big deals and become a financial mogul. Tony Schwartz was Donald Trump's ghost-writer in preparing the book. It was wildly successful, and it brought Tony Schwartz more money than he ever imagined. Yet here is what he would write about the experience later:

"Now, with *The Art of the Deal*, I was about to earn more in a few weeks than I had in the whole of my working life, giving me a financial cushion that few people are ever lucky enough to enjoy. Publishers were eager to sign up whatever book I chose to do next. My marriage of ten years was strong and stable....Our two young daughters, ages two and six, were healthy and mostly happy. I jogged several miles a day and played tennis at least twice a week.

I had several close friends, and I felt I contributed usefully to my community. Why, then, wasn't I happier?"³

Why, with all his outward success, did he feel a persistent, gnawing emptiness inside? This is the wall he hit. And it is the wall that many people hit. Maybe it is a wall you have hit.

III

Many people are distrustful of religion even while asking fundamentally religious questions. Too many have experienced religion as rigid, hierarchical, narrow-minded, abusive, and hypocritical. So here is the dilemma: people are looking for authentic faith while at the same time they are turned off to dogmatic religion. Does that sound familiar?

Like the search of Tony Schwartz, our search can take us through all kinds of disciplines: from various forms of meditation to biofeedback techniques to various eastern spiritual practices to western psychology. But in that search, few of us could improve on the conclusion of the Apostle Paul when he said, *...now we see in a mirror dimly.... Now I know only in part.*

³ Tony Schwartz, *What Really Matters, Searching for Wisdom in America* (Bantam Books, 1995), p. 3.

Wisdom is ready to admit limited knowledge. Wisdom accepts the human situation as knowing only in part. Wisdom doesn't need to be right all the time.

One of the characteristics of a faithful church is that it doesn't have to be right all the time. Instead of a hierarchical, dogmatic, rigid authority with all the answers, church can be a steady source of insight when we can't sort out our own feelings, and a source of support when our faith begins to flag. It can also be a source of activism in a community, reaching out and taking stands even when we admit that we do not have all the answers.

IV

Proverbs 8 presents a delightful picture in the latter part of the passage we read today. In v. 30, wisdom is speaking of her presence with God at creation, and we get this verse: *...then I was beside him, like a master worker*. Then we get a little footnote that says that the meaning of the Hebrew for that verse is uncertain, and that the term here translated *master worker* could also be translated *little child*.

To read, *...then I was beside him, like a little child...* would fit well with the imagery of delight and laughter that is found in the next verse. Here is the way it would read: *Then I was beside him, like a little child;*

and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

All of this reminds me of a quotation I heard from Warren Buffet, who is called “the sage of Omaha.” Someone asked him the secret of his success, and he said something like this: “I find myself dancing to work every day.” His wisdom includes⁶ playfulness. *I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.*