

Proper 20B; Proverbs 31:10-31
September 23, 2018
The Rev. Devon Anderson

This morning is the third time I will preach on this passage from Proverbs in the past six years. And if you even faintly remember either of my first two sermons you know what I'm going to say: that woman from Proverbs? *I don't like her.*

You know who she is. She gets up at 5:00 am each morning to go to Pilates and then gets home in time to make her kids blueberry pancakes for breakfast before driving them to school in the family's hybrid car that has a "my child is an honor student" sticker on it. Then, in her linen power suit that's never wrinkled, she volunteers in the classroom before she heads out to work where she makes a million dollars working part-time so she can be home to receive children at the end of the school day. She cooks a balanced organic meal which the family happily eats together as the kids willingly relay every detail of their day. The kitchen is spotless as she gives her spouse a kiss and heads out to her community board meeting. She'll be back to help with homework and bedtime.

I don't like her. Do you know why? *Because I am not her. I will never be her.* Her description is the throwing down of a gauntlet – an impossibly high standard never to be reached. *A capable wife who can find?* My first response? Nowhere. My second response? In Crazy Town.

But like years past, I spent this past week digging deeper for the richer and life-giving place the scripture wants to take us. As I read the passage over and over what presented itself this time was this: compelling words that paint a more compelling picture, words like: *willing, considers, perceives, reaches out, laughs, opens, strength and dignity, kindness, happy.* She's not perfect. Not exceptional. Just willing, receptive, open and energized, industrious, and focused on others.

The Book of Proverbs is one of five books in the Hebrew Scriptures known as *wisdom literature*. These books contain form and content that's different from all other books in Hebrew Scripture, focusing entirely on a kind of search for and ordinary spiritual practice that makes life deeper. Cynthia Bourgeault in her book, *The Wisdom Jesus*, asserts that wisdom, and the pursuit of wisdom, is "concerned with the transformation of the whole human being. Wisdom is a transformation ...from...egocentricity into love and compassion; from a judgmental and dualistic worldview into a nondual accepting-ness."

Sometimes we confuse the meaning of wisdom with knowledge or intellectualism or book smarts. We complement others by saying, "that person is so very wise." People with academic gifts also can possess wisdom, but wisdom is not so much about "right belief" – knowing all the rules and the history and the theology – as it is about "right practice." Wisdom, the pursuit of wisdom and transformation that happens when we pursue a life of wisdom, is about paying attention, being open, listening. It's about allowing our hearts and minds to be available for God, and allowing that availability to direct our actions, our choices, our priorities, our relationships. Wisdom is an art form, a way we grow into over time.

As Christians, our wisdom guide is Jesus. Many of our most prominent theologians believe that Jesus came first and foremost as a teacher of wisdom, as a guide on the path of inner transformation. Our way of wisdom is paying attention, week after week, day after day, to what Jesus actually taught and seeing how we can begin to walk it authentically from the inside out -- one moment, one quotidian situation at a time. It's important to note that Christianity doesn't have a corner on wisdom. In fact, Jesus belongs to a stream of living wisdom that has been flowing through the human condition for at least five thousand years, from Wisdom literature in the Hebrew Scriptures, to Sufism (the mystical arm of Islam), to Kabbalah, to indigenous culture and religious practices. The pursuit of wisdom is ancient and universal, a mighty river with many streams and springs feeding into it.

So, what can the practice of wisdom look like, now, for us gangly band of Episcopalians in Excelsior? How do we recognize it, cultivate it, practice it?

I am about to begin a multi-year program with Parker Palmer's Courage and Renewal Center called the Leadership Academy. In preparation for our first gathering, I've been re-reading Palmer's earliest books. There's a great story nestled in "A Hidden Wholeness" that's relevant for our purposes this morning. Our reading from Proverbs ends with this summarizing imperative, "a woman [or person] who fears the Lord is to be praised." The word "fear," of course, is better translated in the Hebrew as "awe," so -- whoever is in awe of God, who remembers God as the most important, the one to whom we owe our lives and everything we have, whoever can do this, or who tries to do this, is walking the path of wisdom. Here's Parker Palmer's take:

"It happened at a retreat I facilitated," writes Palmer, "for some twenty elected and appointed officials from Washington, DC. All of them had gone into government animated by an ethic of public service, all were experiencing painful conflicts between their values and power politics, and all sought support for the journey toward living [a more whole life, with values and lives better aligned.]

One participant had worked for a decade in the US Department of Agriculture, after farming for 25 years in northeastern Iowa. On his desk at that moment was a proposal related to the preservation of midwestern topsoil, which is being depleted at a rapid rate by agribusiness practices that values short term profits over the well-being of the earth. His 'farmer's heart,' he kept saying, knew how the proposal should be handled. But his political instincts warned him that following his heart would result in serious trouble, not least with his immediate superior.

On the last morning of our gathering, the man from Agriculture, looking bleary-eyed, told us that it had become clear to him during a sleepless night that he needed to return to his office and follow his farmer's heart. After a thoughtful silence, someone asked him, 'How will you deal with your boss, given his opposition to what you intend to do?' 'It won't be easy,' replied the farmer-turned-bureaucrat. 'But during this retreat, I've remembered something important: I don't report to my boss. *I report to the land.*'"

"...every time we get in touch with the truth source we carry within, [the God inside each one of us], there is net moral gain for all concerned," summarizes Palmer. Every time we remember whose we are, to whom we owe everything, who is most important, both when stakes are high and low, we walk the road of wisdom.

Another aspect of wisdom comes, again, from our woman from Proverbs who "...opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." Kindness. The practice of kindness is the practice of deepening wisdom. But like all things biblical, it's just not that easy. David Whyte is an extraordinary and prolific poet, and four years ago, he took a step beyond poetry and published a book that contains a series of word studies – his take on the underlying meaning of everyday words. I read them over and over because they are so rich and multi-layered. But the one that really knocks my socks off is his exploration of "self-knowledge" and how the pursuit of self-knowledge, though never finished, is the necessary pre-cursor to the ability to practice real, life-long kindness.

"What we recognize and applaud as honesty and transparency in an individual," he writes, "is actually the humble demeanor of the apprentice, someone paying extreme attention, to themselves, to others, to life, to the next step...someone who does not have all the answers but who is attempting to learn what they can, about themselves and those with whom they share the journey...Self-knowledge is not clarity or transparency or knowing how everything works, self-knowledge is a fiercely attentive form of humility and thankfulness..." I think what he's saying is a lot like my sophomore English teacher would repeat over and over, a lesson I never forgot: "The more we learn, the more we deepen, the more we know, the more we know we don't know – and the humbler we become." The process of self-knowledge – of knowing ourselves, understanding our motivations, our passions, our wants, our injuries – is an awakening that brings with it humility, an awareness of how vast and mysterious is the depth of our being, and the presence of God, and the secrets of our world. And from that humility comes compassion for everyone else in similar pursuit, and from that, our heart warms for the fallibility of others and we are propelled toward kindness. It's like a spiritual chain of events: self-knowledge, humility, compassion, kindness. It's the spiritual process of wisdom.

And finally, this last story, which, I think, relates to the sentence in Proverbs, "She looks well to the ways of her household..." Wisdom is about how we choose to look at things, how we interpret what is happening around us, and maybe moving from an "either/or" to a "both/and" mind frame. There is a great story from the Delores Catholic Mission in east Los Angeles. As the story goes, the church felt a call to minister to the homeless people sleeping on their front steps, and they invited them in. Once the homeless began to sleep at the church at night, though, there was always the faintest that they had. Come Sunday morning parishioners would "phoo phoo" the place the best they could. They would sprinkle "I Love My Carpet" on the rugs, and vacuum like crazy. They'd strategically place potpourri and Airwick everywhere to combat the lingering, pervasive reminder that nearly 50 – and later, up to 100 – men had spent the night there. About the only time they used incense was on Sunday morning before the 7:30 am crowd would arrive. Still, try as they might, the smell remained. The grumbling set in. And people spoke of churching elsewhere.

The smell was never overwhelming, just undeniably there. The Jesuits figured that if they couldn't figure it, then they'd feature it. So they determined to address the disconnect in the homily one Sunday. Homilies were often dialogic in those days so one Sunday the priest began his sermon with, "What's the church smell like?"

People were mortified, eye contact ceased, women searched inside their purses for they knew not what. "Come on now," the priest threw back at them, "What's the church smell like?" "Smells like feet!" someone yelled out. The man was old and never cared what people thought. "Excellent," the priest said. "But why does it smell like feet?" "Cause many homeless people slept here last night," said a woman.

“So why do we let that happen here?” “It’s what we’ve committed to do,” said another. “Well, why would anyone commit to do that?” “It’s what Jesus would do.” “Well then, what’s the church smell like now?” A man stood and bellowed, “It smells like commitment.” The place cheered. A parishioner named Guataloupe waves her arms around wildly. “It smells like roses.”

The packed church roared with laughter, and a newfound kinship that embraced someone else’s odor as their own. As the story goes, the stink in the church hadn’t changed, only how the folks saw it. The people at Delores Mission had come to embody Wendell Berry’s injunction: You have to be able to imagine lives that are not yours.”

“The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits...” The practice of wisdom is nothing less, and nothing more, than a drawing near to God. “Yesterday I was clever, wrote the mystic Rumi, “so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.” AMEN.

Sources:

The Wisdom Jesus, Cynthia Bourgeault, pp. 4-5

A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life, Parker Palmer, pp. 18-19.

Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion, Gregory Boyle, Chapter 4 (story about the smell in the church).

Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words, David Whyte, pp. 199-202.