



## **“Wisdom”**

**Scripture – Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31**

**Sermon Preached by The Rev. Casey Thompson**

**Installation of The Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson**

**Sunday, May 22, 2016**

Wisdom and folly. Proverbs personifies the two for us. Folly’s this broke down girl from around the way that nobody wants nothing from. She might be attractive at times, if the mischief is high and the lighting is right, but Proverbs has an answer for that as well: “...like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without good sense.” Ouch, proverbs, that’s harsh!—with a derogatory undertone.

Wisdom, on the other hand, has gleaming teeth and a smile to die for, and all the smart boys go for her. This is what Proverbs is, you know, a meditation on the two great choices we have: wisdom that leads to life and folly that leads to death—a meditation passed down from parent to child.

But it’s a little trying—to tell the truth. That’s the way it is with proverbs. They’re so... proverbial. If you’re reading through proverbs, at some point, your eyes will cross from weariness. One after another after another after another. You’ve heard it all before and, quite frankly, you’re not sure you wanted to hear it the first time.

Will Willimon says reading proverbs is like going on a cross-country trip with your mother-in-law.

Just listen: “When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble.” Check. Sounds like sage advice from the mother-in-law. I think we can all agree on that, right? “The wise lays up knowledge, but the babbling of a fool brings ruin near.” A little rich for someone who speaks in clichés for thirty-one chapters, but I’ll buy it. Then my favorite: “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but those who hate to be rebuked are stupid.” And that’s when you remind yourself that you married your spouse and not your mother-in-law. You married the Song of Solomon—not Proverbs, and you’re glad you did too.

But this is the crux of Proverbs: a claim that there are two futures, one underwritten by the empty excitements of folly and one by the unrelenting goodness of wisdom. You’ve got to marry one of them. Who’s it going to be?

Wisdom, of course. I mean if anyone asks you, wisdom or foolishness—like Coke or Pepsi—you’d say wisdom, right? If it’s the wisdom challenge, you take wisdom, thank you very much. Maybe you ask if there’s any diet wisdom but there’s no question about the right answer. Just like ‘life or death?’ You know this one too. You’ll take life (and you say it so confidently!). Okay, that’s two for two. Wealth or poverty? Wealth. Ah-ha! Well, actually, Proverbs says, that’s a trick question. There’s nothing wrong with wealth per se. It just gets a little tricky. After all, Wisdom says, “How much better to get wisdom than gold (exclamation point)! Understanding is to be chosen rather than silver (period).” The question is not between wealth and poverty. It’s between pairs: wealth

and foolishness, or poverty and wisdom. This question intends to ferret out loyalties by pitting them against each other. It's harder to answer honestly. "Oh, I mean, if I had to choose, I'd take wisdom and, gulp, poverty, and all those other fools can lounge around at their country clubs, sipping champagne, and savoring strawberries and receiving massages. (Sigh). Fools."

This is where the marriage analogy is apt. Wisdom, like your spouse, demands priority. You can't shove your wife in the closet while you re-live old times with your high-school girlfriend. You can't ask your husband to twiddle his thumbs while a corporate deposition dominates your life. And, you can't ask Wisdom to take a back seat to everything else. Wealth? No, dear, I don't think so. Status? No. Power? No. Production? No. Work? Let me think about that... No!

Well, why not? Because wisdom is more than just accumulated knowledge or enlightenment. Wisdom, Proverbs tells us, is God herself. Lady Wisdom is begotten of God, the firstborn of all creation, the very spirit alive in Creation.

This isn't just some *hocus pocus* stuff from the Old Testament either. The New Testament writers are so influenced by this thinking that they pay homage to Lady Wisdom all over the place. You who have ears listen: From 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." John doesn't use footnotes but if he did, he'd have to cite this: "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." Or perhaps, you prefer the Pauline tradition, in Colossians, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Or Paul himself, who in 1 Corinthians 1:30 says that Christ became the wisdom of God for us, or Luke who in 7:35 calls Jesus a child of Wisdom and a vindicator of her too. That's not only four citations in the New Testament, but four independent sources, the holy grail of historical authenticity in New Testament scholarship. It's clear to us, from the very beginning of things, Jesus was known as an embodiment of wisdom. And wisdom is more than just accumulated knowledge or enlightenment. Wisdom, the New Testament tells us, is God in Christ. That's why the answer comes back 'no' to power and status and wealth and all those other things, because of that pesky first commandment: no other gods before me. All other gods are folly. They lead to death.

Let me repeat that: All other gods are folly. They lead to death.

It's a lot to swallow, this mother-in-law view of life, that power and status and productivity lead to death and that God leads to life. You pull the car over and look at her and say, "Do you have any evidence for this? Anything at all? I mean, I've listened to your Jesus and even the answers that I'm supposed to have, life over death, and wisdom over folly get turned around. 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' He said that, right? Or your beloved Mr. Paul, 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' How do these things make any sense at all?"

Your mother-in-law looks at you like a hungry cat looks at a fish. She pulls out her wallet and shows you a picture of your spouse, your beloved. "Do you love her?" she asks. You reply, "I wouldn't be in this car if I didn't." "Do you love her more than your job? More than your house? More than your reputation? Would you give up your life for her?"

"Yes." "Now, does that make any sense at all?" "I guess not."

Then she shows you another picture. “These are my grandchildren whom I’ve graciously allowed you to think you’re raising. Do you love them? Are they better than gold? Would you choose them over silver?” “Every day.” “Why?” “Because I love them.”

“Wisdom is God, Casey, and God is love. If you’re going to be out chasing these other gods, then you’ll never know love. You don’t frame a portfolio. You can’t pray a deposition. They’re nice things to have, but only a fool seeks them first and expects that love can be purchased later.”

That mother-in-law, she’s a straight talker. She pulls out one more photograph. “Hey, that’s me!”

“Of course it’s you. You’re not as easy to love as my daughter and my grandchildren, but in the moments I’m successful I learn a great deal more about God.” “Hmmp.”

“Now, Jesus turns things upside down, Casey, because that’s what love does, and there’s never been someone more full of love than him. Turned him upside down, love did: from divine to human, from king to servant, from unassailable to vulnerable. You want to criticize him? Someone who dumped all the money out of his wallet, all the credit cards and business numbers, the free-lunch cards and the insurance information, so that he’d have enough room to carry pictures of the whole world around? Is that who you want to criticize?”

“No, ma’am.” “I didn’t think so. Now get back on the road and pay attention. It’s narrow up here, but it’s the better way.”

There are choices in life. Thankfully one of them is not whether God will love us. That’s God’s decision, and God already said yes, even to those among us who are hard to love. The rest of life, though, demands choices. You can choose the way of Christ, which is love, or you can choose the way of folly, which is death. The wise seek love in all they do.

Which brings me to Sudie. Wonderful Sudie. Everyone loves Sudie, you should know this. (This is the part I’m supposed to talk about how wonderful she is.) She is. You’ll love her—if you don’t already. She’s a fantastic worship leader. Creative with liturgy. A great teacher. Two masters degrees. In case she misplaces one, I suppose. A helpful colleague. Immune to cynicism. Seriously, I don’t know how you worked with Bill and me for three years and didn’t pick up any cynicism. She gets scripture in her bones. She legitimately loves the church. She named her cat Calvin, for goodness sakes. She’s authentic. She radiates goodness. She’s like the enriched uranium of goodness. Gleaming teeth and a smile to die for. All the smart churches go for her. As they should.

But she’s also a person, and all of us struggle with this call to some degree. Fred Craddock, the man most responsible for the death of three point sermons, may God bless his soul, once said about the ministry, “As a minister, you’ll sometimes be called upon to be more of a Christian than you intended to be.”

This work can get hard. Even for the wisest amongst us. One of its trickiest places is in ferreting out your priorities, Sudie. And for pastors, it *can* be about wealth and power and status—but often it’s about choices that are even more difficult. I’m going to mention two that I struggle with, assuming that the transitive property applies to all Thompsons, and that they may be helpful to you:

Will you choose rationality or will you choose faith? No, they’re not opposites. Remember that proverbs pits two wonderful things against each other that we might ferret out our loyalties. In the end, do you prize rationality or faith?

Given the tenor of American Christianity right now, it’s a deep temptation to choose the rational. Given how often the public discourse around Christianity seems to be about bathrooms and wedding cakes and whose insurance

can provide birth control pills (rather than grace and justice and the healing of our society), I often find myself cringing when I introduce myself as part of the family of faith. I want to say, “I’m not like that really” which is a terrible thing to say about your cousins in the faith, but there it is. As long as we’re fighting about creationism, I’m just not sure how I can talk to a geologist without hours of prolegomena.

But here’s the problem.

The resurrection is not rational. Our claim of abundance is not rational. The notion that the triune God cares about you, would count the hairs upon your head, would refuse to stop loving the world under the threat of the cross, would you intercede with sighs too deep for words, this is not rational. The abundance of love that pours out into the world from the epicenter of Christ’s church is not rational. Where’s the self interest in that?

The temptation is to be rational, to be measured, to be counted amongst those who are compelling society forward in some way. What I want you to hear is that the church, by virtue of its collection of talents and its will toward goodness, can do marvelous things for the betterment of all of us. But those things are nothing compared to the promises of what the church can do when it confesses a trust in the creator, redeemer and sustainer of this world. A trust that is quite frankly outside the rational.

In this upside down world of wisdom, the wisdom of Proverbs, where everything is a little different than it seems, you have to risk looking foolish to know the fullness of the gospel. I want to say to you, Sudie, commit fully, risk looking foolish, believe in the power of the triune God in a way that can mend wounded hearts in a way that antibiotics can’t, that can reconcile families to each other in a way the judicial system can’t, that can free people from worry in a way that 401k’s can’t. Choose faith.

The second priority I want to mention is this: I’m starting to believe the hardest choices in ministry are the choices that serve the church rather than the gospel. That is, I sometimes wonder if my job has become protecting the church from an encounter with God. Because an encounter with God is too world changing. The love of God burns away everything that would separate us from God. And such purification hurts. It leads to life, but it hurts. And so the temptation is to offer them something milder. Protect their interests.

Resist this temptation, Sudie. Jesus turns things upside down—because that’s what love does, and there’s never been someone more full of love than him. Turned him upside down: from divine to human, from king to servant, from unassailable to vulnerable. Is that who we want to protect the people from? Someone who dumped all the money out of his wallet, all the credit cards and business numbers, the free-lunch cards and the insurance information, so that he’d have enough room to carry pictures of the whole world around?

I didn’t think so. Don’t do it. It’s the only thing that can save us.

Now, get back on the road and pay attention. It’s narrow, but it’s the better way.

Ministry demands choices. You can choose the better way of Christ, which is love, or you can choose the way of folly, which is safety and death. The wise seek love in all they do—even when it seem foolish. Amen.