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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Trinity Sunday

"In Search of Wisdom"

It seems like a lifetime ago that Terry and I were childless. It seems so long ago I can hardly remember what it was like not to have children. But I do remember that we were adamant about what we would and would not do in raising our child. For example, we were determined that we would put the child to bed at a reasonable hour and if he/she didn't like it he/she could "cry it out". We were extremely adamant that we would never, ever, under any circumstances let our child use a pacifier because we hated them. Of course, these two rules went by the wayside almost immediately upon bringing Henry home from the hospital.

We were armed with books on child rearing. We bought them all before Henry was born- T. Berry Brazelton, the American Society on Pediatrics, "What To Expect The First Year", Dr. Spock, and one other one I can't even remember the name of- we were out of control. When my parents visited that first time I kept saying "But the books say, the books say, the books say", and finally my Mom said, "Annie, dump the books." And I tell you, that was about the best advice I've gotten. What we were armed with was lots of knowledge- lots of knowledge. And not a whole lot of wisdom.

In our everyday speech, we often treat wisdom and knowledge as though they're the same, but they're not. Knowledge you and I can gather on our own; we can read books and store that information in our brains, or even in our computers; but wisdom is different. It's more intuitive; it comes from life experience; it lies somewhere beneath our conscious; it's the sum of our experiences.

Today, Wisdom calls out to us in the book of Proverbs from the passage we heard. Most people assume that the book of Proverbs consists of the type of short, pithy sayings we think of as proverbs. It's a sign of our culture's biblical illiteracy that many folks confuse sayings from the Bible's book of Proverbs with sayings from early American Founding Fathers like Benjamin Franklin: perhaps the most familiar example is the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," which does not appear in Scripture but in Franklin's 18th-century *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Of course, there are indeed plenty of proverbs in this book of the Bible, although they don't really begin until the stage has been set by nine chapters of a long, introductory poem, and this week's passage is part of that poem.

In these introductory chapters, the listener - "my child" - is exhorted to learn the "proper" way to live so that good things will follow: prosperity, success, security, even fairness. The

Book of Proverbs is one example of Wisdom literature in the Old Testament, and it balances the very different perspective of another example of Wisdom literature, the book of Job. But Rather than contradicting each other, these two books give voice to a paradox of life: we all know that there is much that is true – and proven – in Proverbs, but we also share the questions Job has about the mysteries, and seeming injustices, of life.

The passage we heard today isn't one many people are familiar with, and those who hear it for the first time can sometimes be caught off guard because the book of Proverbs presents wisdom in exclusive feminine imagery. That's right, wisdom is personified as a woman. In fact, the Greek word for wisdom is a woman's name: Sophia; and in Hebrew the word for wisdom is also feminine.

Some people find this feminine attribute of God quite liberating while others *not so much*. In the early 1990s an ecumenical women's conference was held in Minneapolis. The conference was titled "The Reimagining Conference", and as you can guess, this feminine aspect of God as Wisdom/Sophia was brought to light and man, did people get their panties in a bind. "Those women are worshipping a goddess named Sophia!" People cried. Which wasn't true, of course. The women were simply bringing to light this one aspect of God.

And that's all wisdom is-an *aspect of God*. Wisdom is a personification of one of God's attributes, not a separate deity. In our Proverbs reading we hear, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago." In other words, wisdom has been around all along. The famous painting by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel-the one where God reaches out a finger to touch Adam-well in the crook of God's left elbow is a woman who accompanies God in this creative activity-and some art historians think this is a picture of Wisdom. I just learned this little piece of trivia last week.

The Proverbs reading begins, "Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: To you, my people, I call, and my cry is to all that live." Eugene Peterson's translation, as usual, 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!'"

The writer of Proverbs is quite clear that wisdom calls out to everyone, but how do we listen for that cry?

Not with our brains. Instead, wisdom is something acquired over time-gathered from a lifetime of experiences. And it doesn't spout platitudes, it doesn't pretend to know all the answers.

The truly wise people of the world are willing to admit when they don't have all the answers. It's only fools who pretend they have answers to everything. Thomas Edison once admitted, "We don't know the millionth part of one percent about anything in our world." And he was a brilliant scientist and inventor.

Likewise, Any person of spiritual wisdom is bound to admit that "we don't know the millionth part of one percent about God, either. The Bible allows us to glimpse God, and as Christians we believe that in Christ we can see God in human form. But our visions are only glimpses. I don't have an answer for why there's such a thing as cancer, or how we can prove God's existence, or why bad things happen to good people. The wise person, Proverbs says, is a seeker-one who is able to live with the ambiguity of not having all life's answers wrapped up in a neat little parcel.

There are churches, as you know, that spoon-feed the answers to difficult questions. And I'm convinced that one reason why they're growing is because people want easy answers to life's most difficult questions. They don't want to live with uncertainty when they're surrounded by so much of it in their daily lives. But these aren't churches of wisdom. Churches of wisdom are ones in which we seek honest answers to life's toughest questions and yet don't always get them. Churches of wisdom are ones that allow us to question and to doubt because wisdom, unlike knowledge, doesn't always present us with answers. It's totally honest about the uncertainty of life.

One thing I have always valued about being a Presbyterian is that we are OK with admitting that we don't hold all the answers to life's questions. This doesn't always make for a comfortable or an easy faith, but it's an honest one. When I was in confirmation class I can remember asking the minister "But what about doubt? I have doubts. Is this wrong?" I'll never forget his reply because it was such a wise one. "Doubting, Anne, is an essential part of our faith. If you never ask any questions of your teachers, you'll never know anything more than what you are taught. The same is true of our faith. If you never ask any questions, you'll only know as much as you're told. Your knowledge will only be as deep as the person who is teaching you."

The Presbyterian Church USA has always been a church for critical thinkers. So many denominations like to tell their members how and what to believe. But not us. This doesn't always make it easy to get along, and at some points people are ready to throw in the towel. But something gnaws at us to hang in there, because in our heart of hearts we know we have something to learn from one another.

As you read in the newsletter, I'm headed to Minneapolis this summer to attend our denomination's biennial meeting of the General Assembly. Over 700 commissioners will gather together, most of who have never attended a GA before, to try to discern what is wise for the denomination and what is not. Depending on your perspective, sometimes they get it right and sometimes they don't. After each GA meeting there's always a group

who's ready to throw in the towel because, in their opinion, the GA did something dumb. But as I said, we aren't a denomination that paints critical issues in broad strokes of black and white; and we are comfortable admitting when we don't get an issue right. The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "Wisdom is not gained by *knowing* what is right. Wisdom is gained by *practicing* what is right, and noticing what happens when that practice succeeds *and* when it fails. Wise people do not have to be certain what they believe before they act. They are free to act, trusting that the practice itself will teach them what they need to know."

With each successive child we've had, Terry and I have learned that how to be a good parent doesn't come from knowledge found in books, it comes from the practice of being a good parent. Good parenting happens when we learn from our successes and our failures. If I've earned anything through the years, I've learned that anyone can be knowledgeable about parenting, but not everyone is a wise parent.

And so I close with this short, pithy saying from Proverbs:

*And now, my children, listen to me
Happy are those who keep my ways.
Hear instruction and be wise,
And do not neglect it.*

Amen.