

LISTENING TO WISDOM

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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The common lectionary for today -- the Bible passages that are being read this Sunday in thousands of Christian churches across the country and around the world -- links verses from the first chapter of the Old Testament book of Proverbsⁱ to verses from the New Testament gospel of Mark.ⁱⁱ We're told that a female-personified source of Wisdom "cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice... I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you...those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster." Then, in the New Testament lesson we hear that Jesus of Nazareth, who is said to be one of the Jewish prophets like Elijah, teaches some kind of wisdom through aphorisms like this: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." What possible connection is there between these female and male purveyors of wisdom, written about some five hundred yearsⁱⁱⁱ apart? And then, what are we to learn from them some two thousand and more years later? What wisdom can we listen to today in order to live secure and at ease, without dread of disaster, especially when we're being asked to lose our lives in the process?

When I have difficulty as a preacher dealing with the assigned Bible passages for the day, I turn to the work of Biblical scholars for help, none more often than Marcus Borg, whom I've invited to teach and preach in this church on more than one occasion in my twelve years as Dean for Religious Life. Much of what I say today is drawn from his books *The Meaning of Jesus*^{iv} and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.^v

Let's start with the reading from Proverbs, where wisdom is described as a woman speaking at the entrance of the city gates. She tries to move people from being "simple ones" to having true knowledge and understanding. Later in Proverbs, it's explained that, through her, one can come to "understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path."^{vi} Wisdom is pleasant to one's soul,^{vii} has a dimension of prudence,^{viii} will help one avoid others' crookedness and deviousness,^{ix} and will produce true personal wealth beyond that of silver and gold.^x Moreover, "all her paths are peace."^{xi} Wisdom produces happiness and is in fact the tree of life.^{xii} It's explained that she has existed from the beginning of creation: "'Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth...When God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker."^{xiii} In words that sound like the sacrament of Christian communion, Wisdom continually invites people to her banquet of bread and wine: "She has also set her table...Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed."^{xiv} To do so is to "Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight."^{xv}

Moving to the New Testament book of John, a Greek word for Wisdom, "logos," is translated into English most often as the "Word". But translating it as wisdom, we have, "In the beginning was Wisdom, and Wisdom was with God, and Wisdom was God."^{xvi} Then John describes that Wisdom as flowing into Jesus: "And Wisdom became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth...grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."^{xvii} Hence, as Marcus Borg explains, there's a "symmetry between Jesus as a teacher of wisdom and...also the voice of [what is called in Proverbs the Wisdom of God]."^{xviii}

So, the Old Testament Wisdom becomes fully known in the New Testament through Jesus. But how exactly does Jesus incarnate or embody wisdom himself, and what does he teach

about it that could be useful to the rest of us now in the twenty-first century? Borg explains that, “The forms of speech most frequently used by Jesus as an oral teacher were aphorisms and parables. Aphorisms are short, memorable sayings, great ‘one-liners.’... Jesus used them to invite his readers to see something they might not otherwise see.”^{xix} So, Jesus says in today’s lectionary reading, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life...will save it.” He asks people to “deny themselves and take up their cross.” He asks, “what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”^{xx}

For Jesus, this all seems to have to do with conventional wisdom versus Jesus’ alternative, radical form of wisdom. Conventional wisdom is taken-for-granted knowledge about the way things are and how to live. It’s what everyone tends to know through our socialization process and growing up. It gives us guidance on how to live, including basic etiquette and larger images of the good life, perhaps like the American Dream in this country. Generally it teaches that if you work hard, you will succeed, and you will get what you deserve. Conventional wisdom becomes internalized within our psyches as the superego – the internal cop and the internal judge of what society generally thinks is right and wrong and should be rewarded or punished.

But Jesus uses the language of paradox in his aphorisms to shatter conventional wisdom and push us to a radically different spiritual level. He speaks of the narrow way, which leads to the fullness of life, and the broad way, followed by the many, which through its materialistic emphasis tends to lead to death and destruction. It is only through a process of letting go – denying oneself materially and moving beyond social convention – that we can, in effect, die and be reborn into a life that transcends our puny selves and allows us to merge with all that is on earth and beyond, that connects us with the river of life that flows through all things and of which we are definitely a part, but only a very small part.^{xxi}

No doubt Jesus was a mystic and had mystical experiences similar to other religious figures, like the Buddha, who came to be enlightened or had times of direct connection to what they called God. He asked his followers, then, to come into relation with the Spirit or the Sacred in a way not dependent upon convention or institutions,^{xxii} and he became “a lens through which we see what a life filled with God’s Spirit [with the Wisdom that comes from God] looks like.”^{xxiii} At the center of that was compassion or unconditional love, as an ideal mother might feel for her children. That was universalized to a different way of seeing all people beyond conventional categories like important or unimportant, beautiful or ugly, deserving or undeserving, but instead as beloved in their essence. Radical, unconventional Wisdom leads to an entirely new way of living, a new ethic and social vision,^{xxiv} in which one turns the other cheek, loves not only one’s neighbor but also one’s enemy, judges not lest one be judged oneself, and does to others only what you would have them do to you.^{xxv}

Radical, unconventional Wisdom transforms our personal sense of identity, moving us beyond what our cultural conventions say we are and liberating us from “the anxieties and preoccupations that mark so much of our lives. It is a source of courage as well as endurance. It enables us to face suffering in a new way.”^{xxvi} Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink,’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ...But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”^{xxvii}

Marcus Borg helps us see that “Life in the Spirit grounded in the wisdom of Jesus” has several other dimensions as well: a passion for social justice, understanding the importance of life in community, and limited concern about the afterlife in favor of a transformed understanding of life in the here and now.

So, first of all, “Like those who stood in the Jewish prophetic tradition before him, Jesus knew that the desperation of peasant life flowed from systemic injustice.” Then, and now, Wisdom requires challenging the “domination systems created and maintained by the rich and powerful to serve their own interests.” Compassion as a virtue for individuals is partially blind unless it’s married to an understanding “that much of the world’s misery flows from systemic injustice” and then having a willingness to work to change it.^{xxviii} “Blessed are the poor,” taught Jesus, and “Blessed are the meek,” and “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”^{xxix}

Secondly, the Wisdom of Jesus sees beyond individual enlightenment to life in community. “The community that gathered around him, enacted in his open meal practice [which has become our sacrament of Communion], was both symbol and reality: it embodied his inclusive social vision, even as it also met genuine human needs for...belonging.”^{xxx}

Thirdly, the Wisdom of Jesus said little about how to get to heaven and a lot about God’s kingdom coming on earth. It taught how the Spirit of God transforms our lives in the present and how to live in relation to that Spirit.^{xxxi} As we will pray later in this service, Jesus taught us to say, “Your reign come [O God], your will be done, on earth as in heaven...Forgive us our sins...deliver us from evil...For the...power and the glory are yours, now and forever.”

So, in conclusion, how should we listen to Wisdom? First of all, we should come to the common banquet of bread and wine that both the female personification of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs says that she has set for us and the male personification of Wisdom in the gospel of Mark says that he has set for us in remembrance of him. The words of today’s Holy Communion explain that on the table are set tokens of love and hope, with the bread and wine holding a story of dying and rising again, and with us becoming part of the ongoing story of God’s reign in life

on earth. Second, we should go out of this church trying to live and move and have our being in Wisdom as the Eternal Spirit that helps us to love, both in deed and in truth. That requires a radical social ethic which is willing to work against systemic injustice in the world. Third, we should try to stop worrying and fearing and being anxious, for that closes our eyes and ears to the abundance of life all around us here and now that we can savor and appreciate, even as the world is yet to be fully transformed and redeemed.

“Be now my wisdom,” we will now sing. “Ever within me, my soul is assured; Mother and Father, you are both to me...Nothing surpasses the love you impart.”^{xxxii}

BENEDICTION

For all who see God, may God go with you.

For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found...

And the courage to take it, step by step. AMEN.

Robert Mabry Doss

NOTES

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- i Proverbs 1:20-33.
ii Mark 8: 27-38.
iii Harold W. Attridge, *HarperCollins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), pp. 849, 1723.
iv Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).
v Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
vi Proverbs 2:9.
vii Proverbs 2:10.
viii Proverbs 2:11.
ix Proverbs 2:15.
x Proverbs 3:13-14.
xi Proverbs 3:17.
xii Proverbs 3:18.
xiii Proverbs 8:23, 29-30
xiv Proverbs 9:5.
xv Proverbs 9:5-6.
xvi John 1:1.
xvii John 1: 14, 17.
xviii Borg, *Meeting Jesus*, p. 108.
xix *Ibid.*, p. 70.
xx Mark 8: 34-36.
xxi Borg, *Meeting Jesus*, pp. 70, 75-77, 80, 85-88.
xxii Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 69
xxiii *Ibid.*, p. 242.
xxiv *Ibid.*, p. 70.
xxv Matthew 5: 39, 43-44; 7: 1, 12.
xxvi Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, pp. 243-244.
xxvii Matthew 6: 31, 33.
xxviii Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, pp. 244-245.
xxix Matthew 5: 3, 5-6.
xxx Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 245.
xxxi *Ibid.*, pp. 245-246.
xxxii Mary E. Byrne, "Be Now My Vision" (hymn).