

**MOTHER WISDOM'S CALL**  
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24th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Proverbs 1: 20-33**

*Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: "How long, O simple [or, shallow] ones, will you love being simple [shallow]? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you."*

In his retirement over the past 20 years, Harvey Kercheval re-caned and refurbished nearly a thousand chairs and tables in his shop at home. His wife Pat once had the nerve to question his approach to a certain complicated piece. He paused and looked at her and said: *Only fools and children judge a project before it's complete.*

Actually he uttered that aphorism many different times—meaning, I suppose, the unfinished projects he held in his hands but also souls like us held in God's hands. We're all under construction. It should make us humble, tenderhearted, forgiving of one another. *Only fools and children judge a project before it's complete.*

Harvey was also famous for saying: *Maybe we should all shut up and listen to one another.* And this: *you can't argue with stupid.* Harvey was a man of few words but those words packed a lot of salty, earthy wisdom.

Much wisdom is found in aphorisms and pithy sayings like that. Maybe you have a few favorites like:

*A stitch in time saves nine.* Ever wonder how many garments were ruined before someone came up with that? Wisdom comes from experience.

*Give a man a fish he'll eat for a day. Teach him how to fish he'll eat for a lifetime.*

*An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*

What proverbs and aphorisms mean something to you?

[Several spoken from congregation.

The early bird catches the worm.

A wise woman always tells the truth and a wise woman doesn't always tell the truth.

The way is not difficult for those who have no preference.

Marry in haste; repent in leisure.

Make reversible decisions quickly; irreversible ones slowly

Don't marry for wealth but don't let it stand in the way either.

It's not the years in your life that matter most but the life in your years.

Wherever you go, there you are.]Here are a few more:

*If the grass on the other side of the fence is greener, water yours.*

*Don't waste your time bothering whether you love your neighbor; act as if you did!*

There are many, many more. As today's lesson puts it: *Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.* In other words, there's no excuse for being foolish.

When I think of wisdom I think of my mother. She only had an eighth grade education. But, as most of us know, schooling and education is not the same thing. Nor is

knowledge and wisdom the same thing. My mother had some schooling and some knowledge but she had a whole lot of wisdom.

Whenever my brother, sister or I messed up, my father was often quick to scold us. My mother, who was careful not to contradict my father in front of us children, did on one occasion rebuke my father for scolding me by saying, *Mike, don't scold; teach.*

That's wisdom. *Don't scold. Teach.*

My mother valued education and sacrificed in order to get me into college. She prized education highly. But she prized wisdom even more. *Education is a good thing, she'd say, but don't let it go to your head.*

She often told me: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*, which is to say, we either enter the path of wisdom with a sense of awe and deep reverence before the stupendous mystery of life or we don't enter at all. Arrogance is a dead end.

My mother especially loved the book of Proverbs, a portion of which is before us this morning. When I was about seven or eight she urged me to read one chapter from the book of Proverbs each day of the month. I did that for many years. The book is divided into 31 chapters. So, there's one chapter for each day of the month. Sometimes she and I would read a chapter aloud after breakfast before I headed off to school. Because of the patriarchal culture from which these arose, much of Proverbs is addressed to young men and sons. But it's not hard to translate most of its lessons for everyone.

*Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise. Without having any chief or officer or ruler, it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest.* In other words, there's a lot to learn by paying attention to nature. *Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise.*

At first I thought *sluggard* was *slugger* as in baseball. It's not. It's *sluggard* as in *slug* and *sluggish*. In other words, a sluggard is a ne'er-do-well, lay about, do-nothing, idler, loafer, loungeur, good-for-nothing, shirker, underachiever; slacker, lazybones, bum, couch potato. You get the picture.

*As a door turns upon its hinges so does a sluggard turn upon her bed.* In other words, a lot of motion, swinging and twisting back and forth, maybe some squeaking and squealing but no progress. A sluggard like a door goes nowhere.

*Sluggards are wiser in their own eyes than seven people who can give a discreet answer.* In other words, sluggards are too lazy or too arrogant to consider any other view but their own.

But there's more to proverbs than warnings to sluggards.

For example, one of my childhood favorites: *as a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to his folly.* In other words, foolishness tends to feed on itself.

Here's another: *A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and respect rather than silver and gold.*

And this: *better a few morsels with peace than rich foods with bickering.* In other words, better to be poor and happy household than rich and miserable household.

As you can see, wisdom is practical. It offers guidance not absolute truth or dogma. Sometime proverbs contradict each other. *Look before you leap.* Or is it: *he who hesitates is lost.* It all depends.

Wisdom is not unique to our religious tradition. It's found in all the historical religions and ethical systems such as Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Bahai, and Native American spirituality. It's what we have in common.

Wisdom is universal. It is not the domain of priests, or prophets, or preachers, or mystics, or the chosen, or any elite. As the lesson puts it today: wisdom calls out in the streets, in the squares, in the busiest places of our lives. You can find it and hear it everywhere, anytime. Mother Wisdom is screaming her head off to get your attention.

Wisdom answers the question: How shall we live well and wholly with others on this earth? The teachings of Jesus primarily reflect the wisdom tradition of Judaism more than the priestly temple sacrificial tradition.

So what happened?

Somewhere along the line Christianity got side tracked into a neurotic obsession with the so-called next world and how to get there; got obsessed with how to appease an angry, judgmental god with a bloody sacrifice, rather than how to live fully and abundantly in this fabulous, wonderfully complicated world in the way and in the spirit of Jesus. Somewhere in the past, heaven and hell were construed as actual places rather than conditions here and now. Somehow the way of Jesus, which is the way of love and wisdom, became a fire escape instead of a holistic health plan.

Recently, I along with many others have begun to rediscover and appreciate the long neglected treasures of wisdom in our tradition. Proverbs. Job. Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon is a big part of that tradition along with Jesus' parables and the New Testament book of James. Over the next several weeks we will uncover some of those treasures, examine and ponder them together.

Wisdom speaks: *Waywardness kills the simple (shallow) and the complacency of fools destroys them; but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.*

In our tradition, Spirit and Wisdom are nearly the same. And interestingly enough, both are often portrayed as Women.