

Seeking Wisdom is a Humble Business

Part 1: Seeking Wisdom in the Bible

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Proverbs 8-9 (selected verses)

*The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,
and whatever else you get, get insight. Proverbs 4:7*

Introduction

When I grew up, the adults around me would tell various sayings at key times. “Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched,” “a watched pot never boils,” or “hold your horses” – we didn’t have horses, why was that a thing?

These sayings were to describe the way the world worked, and hopefully the current particular experience would provide the grounding for that learning to seep into my brain. In a sense they were trying to pass on their own lived experience to me. Most of the time I figured that what they had to say was never going to apply to me. Ah, the ignorance of youth!

In the Bible, the search for wisdom implies a search for order in the creation. And perhaps even more strongly than that, to have wisdom means not only to have intellectual knowledge, but also the ability to act on that knowledge - a moral compass for behavior.

We know people who have this kind of wisdom. They are our friends and confidants. Now consider, how might these wise people have gotten to be like that? In short, what makes wise people wise? How does one seek wisdom?

To get us started on our quest, let’s consider this quote by a couple of writers. Author David Foster Wallace puts it this way, in a speech at Kenyon College in Ohio a few years ago: “The whole trick is keeping truth up in front in daily consciousness.”

William Saroyan says it this way. “Good people are good because they've come to wisdom through failure. We get very little wisdom from success...”

This is our first couple of clues. Clue A. You have to have lived long enough to fail at something. Clue B. You have to have learned something from your failure.

All of us can claim A. We've all failed. Maybe we totally messed up a project at school, or failed a professional exam, or messed up a relationship or two or three.

The tricky part about seeking wisdom is B. – learning from our failure. Someone on an email list this week asked a small group, “When do we seek wisdom?” And the answer was, “When we've been foolish!” (Ok, this is an aside, but it reminds me of my own little proverb, probably stolen unknowingly from someone else “I love to learn from *other peoples'* experience.”

Today as I record this sermon, our country is in a deep crisis – the collective protests involving hundreds of thousands, if not more, of our fellow citizens in protest. The immediate cause is over racial violence at the hands of certain law enforcement officers, but that is a window on the larger, systemic issues of how our country treats African American people and communities. A small number of others are also causing looting and damage to communities, heightening the risk and challenges to our communities.

This is probably confusing for some of us. Someone asked me this week why the protests turn violent, even on their own communities? And I love this question because it is the question that a wisdom seeker asks. If we don't understand something, it's time to get curious to learn things we do not know.

Let's see what our own spiritual tradition has to say about seeking wisdom. The Bible contains its own received wisdom too – in various books such as the stories around King Solomon, the Book of Proverbs, and other books like Ecclesiastes. These books (called Wisdom literature) don't get as much press as the stories surrounding the patriarchs of Moses, Jacob, Joseph, and the Kings like David and Solomon, yet they were part of the received wisdom of the Hebrew people.

The wise ones of these times, the ones who said such wise things that were written down, were called “sages.” The sages put into words the experiences they had, so that the next generations would know what to do and how to live.

In Jewish tradition, the 'wise ones' are those who not only *know the* Torah, the teachings, (any idiot can learn the rules off by rote) but who know *how* to apply it in the complexity of real life. And the 'wise ones', who were usually from families that had been living orthodox lives for many generations, were often more lenient and less harsh in their application of the law than their more recently religious, but equally knowledgeable, colleagues.

Woman Wisdom

If we are in need of images that help us see how we might find the wisdom of God, one

of the best is this wonderful character that scholars call Woman Wisdom. In Hebrew, wisdom is hokmah, in greek, Sophia. Although these words are grammatically feminine, it is in the strand of wisdom texts that create her as a character, the Sophia of God, that we find an image unlike any other in scripture.

One can find her not only in the passages read today but also throughout the first nine chapters of the Book of Proverbs, and in Job, and in the part of the biblical canon that we call the apocrypha in the Wisdom of Solomon.

This Woman is in creation, moving from the fields outside the city gates to the streets of Jerusalem, and finally ending up on the heights with other elites, and inviting the young in to tutor them in the ways of wisdom, through a meal that strikingly looks like the sacrament of communion.

More than that, woman wisdom plays a role in the whole creation – she is present and a force in creating the world, a mediating force at the very creation, and works as a “go-between” between the remote creator God and the creation on earth.

Her house is the place of apprenticeship, and a new way of being is learned by the young men and women who come to her house. What are this woman wisdom’s ways? Her ways seem to embody the way of justice and love, a way to learn through understanding and relationship. Her relationships are mutual and reciprocal, and outside the top-down paradigm of the times.

Jesus as the Wisdom of God

It should not surprise us, then, that the early church saw Jesus as the embodiment of God’s wisdom on earth. In the early traditions of Christianity, Jesus as the wisdom of God competed with Jesus as God’s son. Take this passage from Luke:

³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; ³⁴ the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' ³⁵ Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children." **Luke 7:33-35**

Think of it: Jesus as the embodiment of the wisdom tradition incorporates her love for walking in the fields and among the people, a yearning for the same justice and righteousness, the same assumption of equality with all from the most desperate sinner to the highest authority. Jesus gathers those around him to instruct them in other ways to live, as a mutual, reciprocal community in the middle of a top-down world. Just as Woman wisdom invites her disciples to her house, Jesus invites us to his table, to learn to walk in the ways of insight.

A Journey we are invited into:

I think we have to consider that wisdom seeking is done in community, not alone. It is done in small, human-scale interactions, where we can know one another well enough to see each other truly, and live the complexities that life gives us.

That means we need to be in community with those who care about us and our journeys.

It also means that in seeking wisdom we will need to spend enough time experiencing God's presence that we are gentled into seeing God's teachings in the love-filled way they are meant to be, not as firm rules that can never be breached, but guidelines that help us avoid the worst of our own selves.

The beginning of wisdom is humility is knowing that we don't know. In our current context we don't know the full effect of the coronavirus yet, we don't know fully the pain of our brown and black brothers and sisters seeking justice and equality in our country, we don't know fully the challenges of our police, many of whom seek change within in their contexts while facing danger every day. It's going to require of us a willingness to listen and learn, to walk into ways of insight.

The beginning of wisdom is humility. Let us have ears to hear. Amen.