

Hear the Voice of Sophia: Live Wisely

Ephesians 5:15-20 Proverbs 9:1-6
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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There's a very special woman that I'd like to introduce to you today. Her name is Sophia. The Sophia to which I refer, however, isn't a person. Sophia is more of a concept. Sophia is wisdom. Late in the 3rd century BCE, the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, was translated from the Hebrew language into Greek. It's called the Septuagint, or LXX.

The Greek word *sophia* is the feminine noun used to translate the Hebrew word *chokmah*. This is the word that is translated into English as *wisdom*. In the magnificently rich poetic language of the Old Testament wisdom literature, wisdom was written about as if a person, especially in the Book of Proverbs. **The personification of wisdom as a woman in Proverbs 1, 8 and 9 presents a very positive image of the divine feminine as a source of truth and peace.** While some non-Christian traditions, from ancient times to modern, attribute aspects of a goddess to Sophia, the approach taken in the Judeo-Christian tradition sees wisdom as a portrayal of a feminine characteristic of Yahweh God, who, unfortunately, is most commonly portrayed as male. We know, of course, that God – as a Spirit, as a Sacred Presence – is without gender. Listen to how Woman Wisdom is portrayed in Proverbs.

From Proverbs 1:

"Wisdom (*sophia*) 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 ones, will you love being simple?'"

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." (Prov. 1:20-23)

From Proverbs 8:

"I, wisdom (*sophia*), live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion... I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me... My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. I walk in the ways of righteousness, along the paths of justice... Happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it." (Prov. 8:12; 17; 19-20; 32-33)

That brings us up to the passage that we heard a few moments ago from Proverbs 9. We are informed how wisdom (*sophia*) has built her house, prepared a sumptuous meal, and sent out her servant-girls to invite anyone who would listen and follow.

Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight (Prov. 9:5-6).

As Christians, this last phrase about eating bread and drinking wine certainly recalls Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper. It is indeed reflected in what the author of the Gospel of John was trying to get across when he puts on the lips of Jesus, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

Before turning to our Epistle Reading from Ephesians it is important to remind ourselves **just who it is to whom Sophia calls out – it is those who are simple**. This suggests that there may be a prerequisite to being able to attain wisdom. And that's the humility to recognize that we are not all-wise and all-knowing, that there is still so much that we can learn when it comes to living wisely. **Without this humility, we may not hear the voice of Sophia** – Woman Wisdom – calling out to us and inviting us to draw near and learn from her.

This personification of wisdom as a wise woman reminds me of my own grandmothers – both of whom were exceptionally loving and kind, always gentle while trying to impart to my brothers, sister, and myself little gems of wisdom and guidance. This seems to be the approach taken by the author of the letter to the Christian community in Ephesus, which is in modern-day western Turkey, near the shore of the Aegean Sea. We read in Ephesians 5:15-17:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

What immediately comes to mind are the probing questions that each of us should ask of ourselves:

- Am I being careful in how I live?
- Do I make the most of my time?
- Am I living life wisely or foolishly?"

As always when it comes to the New Testament, the same questions can and should be asked of us collectively as a community of faith.

It is very important to understand just what is meant by the word wisdom. **Wisdom is not the same as knowledge, though it includes that along with experience and discernment. Wisdom is clearly more than mere intelligence. Wisdom is not the gathering of more facts and information. In the age we live in, we are bombarded with information. But are we any wiser?**

The ultimate goal of gaining wisdom, then, is to learn how to live our lives more fully, effectively, and abundantly, especially in relationship to others. That's why **the biblical concept of wisdom is always portrayed as the opposite of living life foolishly**. Wisdom can be seen, then, as an approach to life. As people of faith, it is a way of living out our lives in a very deliberate manner that exhibits our commitment to following the ways of God, the ways and teachings of Jesus. These include, among others, the ways of love, peace, inclusiveness, righteousness, justice, gentleness, generosity,

fairness, humility, forgiveness, reconciliation, and compassion. This is the way of life modeled by Jesus, and it becomes the path of life that we are to emulate.

So what does living wisely entail? In the Book of James, often called, "The Proverbs of the New Testament," we read, "**If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you**" (James 1:5). James later asks:

Are any of you wise and understanding? Then show it by living right and by being humble and wise in everything you do... The wisdom that comes from above [from God] is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds; **it is free from prejudice and hypocrisy** (James 3:13, 17).

I can think of no greater measure of living wisely. Returning to our passage from Ephesians 5, we are again presented with how wisdom is to be applied to our daily living. The readers of this text, including you and me, are **called to exercise appropriate discrimination, self-discipline, and control concerning our own behavior**. You and I, and we together, are indeed called to live in a responsible, appropriate, and wise manner in all areas of our lives.

Let me share a recent relevant example of the difference between knowledge and wisdom, while keeping in mind that verse from Proverbs 1 that declares, "**fools hate knowledge**". In a week-long series of posts from July 2020, entitled "Wisdom in Times of Crisis" from Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation emails, guest author Brian McLaren writes:

In these challenging, difficult times, we are discovering a wisdom that we needed all along, and that wisdom is that we are all connected. We are not separate. We used to think that we caught diseases as individuals: "I'm sick; you're not." But now we realize, no, we catch diseases as individuals who are part of families, and families who are part of cities, and cities that are part of states and nations. We realize now that our whole species can become infected, and that our whole globe can be changed because of our interconnectedness.

That's why a majority of us in this community of faith find it is simply a matter of being wise – in the discernment and exercise of good and sound judgment – to wear a mask, get vaccinated, and take the necessary precautions during this pandemic. This becomes an expression of love of neighbor and love of self, so it is indeed a demonstration of living wisely. So yes, to be clear, to not follow necessary precautions is to live foolishly.

Today's overarching message is simple, though not always easy to achieve: strive to lead a careful, self-disciplined life, marked by wisdom not foolishness, making the most out of the opportunities you and I face, individually and together as a community of faith. I encourage us all to get to know Sophia a little better, and get to know her well. For she has much to offer and is eager to share her wisdom generously. But as Jesus often adds, to those who have ears to hear. May our loving God, the Sacred Presence dwelling within each of us, help us all to live wisely!

Amen.