

The Voice of Sophia: Live Wisely

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

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August 18, 2024

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 an actual 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 Roman numeral which stands for the 70 persons who did the translating. **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, encompassing all genders. 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 phrase about eating bread and drinking wine is used to recall Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper.

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 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. Yes, **wisdom is a combination of knowledge, experience (good or bad), and discernment.** Because of that, wisdom often takes time. But it grows and keeps growing.

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, courage, 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 follow and emulate.

What, therefore, 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 – good deeds free from prejudice and hypocrisy.**

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.

In this morning's Call to Worship, I included two quotes from different sources that deal with wisdom. The first is found in both Proverbs and Psalms. The actual biblical language is, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The word "fear" in this context, though, does not mean to be afraid of God, as it is often interpreted. We are never to be terrified of God, our God of love. A better translation in English would be **reverence of God, or the sense of awe, or a combination of respect and obedience.**

The second statement about wisdom was made by our own John Calvin almost 500 years ago. The very first sentence in his huge theological treatise, the "Institutes of Christian Religion" is, "**True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts: the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves.**" I have learned to love that quote. And I have learned to believe it's true.

Wisdom involves our pursuit of the knowledge of God – who God is, and what God does. Wisdom takes insights gleaned from the knowledge of God's ways and applies them to daily living. But according to Calvin, this isn't enough. We must also know ourselves and be honest about who we really are and honest about our relationship to God.

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. **To live wisely is a call to decency, common sense, and an eye toward reasonable and appropriate conduct** in any given situation.

I encourage us all to get to know Sophia a little better. In fact, to get to know her well. For she has much to offer and is eager to share her wisdom generously. And as Jesus, as a wisdom teacher, often adds, "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!"

Amen.