

WHAT THE CHILDREN NEED IS BREAD!

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University Congregational Church

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Reading: Proverbs 9: 1 – 6

**Lady Wisdom has built and furnished her home;
it's supported by seven hewn timbers.**

**The banquet meal is ready to be served: lamb roasted,
wine poured out, table set with silver and flowers.**

Having dismissed her serving maids,

**Lady Wisdom goes to town, stands in a prominent place,
and invites everyone within the sound of her voice:**

Are you confused about life, don't know what's going on?

Come with me, oh come, have dinner with me!

**I've prepared a wonderful spread – fresh baked bread,
roast lamb, carefully selected wines.**

Leave your impoverished confusion and *live*!

Walk up the street to a life with meaning.¹

Children are loading up the yellow buses on their way back to school. Their new backpacks are filled up with freshly sharpened pencils, colored marking pens, and notebooks. College students are moving back into dormitories, sorority and fraternity houses. Their ipods are loaded up with the latest tunes. Empty thumb drives for their laptop computers are at the ready to download electronic class notes and lectures from the online “blackboard.” And some of these students will be lucky enough to crack open a brand new textbook and smell the rich aroma of fresh ink.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), p. 841.

Teachers and professors are reviewing their lesson plans, making last minute changes to the class syllabus. Some are wondering why their desk drawer did not get repaired over the summer or why the burned out fluorescent lights on the middle row have not been replaced. Faculty meetings are crammed with new regulations and policies that the school board, superintendent, administrator, or dean has issued. There are fresh baked cakes and cookies to set a mood of camaraderie. First year teachers, instructors, and professors fidget with both excitement and anxiety, fearing that this year's students may be the class from hell.

Through the sheen of new blue jeans, sparkling sneakers, and freshly pressed herringbone jackets prowls the possibility of education. The sharing of knowledge is promised everywhere. Language arts, mathematics, science, and literature are waiting to pounce into open minds with the vision of an educated citizen who will successfully make his or her way into this world.

I love the life of learning and hold in highest esteem those who make education their profession. I love to read and learn and relearn. I love to teach because I learn so much from students and the discipline of preparation. It does not matter to me whether it is an adult Christian

education class or a graduate class at seminary. Education is one of the most important pillars of any civilization I know of.

This morning I would like to think about a different way of knowing that is **inclusive** of education as we know it, but represents a sagacity that is deeper than information gathering and broader than logic and common sense. I speak of Wisdom, and specifically I speak of Biblical wisdom that insists on keen perception and sound judgment.

Do not think for a moment that Biblical wisdom is the memorization of the books of the Bible, or the Ten Commandments, or the Sermon on the Mount. I am not talking about the things that one studies in Sunday school, church, or synagogue. Biblical wisdom is life wisdom that is meant to be found in the streets of human commerce; on the highways and byways of social intercourse; on the mountain paths, streams and rivers.

Biblical wisdom is fundamentally the interrelationship between God, humanity, and nature. The Holy is the order that weaves together and sustains human beings, plants, animals, and minerals. The Sacred is the estate in which nature and human beings are in relationship with one another. To put it another way, God is the BEING in and through which we live our lives with the natural order. Or think of it this way.

Humanity and nature are two parts of a triangle with God as its head. All of life is a gift of God who sustains the whole world and all of her creatures. It is the role and responsibility of wisdom to mediate the relationships of the Sacred, humanity, and nature.

Now we are not used to thinking about nature as an active partner in our relationship with God. We grew up thinking that nature was something we were to have dominion and power over. We believe that the world is here to feed us and provide the resources for our every need. We are trained to think that we have a relationship with God and, if necessary, with one another. We cannot imagine that there is a third partner in our spiritual lives. After all, did not Jesus say that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves? He did not say anything about loving trees, or ponds, or frogs. But it is the fundamental assumption of wisdom that the world and its people are in an indissoluble relationship. We cannot think of life or a future life in the absence of the natural world and human beings. Next Sunday I will take up the theme of wisdom and nature.

Wisdom played an important part in the development of the Hebrew Bible. By the time of the prophet Jeremiah, during the 7th and 6th centuries before Christ, Biblical wisdom focused on the quality of the

relationships between God, humanity, and nature. That is to say, wisdom became the foundation of conscience. Moral agency, framed in the human heart, was revealed in the souls of the people. The ethical timbre and core values of the nation rang out the true content of their character.

Now it is very important to distinguish the quality of the nation's character from law and order. Indeed, a man or woman of moral probity most often obeys the laws of a nation, state, and city. But it is also understood that when we codify and legislate laws regulating human behavior such laws are always the lowest common denominator of ethical behavior. Laws are the minimum requirements of social relationships. They are the ethics of consensus and represent the path of least resistance in terms of character. Legalism replaces conscience and morality becomes mechanical and sterile. As Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, we become content with "the eddies of outward conduct rather than with the currents of inner purpose."²

Biblical wisdom is the constant call of the people of faith to the flood of deepest conscience. The outward appearance of goodness can never substitute for the profound inner qualities of justice and compassion. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible railed against the trivial

² Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), p. 120.

adherence to law and ritual, calling the nation to a conversion of their hearts. Micah chastises the people for the obsession with sacrifices and declares, “He hath shown thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (6:8 NKJV). Likewise, the prophet Amos charged the nation with corruption in the judicial system where verdicts could be bought and sold. He deplored the violence of a community that prided itself as righteous and made an exhibit of their religion. He demanded, “Take away from me the noise of thy songs, for I will not hear the melody of thine harps. But let justice run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” (5:23-24)

The prophets called the nation to wisdom. The gospel of Jesus took up the same theme, calling for a renewal of the spirit and the quickening of the soul. The ministry of Jesus was about the empowerment and development of thoughtful and compassionate relationships between human beings. He would plant in every heart an organic sense of God’s love and justice, unbridled by social norms, religious rites, national security or imperial assumptions.

Sometimes the distinctions between what is wise and what is foolish are so obvious as to be funny. For example, if you are worried

about the rapture and the probability that you will not be lifted up by Jesus, you can learn how to thrive in the meantime. Visit www.nonraptured.com. The creators of the site declare, “If you’re like the authors of this site, you know that when Jesus returns and takes the saints with him during the Rapture, it’s not likely you’ll be among them. So where’s that leave you? Well, for starters, trying to get by back on earth during seven years of tribulation and the reign of the Anti-Christ.” The site proposes to be your guide during the time of turmoil, and will give “tips on everything from what stocks will boom while commerce is controlled by the Anti-Christ, and how to minimize inheritance taxes on gifts left by raptured relatives.”

Or, did you know that you could get yourself debaptized by the National Secular Society? For about three British pounds you can receive a certificate proclaiming that you have been removed from the mystical body of Christ.³

There are more serious times when wisdom and foolishness are difficult to distinguish. For example, most people are aware of or have read Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.” Many people do not remember or realize the context of that letter. Dr. King

³ Fruitcake Zone, *Ship of Fools* at <http://shipoffools.com/fruitcake/index.html>, downloaded 8/15/09

wrote the letter in response to a public letter written by eight distinguished clergymen from Birmingham, Alabama. Two were Methodist Bishops; two were Episcopal bishops, one a rabbi, one a Roman Catholic priest, and the others were pastors of prominent Presbyterian and Baptist churches. They were honored leaders of their respective religious traditions and they were “pillars” of the Birmingham community.

These gentlemen were like thousands of moderate clergy throughout the south. They found themselves caught in the middle of racial fear and hatred on the one hand and seething demands for racial justice on the other hand. In January of 1963 they issued “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense.” In that document they condemned violence and argued that the current racial conflict should be changed and tested by the legislature and judicial system. Further, they affirmed, “That every human being is created in the image of God and is entitled to respect as a fellow human being with all basic rights, privileges, and responsibilities which belong to humanity.”⁴

In April of that same year, Dr. King brought the civil rights movement to Birmingham, which had a long history of strictly enforced

⁴ “An appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense,” as found in S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2001), pp. 233-234.

segregation laws. He was arrested. The same white clergy wrote a public letter to Dr. King, often called the “Good Friday Statement,” or “The Call to Unity.” They opened their letter with a reference to their appeal for law and order. Again they opined that racial justice would only occur in courts of law and denounced mass demonstrations led, in part, by “outside” leaders. They urged local citizens and clergy to withdraw support from Dr. King’s movement.

In their minds they were offering a wise course of action. They feared unrelenting violence and death. I suspect that they really believed that racial justice would be accomplished in the legislative and judicial branches of government. I know that some of them were advocates of integration and racial justice.

But I am wondering if we can imagine how the African-American community of 1963 would hear such a letter. Jamestown was settled in 1607. By 1619, the governor introduced 20 slaves into the settlement. The numbers of African slaves traded into the colonies after that grew to hundreds of thousands. It was the United States Supreme Court that had determined the Dred Scott case. Dred Scott was a former slave living in a free state. He argued that he could not be returned to his previous masters. The Supreme Court denied his petition for freedom on the

grounds that no person of African descent could be a citizen of the United States and therefore had no standing before the Court.

It was legislatures that passed and courts that upheld Jim Crow laws throughout the South that stripped Negroes of their civil rights.

Segregated schools, restaurants, and public swimming pools were local ordinances strictly enforced. The appeal to law and order would ring hollow in the ears of African Americans who had seen virtually no progress in their standing as citizens in over 350 years of American history.

The history is much more complicated than the few examples I have cited. But I hope it is enough for us to understand Dr. King's quotation of William Gladstone, "Justice delayed is justice denied."

Which of these sides offer witness to a deeper wisdom? Which was able to see beyond social mores and even public law to a greater injustice? Which had a greater vision of God's justice that sadly but necessarily stood up against the call for moderation? Had law and order and common sense ruled the day in 1963, I submit that we would still be in the throes of segregation and deadly racial violence.

Lady wisdom is seldom popular. Many consider her dangerous, as they thought that Jeremiah, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Dr. King were

dangerous men. Some think they are so dangerous that they needed to be killed as all of these figures were. It is not just the prophetic voice that sounds so radical in our ears but also the wise voice that guides them. Remember what I said earlier. Biblical wisdom is the call to people of faith to the deeper currents of conscience. Biblical wisdom is always focused on the quality of the relationships of God, nature, and humanity. In the Biblical tradition those relationships are characterized by justice and compassion. It is the voice of Biblical wisdom that gives life meaning and purpose. It is the voice of Biblical wisdom that feeds the hope of humanity and nourishes every soul to freedom.

Indeed, such wisdom is the staff of life, the daily bread that all of God's children are so hungry for, no matter what bus they ride.

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