

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
September 13, 2009
Proverbs 1:20-33
“Woman Wisdom”

I have two opening statements this morning. *Statement #1*: There is no action we can take which has only the effect desired.¹ *Statement #2*: It is within our ability to understand what God wants us to be and to do.

#1: There is no action we can take which has only the effect desired. Isaac Newton taught long ago, in his Third Law of Motion, that every action leads to an equal and opposite reaction. In scientific terms: pushing the pendulum forward six inches causes the pendulum to swing back six inches. In playground terms: push me in the shoulders and call me a name causes me to push you back and call you a name. Actions provoke reactions. But here's the subtle distinction. None of us live in vacuums, in tidy, self-contained worlds in which we can predict the results of our actions. We tell ourselves that life is a simple equation of actions and reactions, when the truth of the matter is that we have no clue about the true impact of our daily actions. Life is not Newton's pendulum, neatly swinging forward and then back; life is more like the freshwater pond, in which every action is a rock that breaks its surface and sends ripples out in all directions, to the farthest shore and back again. It's a humbling thought.

#2: God wants us to understand how we should live and act and has put it within our ability to gain this wisdom. Life is not a perpetual pop quiz, for which we lack the necessary textbooks and are destined to always feel unprepared. The world for all its complexity is not inscrutable nor beyond our basic comprehension. Yes, we have thousands of options to choose between every day – Do I go here or there? Do I drive or walk? Do I cheer for Pittsburgh or for Cleveland? – yet the basic truths of life are both simple and readily available: Treat others as you wish to be treated. Do what is right and just. Love kindness. Walk gently upon the gift of this earth and humbly before God. It truly is not that complicated.

So why is life at times so hard? Why aren't we at peace? The *simple* answer is that we know the things that lead to peace, but we do not do the things that lead to peace. The more *nuanced* answer is that we have trouble hearing the basic truths of life because our ears are clogged with a cacophony of competing voices. Imagine standing on a street corner near Times Square in New York City during rush hour at the peak of tourist season: cars honking, buses revving their engines, music blaring, voices shouting. And there, standing on an island in the middle of traffic, is Woman Wisdom trying in vain to get our attention and be heard.

Wisdom appears as a metaphorical figure many times in scripture and she is always depicted as a woman. In a male-dominated world, she is the contrasting female authority figure. In a world of war and crime, she is the embodiment of détente and justice. And in a world of foolishness and pride, she calls us to remember who we are and to whom we belong.

There she is, Woman Wisdom, calling out to us. As we strain to hear her words, we discover that there is a paradox to what she says. She says, "Listen while I tell you how deaf you are. You, O simple ones, how long will you love being simple?" My mother used to say, "You can attract more bees with honey than with vinegar." Woman Wisdom's message isn't sweet like honey. We are tempted to stop listening and re-join the tourists on Times Square. So what does Wisdom do next? What would you do in her place? What *have* you done when a teenager or grandchild or student hasn't listened to what you said? You've raised your voice. You shout, if necessary. (Now just because you're sitting in church pews, don't go pretending you've never raised your voice at someone.) Wisdom's voice isn't raised in disrespect; she isn't rudely shouting to disrupt a speech by the President. Wisdom speaks with the voice of passion built upon a promise. Remember Statement #2: God wants us to understand how to live and act. God, through Woman Wisdom says, "I *will* pour out my thoughts to you; I *will* make my words known to you" (Prov 1:23). Jesus said, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me. But the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 13:36, 14:26).

Woman Wisdom has much to say to us. She speaks as a true parent who loves both in her embrace and her rebuke. In the gospel lesson, Jesus asked his disciples "Who do people say that I am?" and Peter replied, "You are the Messiah." We love the fact that Peter gets the right answer, the star pupil in the inaugural class of Discipleship 101. But when Jesus talks about how the Messiah will be rejected and killed, Peter challenges the teacher, and he receives a stern rebuke: "Get behind me, Satan! For your mind is set not on divine things but human things" (Mk 8:29, 33).

To rebuke is not the same as to be judgmental. To be judgmental is to willfully obscure the image of God in another person through a bias or prejudice overlaid upon him or her. It is judgmental to say, "You cannot do this job; you're too young, you're a woman, you're not from here." Or to say, "You don't get it, you're a man; you're not educated enough; you're not married," and in so doing we deny their image of God through words of injustice and malice. To rebuke is to seek to break the personal veneer of worldly foolishness so the deeper beauty of God's image can now fully emerge. It is Jesus' warning to Peter not to set his mind on earthly things, but to stay focused on heavenly things. It is the teacher saying to the pupil, "Don't tell me that this is too hard because you *can* learn this and so much more." It is the parent saying, "Don't pretend you're a victim or that others are out to get you simply because you made a bad choice. Take responsibility and do what is right, because you know better." It is the prophet saying to the church, "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. Because you are lukewarm, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Rev 3:15-16). O church, you've been given a precious gift, yet you've buried it in the ground. I sent you to be a light for the world, a city built on a hill."

Woman Wisdom says without malice yet without hesitancy, the way of foolishness will kill you. She warns that the pathway of complacency leads to destruction (Prov 1:32). Although we strive to be an inclusive and welcoming church, this does not mean that we

are never critical or adversarial. Only by saying “No” to the ways of vanity and injustice can you say “Yes” to the promises of new life and righteousness. So Woman Wisdom calls out to us today. She reminds us to walk humbly in this world, for we can never foresee the consequences of our actions. Yet we are to walk faithfully as well. For in a world of trouble and complexity, there is One who sees the big picture, and One who calls us to specific roles within that big picture, offering us true wisdom, true peace, and true life. That’s why, at the end of her introductory speech, Woman Wisdom said, “Those who listen to me will be secure” – not through the security of weapons and worldly power, but secure by abiding in a house built upon a foundation of solid rock. Woman Wisdom said, “Those who listen to me will live at ease” – not live *in* ease through hollow promises from prosperity gospel preachers, but live *at* ease, possessing a hope that endures and a peace that passes all understanding.

Today we commit ourselves once more to be the church of Jesus Christ at the busy street corner of Penn & Highland and wherever God’s providence sends us out in the world. Today we commit ourselves to the three touchstones of our faith: lives of consistent worship, Christian Education for all ages, and community witness through daily words and deeds. Today we stand beside Woman Wisdom, who comforts and challenges, reminding us that all our knowledge might help us make a living, but only faithful wisdom can help us make a life. Let us go forward together; as it says in the Psalms, “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

AMEN

¹ Michael Frayn, The Human Touch, 2006, p. 76.