

September 15, 2024
“Not So Simple”
Proverbs 1:20-33 / Mark 8:27-37
Pastor Tim

You may not have heard or noticed the lyrics to this morning's Gathering Song—Hannah Leigh's “The Way is Simple.” It begins and ends like this:

*Our wisdom awakens
Our memory returns
Within these open hearts
A sacred fire burns*

*And the way is simple
The way is clear
The way is humble
The way is here*

The way is ALREADY here if only we would humbly listen for it. Look for it. Pay attention to it. Make space in our hearts for it.

The way of Wisdom, as our reading from Proverbs describes it, cries out in the street! Divine Wisdom, capital-W Wisdom, Wisdom personified, the Divine Feminine—in Hebrew, *Chokmah*, and in Greek, *Sophia*—cries out at the busiest corner, raises HER voice in the squares for all to hear.

Hear HER voice crying out! Lest you think for a minute that God, that the Divine Whole, can be reduced or contained to something so small as masculinity. So limited as he/him pronouns.

Hear HER voice crying out! As the Armenian proverb puts it, “If there were wisdom in beards, all goats would be prophets.”

The way of Wisdom is ALREADY here, if only we would listen for HER voice in the midst of ALL the voices vying for our attention. If only we would listen for her voice within and all around us.

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?” Simplicity meaning simple-minded, simple-hearted. Not to be confused, of course, with the material simplicity—the simple life, the simple Way—Jesus preached and embodied.

“How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?”

How long will you continue to reject Wisdom, to ignore her counsel, to despise her reproof?

How long will you hate knowledge, and not “choose the fear of the HOLY ONE.”

Fear of the HOLY ONE, fear of God, remember, as the Proverbs also remind us, is the beginning of wisdom. And fear—from the Hebrew, *yirah*—understood as both fear and awe. Awe, as in “referential respect mixed with ... wonder.”

Wonder, awe, of the HOLY ONE, of God, is the beginning of wisdom. The proper starting place for Wisdom to awaken in us.

Wisdom can ONLY awaken in us when we listen and look and pay attention beyond merely ourselves, acknowledging that there is always so much more we don't know. When we understand ourselves as part of a much, much larger whole; the interconnected whole of Creation which we, in faith, know as the handiwork of the Creator.

As Bernard Steinberg notes, “Awe is what happens to fear when it stops being about me.”

Which brings us to Jesus, and our reading from Mark's gospel.

Jesus, along with his disciples, is on his way to Caesarea Philippi. You'll recognize Rome in those names, CAESAR, as in the occupying Roman Empire. These were Roman settlements located near the temple built by Herod the Great and dedicated to the Emperor Augustus, the first Emperor of the Roman Empire. And one who, it should be noted, claimed the title, *Divi Filius*, “Son of the Divine.” Son of God.

It is in that imperial and theological context, here about midway through Mark's gospel, that Jesus prompts his disciples with the provocative question, “Who do people say that I am?” And eventually, “Who do YOU say that I am?”

To which Peter responds, "You are the Messiah." Literally the "Anointed One." In stark contrast to the self-anointed emperors of Rome, the self-anointed sons of God, Jesus—claimed as God's own Son, the Beloved, during his baptism in the very first chapter of Mark—was seen by Peter and many as the One come to save them from Roman occupation. To overthrow the Empire.

So this exchange between Jesus and his disciples is very much a preview of things to come, on the road ever closer to Jerusalem and the eventual collision course with the political and religious powers that were.

Here Jesus begins for the first time—and the first of three instances in Mark—to point to his own suffering. To suggest that he will ultimately be rejected and killed as a result of this collision course he's on, and that they—as his followers—are on with him. His power an ever-growing threat to existing worldly power.

This vision doesn't jive at all with the disciples', or the prevailing Jewish, vision of the Messiah. Of the triumphant salvation, the revolution they imagine the Messiah enabling.

So Peter speaks for all of them in rebuking Jesus.

But Jesus rebukes right back, saying to all his disciples, "Get behind me, Satan!—because the mind is not on that which is God's, rather on that which is mortal." Other translations say, "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Not on Divine Wisdom, if you will. When Jesus predicts his suffering and his death, Peter and the disciples are afraid ... for themselves. If this is what's gonna happen to their Messiah, what does that mean for them?

Peter and the disciples are holding on to the simple view. Their minds are set on merely human things. They don't yet understand what it is they've signed up for in following Jesus.

So he reminds them.

"If any want to follow after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For the one who wants to save their life will lose it, and the one who loses their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

To deny is better understood here as disown. If any want to follow after me, Jesus says, let them DISOWN themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

If any want to follow after me, let them understand that their lives are not ONLY their own, that their lives do not BELONG to them alone—but to God and to each other.

“Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength ... Love your neighbor as yourself.”

If any want to follow after me, let them listen and look, pay attention, make space in their hearts BEYOND merely themselves, and understand that they are part of a much, much larger whole; the interconnected whole of Creation.

Again, from Bernard Steinberg, “Awe is what happens to fear when it stops being about me.”

That is the beginning of Wisdom, when it stops being about me. That is the place where Love begins to take root, and so where life really begins to bloom and blossom for me AND the world around me.

That is what it means to lose your life for the sake of the gospel, which is love. To lose your life in order to save it. It's as simple and as complicated as that.

To merely “save your life” IS simple. To attend ONLY to your own needs is the easiest—perhaps even most instinctive—path. The path we choose most naturally, the path we choose when we are afraid, because it operates from the narrowest of perspectives. It is SMALL and PROVINCIAL. It is ONLY about me and my life.

And the simple path leads, as Wisdom suggests in our reading from Proverbs, to things like “waywardness”—tending to stray off-course because, when we are isolated and disconnected, there is no longer a magnetic field to guide our compass.

The simple path leads to things like “complacency”—settling for less than the world we ultimately want and need, and that God desires for us all, because we convince ourselves that self-preservation, self-satisfaction is enough. Is all there is. Or at our most cynical, most

defeated, we convince ourselves that it's the most, or the best, we can hope for in this life we've been given.

Wisdom warns that the simple path ultimately and inevitably leads to panic that “strikes ... like a storm” and “calamity that comes like a whirlwind.” It leads to distress and to anguish because we collectively reap what we individually and collectively sow.

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?” Wisdom asks.

And likewise, Jesus asks: How long will you set your minds on human things, on that which is mortal, rather than on divine things and that which is God's? Or “For what will it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

To “lose your life” for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of love, for the sake of divine things, is to save it. It is the WISE path. To attend NOT ONLY to your own needs, but in at least equal measure to the needs of your neighbors—and even, Jesus insists, of your so-called enemies—is the very path of Wisdom itself. Wisdom herself.

But it is also the most difficult because it operates from the widest of perspectives, which God represents. Because it requires more of us, from us—our intention, our diligence—to stay connected to wonder, to awe, to the whole, to each other, to Creation, to the common good, to the big picture God paints for us all.

Because it is NOT ONLY about me and my life, but about the life we ALL share together. It is BIG and SPACIOUS.

And it is the cross, Jesus says, unique to each of us, we are called to bear. In and for the sake of love.

Our Gathering Song describes it like this:

*May the fountain within my being
Be ever-flowing, ever-flowing
Pure, life-giving to all*

*May the fragrance blossoming
From my soul be softening
Enlightening the hearts of all*

*And may the world I weave
With the breath I breathe
Bring beauty, bring beauty*

*May the steps I walk
On this sacred Earth
Be in peace
Be in peace*

Friends, Wisdom calls us from the narrow SIMPLICITY of self-absorbed, self-important navel-gazing to the deepest and widest COMPLEXITIES of love in real life. In relationship. In community. Across difference. In the face of disagreement and conflict. Toward the world as God intends, what Jesus called the kingdom.

Marked by ever-blossoming beauty WE help create. By peace with justice for all Creation which WE help create.

Wisdom's calling is actually very simple. And yet, as we all know, all too well, not so simple. NOT SO SIMPLE.

But the first step, always, on the path OF and TO Wisdom is to seek it. With intention, to seek after it, to hear her calling in the streets.

Her way, embodied in Jesus' Way of Love, is ALREADY HERE if only we would humbly stop to listen for it. To look for it. To pay attention to it. To make space in our hearts for it.

Allow it to awaken, once again, in and through OUR lives.

*Our wisdom awakens
Our memory returns
Within these open hearts
A sacred fire burns*

*And the way is simple
The way is clear
The way is humble
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May it be so.