

THE HORIZON OR THE HOOD ORNAMENT

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 13, 2009

Scripture: Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38

There is a different feeling this time of year. The students are back and the campuses that intersect on this corner are buzzing. You can hardly get into the delis at lunchtime there are so many kids around. NYU, Parsons and the New School, Cooper Union, Cardozo Law, they're all back in session with students eager for wisdom, paying royal sums of money to get an education. I found out this week that room, board, books, and tuition costs a student attending my alma mater \$48,000 a year now. Over four years, I paid 1/6th of that in tuition. You've got to value education a lot to spend that much for it.

Of course getting an education doesn't necessarily guarantee Wisdom, which is why very smart people sometimes do very foolish things. Just ask Mark Sanford, or Eliot Spitzer, or Bernie Madoff.

A good education doesn't guarantee the income that it once did either. The law firms in town are taking only a fraction of the number of law school graduates that they did in recent years, and some are not interviewing at all. Even Harvard was only able to place half of its graduating law class last year. And heaven only knows how this year's crop will fare. The recession is dashing a lot of dreams.

Students this year are learning a hard lesson that sometimes an education has to have value in and of itself, and that as the Latin puts it, *educare*, which is to be led out from the dark, led out from ignorance, has to be intrinsically worthwhile. It better be. This year a college degree and \$2.25 will get you a subway ride.

The Bible, interestingly enough is more interested in *Wisdom* than it is in education, which is not to say that education is not important, only that Wisdom is something else. To know facts and to reason well do not necessarily lead to a better life, from the scriptures' perspective. Wisdom is a quality inherently deeper and more enduring than the latest fact or the newest discovery. It is the way of life that leads to God.

Wisdom is depicted in the ancient literature as a feminine figure, and by the time of the Persian conquest of Palestine, Wisdom has found a voice and speaks her mind. So the scribe of the book of Proverbs tells us,

“She cries out in the street, in the square she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks, ‘How long, O clueless ones, will you love being clueless? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?’”¹

According to the scribe, Wisdom is standing on the street, bolting off the page in our Bibles, out on Fifth Avenue at Twelfth Street at this intersection of Athenian

intercourse, where students are carrying books and laptops and Kindles in their backpacks, texting and Twittering each other with the latest fashion and comment, not even noticing this woman on the corner who would have them heed her warning.

The business types pass by as well, on their way to the next appointment, the bankers, the lawyers, the executives with their educations all wrapped up and filed in their briefcases. So also are the mothers pushing the strollers, on the way to day care, late for work, talking on the cell phone, multitasking. They none of them pay attention, though Wisdom cries in tones that are clear and unequivocal,

“How long, O clueless ones, will you love being clueless? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?”

Out on the street she is not like the clever types who ask if you have a minute for the environment or for the whales, there with their clipboards and petitions in hand. Not like the friendly ones who come up and say, “I think we should talk.” Sure we should!

Instead, Lady Wisdom is in your face, out there on the street, wanting to be heard, like some wild woman with her hair on fire, screaming her head off trying to get us to pay attention.

Why is she so upset? Why is she in our face like this with her abrupt and pointed message insulting us, calling us *simple*, (*naive*, would be a better translation); what we describe today as *clueless*. Not quite as abrupt as Congressman Joe Wilson’s impertinence thrown at the President in the joint session last week, but in the same vein. “How long, O clueless ones will you love being clueless?”

She sounds like a prophet, this Woman Wisdom with her call to pay attention. And that is, of course, what she is. Part teacher, part prophet; in the grand tradition, doing something outrageous to get us to pay attention to the meaningful.

Proverbs, her collection of wisdom, the sayings of Israel, is not a book most folks read today. I suppose there are few of the proverbs that any of us know by heart any more. Maybe one or two we know, like “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” or “a proud look goeth before a... fall,” but not many. And yet they point to a truth that is so deep that it springs, like a well from some rich reservoir down under us all.

There are a lot of proverbs around in our culture. Folk wisdom and common sense, the kind of thing that you sew onto a sampler and frame for the wall at Grandma’s house. A relic of a bygone era. “A stitch in time saves nine,” these folk proverbs advise us. “The early bird catches the worm,” “If you lie down with dogs, you rise up with fleas...” that kind of thing. Some popular proverbs contradict themselves like, “she who hesitates is lost,” over against, “look before you leap.” And some folk proverbs, are just patently untrue theologically speaking, like “God doesn’t put on you what you can’t bear.” You hear these little snippets of folk wisdom all the time. And in fact, a lot of people can’t tell you from whence their favorite proverbs come, Shakespeare, or Poor Richard’s Almanac, or the Bible.

In truth we all live not only with proverbs but by them. The real question, then, is not whether we will live by proverbs but by which proverbs do we live? We all have some we value. Some of them end up on t-shirts and are printed on bumper stickers. And many of them live in our thoughts and motivations whether we realize it or not. Some are written on our heart.

Most of the proverbs by which we live these days are self absorbed, protective, survivalist. They are a measure of our narcissism. So Nike advises us to “Just do it,” which is a twist on the old proverb of the Woodstock era, “If it feels good, do it.” In the workplace the operative proverb is, “look out for number one, because if you don’t who’s going to?”

The proverbial law of the jungle is now the law of business and maybe it always has been; “It’s a dog eat dog world, the survival of the fittest, and the devil takes the hindmost.”

Now don’t get me wrong, there’s some wisdom embedded in these popular proverbs of our time. Every time and season and culture has them. They are measures of our values: of what we treasure, and what we believe. And some of our most familiar proverbs these days are the ones that most focused on ourselves.

One of the reasons we look for proverbs to guide us is because we are looking for some rules to live by. We are looking to be wiser in a world where wisdom is scarce and public discourse is barely civil any more. How can you think when all people do is shout slogans and live by noisy nostrums?

We are hungry for a compass by which to gauge our direction. We all want to know how we should live. All these students paying out good money to get an education, but is there wisdom to be found anywhere?

Well, according to the book of Proverbs, the Bible’s Proverbs, Lady Wisdom stands on the corner and begs that we listen to her, that we pay attention to the larger, deeper, truth that longs to be heard, the way that leads to life, the way that leads to God.

“Give heed to my reproof,” she says, “I will pour out my thoughts to you, I will make my words known to you. . . . My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.” Sounds good. Where can we find those teachings, where is that Wisdom?

Edward Kennedy’s memoir entitled “True Compass” will be published and available tomorrow. I’m intrigued by that title, “True Compass” and I am wondering whether there are echoes in his book of the theme of which he wrote in his letter to Pope Benedict, read at Senator Kennedy’s interment by Cardinal McCarrick. There’s a touching and very poignant portion of that letter that lays out both the humanity and the brokenness of Ted Kennedy, but which also speaks of his faith. It is the kind of reflection a man looking at the approaching horizon of his life might write, the kind of Wisdom that the years can bring sometimes. I thought of Chappaquiddick, of course, and of his

divorce, the boozy, hazy years, the women in his life, the sadness of two brothers murdered and the oldest killed in war, a sister who was mentally challenged.

Ted Kennedy writes to Pope Benedict, “I have been blessed to be part of a wonderful family. And both of my parents, particularly my mother, kept our Catholic faith at the center of our lives. That gift of faith has sustained and nurtured and provided solace to me in the darkest hours. I know that I have been an imperfect human being, but with the help of my faith, I have tried to right my path.”²

“...with the help of my faith, I have tried to right my path.” We have known through the years of the humanity and imperfections of Ted Kennedy. What we have not heard until now, in his own words, are what his faith has meant to him, and how it sustained and no doubt chastened and guided him throughout his life.

It is the kind of thought and expression that I suppose most of us would like to be able to offer at the end of our life, that for all of our imperfections, we have tried to be faithful and to keep on the right path.

We are after all searching for rules to guide us in this often chaotic world. We want to know how we should live. And Wisdom stands on the street corner and begs us to pay attention to the deeper, truer, more enduring things that lead to God.

All day Friday, on the eighth anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center our sanctuary was open. And people came in and spent some time among these old stones and in this safe house. This sanctuary was open that memorable day eight years ago within the first hour of the attack, and people came in wearing ash and awe, laden with confusion and tears. They found a place that day to sit down and pray, to collect themselves in the midst of chaos. They were escaping the site downtown, making their way from work, finding their way home as best they could, knowing that home would never be the same again.

They came here to these walls to recover lost bearings, to make sense of something for which no sense has ever adequately been made. They prayed and looked for guidance. They were still and listened to what the silence might say. They thumbed through the Bibles, the psalms, the Proverbs, the words. They waited for a presence that they felt was here. Wisdom was there on the street corner that day, beckoning folks to come in, not strident or calling names, but weeping as we all were weeping.

Never has it been more vividly displayed for me than it was that day; the need that is the deepest need of all, the desire to understand something of who we are and why we are and where we are that only God in God’s infinite Wisdom knows, a mystery that only faith reveals, a knowledge that only prayer communicates, a language spoken in the Bible’s Wisdom, in psalms and proverbs and stories and gospels and letters that bear the heart and love of God for us.

Most of our days we are so fixed on the immediate, the necessary, the next thing that it’s like driving while keeping your eyes on the hood ornament, rather than on the horizon, a dangerous thing to do. And anyone can see that you cannot find your way

home with such short vision. You have to have a longer view, you have to know that there is more than just today, that today leads to tomorrow, and tomorrow leads to eternity.

Wisdom stands at the street corner and begs us to come in, to think of something more than today, something more than ourselves, something more than whatever it is that occupies our hearts and minds too much of the time. She bids us think thoughts that are better than our thoughts and see visions better than our short sightings. She invites us from the street corner in, to take a seat, and to open the book, and to read the words, and to offer the prayers, and to sing the praises, and maybe in the process discover the way of Wisdom, the way that leads to God, the way that leads to life.

She's out there on the street corner right now. Can you hear her?

She's in here too.

And wise are those who have the wit to pay attention.

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¹ Proverbs 1:20-22

² Letter of Edward Kennedy to Pope Benedict XVI,