

CHOOSING WISDOM OVER CYNICISM

Psalm 1; Proverbs 1:20-33
 A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
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This sermon owes a considerable debt to two pastor-friends and colleagues, Carla Pratt Keyes and Patrick Willson, whose work on each of our texts shaped much of my own approach to this sermon.

A few summers ago, with a group of Presbyterian pastors, I stood under the magnificent dome of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Originally constructed under the Roman emperor Constantine in the Fourth Century, it served as the church of the eastern Roman Empire and the seat of Eastern Orthodoxy until the 1400s, when the church was transformed into a mosque, but its Muslim congregants have preserved much of the spectacular design and Christian artwork for pilgrims still to see.

Hagia Sophia means “Holy Wisdom.” As we stood in that resplendent space, one of our Muslim guides observed that with the world in such a frightful state – with the global refugee crisis, the racial tensions at home and abroad, the shrill cacophony of angry politicians everywhere, and the resulting and growing cynicism all around – we surely could use a strong dose of *hagia Sophia* – a strong dose of holy wisdom – today. And all of us echoed a resounding Amen.

The Book of Proverbs talks a lot about such wisdom. And it contains some surprises for the unsophisticated reader. Given its date of origin, the first surprise might be simply that its authoritative figure, its main speaker, and its primary focus is a woman. Wisdom is personified as Sophia. Sophia speaks like a parent addressing children who aren’t paying attention, or, perhaps even more forcefully, like a prophet addressing a recalcitrant people. The second surprise is, thus, her tone, which is assertive and demanding, mostly because she can see the spiritual calamity that will result if her hearers do not listen.¹ How we could benefit from her challenge and her teaching today! She is calling her hearers to be done with cynicism and to embrace *sophia* and *mûsar* – wisdom and discipline.

Woman Wisdom here is a compelling teacher, imparting deep understanding; she is a strong-minded parent, seeking to instill discipline. My pastor-friend Carla Pratt Keyes says that Wisdom employs the same approaches to discipline that are in play in her own household – and likely in many of our households.

[The first] involves a rather calm and gentle instruction that anticipates hard choices. We speak over supper or during long walks about the challenges of life and what constitutes a faithful response. The second kind of discipline comes when a child who *knows better*

¹ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Proverbs 1:20-33: Exegetical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 4*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 51.

has chosen wrongly and is reluctant to admit it. “I can’t believe you just did that!” my husband or I will [say forcefully, because we know] that the stakes are high. “*Look at me when I am talking to you!*”

[In our text for today, she says,] Wisdom virtually jumps across the table to seize the attention of those who must face their failings and repent, or else perish. She speaks not just to a household, but to a community, carrying her discipline into the busiest of public places – the street, the squares, the city gates – where money changes hands, and judges make their rulings. You cannot miss her voice shouting over the din, or her message written everywhere about the things that make for life in the midst of all our living.²

Some of the proverbs that follow her verbal assault may not seem like life-and-death matters to us. Many are simply practical, while others are profoundly spiritual. But they all beckon us to a way of life that is different from that which we often readily choose. They

speak to our daily decisions about money, time, family, neighbors. . . . “What is desirable in a person is loyalty, and it is better to be poor than a liar” (19:22) – good counsel for people prone to duplicity. “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full” (19:17) – so the fear of the Lord leads to righteousness, justice, and equity “Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18) – [wise counsel in these days of angry, divisive political rhetoric].³

But before she gets to such instruction, Woman Wisdom lets loose a tirade against those who would willfully choose ignorance and mock her wisdom. They are words as important today as they were in post-Exilic Israel.

“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. . . .”

In an age that seems to savor ignorance and reward cynicism, these are powerful questions Wisdom raises. Now, for us in this well-educated city in which we live, and in this church, virtually surrounded by esteemed universities that propose to foster knowledge and encourage the search for wisdom, it may seem unnecessary to raise such questions; but I’m not so sure. There are scoffing cynics all around us. And I doubt that we ourselves are immune to cynicism’s lure.

I spoke here two weeks ago about Parker Palmer’s phrase, “the tragic gap.” The tragic gap is, by Palmer’s definition, the distance between what’s actually going on around us – the hard conditions in which our lives are currently immersed – and what we know to be possible from our own experience. . . . the gap between reality and possibility, between what is and what should be. In a conversation a decade ago with Bill Moyers that focused on the global economic

² Carla Pratt Keyes, article for *Interpretation*, included as part of a paper presented to the January 2009 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

³ Pratt Keyes.

collapse, Palmer described what happens when we don't learn to hold the tension between what is and what we know to be possible or right. He said,

I think what happens is we flip out on one side or the other. Flip out into too much possibility and you get irrelevant idealism. Flip out into too much reality and you get ... corrosive cynicism. And corrosive cynicism is partly what's got us where we are. Corrosive cynicism is, "Oh, I see how the world is made. It's dog eat dog. It's whoever gets the biggest piece of the pie gets the biggest piece of the pie. So I'm going to take my share and run and let the devil take the hindmost." That's corrosive cynicism.⁴

The important thing, says Palmer, is to stay in the fray, to stand in the gap, and be creative. But cynicism always lurks...always threatens.

Why is cynicism a danger? Why is a little cynical scoffing such a bad thing? My colleague Patrick Willson says it is because with cynicism we mock the very things that could save us and make us whole and blessed and happy... individually and collectively. Scoffers are expert in defeating every ideal and deflating all admiration. The psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan once described cynics as defeated people "whose attitude seems to be, 'If I cannot be great, then by God there shall be no greatness.'"⁵ Thus they delight in pointing out feet of clay as though feet of clay were a completely novel discovery. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right: there are some people who, taken to a flower garden, will inevitably sniff for the manure under the roses.⁶ And it was Lily Tomlin who gave voice to Jane Wagner's classic line, "I worry that no matter how cynical [one becomes], it's never enough to keep up."⁷

The most seductive thing about this cynical scoffing is that on the surface it sounds so wise, so sophisticated. But Woman Wisdom knows better. The cynicism of the scoffers is pseudo-wisdom masquerading as the real thing. The scoffers sound so experienced, so worldly wise. They seem to know so much, yet really know nothing of importance. It was a cynic that Oscar Wilde once described as one "who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing."

In one of Gary Larson's old "Far Side" cartoons natives are dancing around and making offerings to a great stone obelisk on which is carved the word, "NOTHING." Watching from a distance, one anthropologist turns to the other and asks, "Is NOTHING sacred?" (I know. I know.) But, says Patrick Willson, that's actually the position of the cynical scoffer: nothing is sacred; nothing is respected, admired, cherished, valued. Nothing is worthy of our decorum or praise or sacrifice. Nothing is at the center of life.⁸

Woman Wisdom stands in the public square and shouts,

⁴ *Bill Moyers' Journal*, interview with Parker Palmer, Public Broadcasting Service, February 20, 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/02202009/transcript2.html>

⁵ I borrow this quote from a sermon on Psalm 1 by Patrick Willson, preached at the Shades Valley Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama. He cites Charles Hartshorne, *The Darkness and the Light*, 1990, 17.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1953, 212. Again, with thanks to Willson.

⁷ Jane Wagner, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, 1985.

⁸ Willson.

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
 How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
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The deep sadness is that in cynicism, scoffers close themselves off from the possibility of growth and just get stuck in intellectual laziness – stuck in the tragic gap between reality and possibility. My mind is made up, the scoffer says; don’t confuse me with facts or “fake news.” So scoffers just get stuck where they are. Says Brent Strawn,

Wisdom’s audience has *refused* to hear her call and has *not heeded* her outstretched hand. They have ignored all her counsel, and, indeed, would have none of her discipline (verse 25b).⁹

And so she sounds her warning. And the warning is hard to hear. But Woman Wisdom is not one to trifle with. Strawn says,

Wisdom not only says she will laugh when ... misfortune happens, but also that she will not answer when her audience finally comes to its senses and calls out to her... These sentiments are very similar to those found in the prophets. Wisdom is not alone, that is, in adopting such a firm tone with her recalcitrant audience. She has a host of distinguished predecessors in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos – not to mention the God in whose name these prophets speak.

[And for her, the warning is a life-and-death matter.] One cannot live foolishly forever without reaping the [consequences]....¹⁰

Time marches on, and choices must be made, and we won’t always have tomorrow to make a better choice. And all our choices... *all of them*... have consequences.

In the face of Wisdom’s warning, we are left without excuse. She stands on the busiest corner where everyone can hear. Everyone *can*, but not everyone *will*. It is a shame, because Wisdom has much to teach us, and her wisdom has much promise and hope. She offers, in fact, a way beyond cynical scoffing... a way of wisdom and discipline that leads to life and wholeness.

One does not have to be a genius to discover and claim such wisdom, for wisdom is not the same thing as intelligence. To the biblical writers, says one scholar, wisdom meant “living in the world in such a way that God, and God’s intentions for the world, are acknowledged in all that we do.” Such wisdom is available to every person who desires it wholeheartedly.¹¹ Indeed, within the faith we claim, it is fairly straightforward, though at times counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. And it is not limited simply to the Book of Proverbs. What does wisdom teach?

⁹ Brent A. Strawn, commentary on Proverbs 1:20-33, on the Working Preacher website, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=9/13/2009&tab=2

¹⁰ Strawn.

¹¹ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2000, 1.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

Be kind to one another.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Render to no one evil for evil.

Blessed are the peacemakers...the merciful...the pure in heart.

Judge not, that you be not judged.

Forgive one another, as I have forgiven you.

The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In the end, that's the kind of wisdom we need and are called to embrace. It is the wisdom by which the earth was created... the wisdom of the prophets... the wisdom of Sophia – Woman Wisdom. It is also the wisdom embodied in the grace, gentleness and peace of the One we call the Christ.

Standing as we do in the gap between what is and what is meant to be, between the hard conditions in which our lives are immersed and what we know is possible, we are invited, urged, *called* to choose the wisdom that will draw us more toward the future God intends. To choose such wisdom is to choose the path of faithfulness. To choose such wisdom is, in fact, to choose the road to life itself.

In a world of tragic gaps, a world so in need of *hagia Sophia* – of holy wisdom – it is time to be done with willful ignorance and cynical scoffing. It is time to choose God's wisdom. May God give *us* the courage and the grace to choose it.