WISE GUYS AND GALS
Scripture: Proverbs 1:20-33

FOCUS: We are called as God’s people to incorporate true wisdom into every facet of our daily lives.

Have you ever wondered how the term “wise guy” came to be considered derogatory? After all, wisdom is not a bad thing, quite the opposite, genuine wisdom is a very good thing, something we are called by God to incorporate into our daily lives. But when you are called a wise guy today you are at the very best being accused of a bit of sarcastic wit, at worst you are being charged with false pride and arrogance. I looked up the phrase and discovered that the term has special meaning in the realm of organized crime. A mafia “wise guy” is one who has been officially inducted into the mafia, always by virtue of being of full Italian descent and usually after having proven their metal by, among other things, carrying out a contract killing. Lovely!

But in everyday conversation among those of us who, to the best of my knowledge, are not affiliated with organized crime, the term is generally reserved for those who are either bitingly sarcastic or who think they know more than they actually do. I am convinced that the world has quite enough wise guys and wise gals, actually we have way too many. But I am just as certain that there is a critical shortage of wise men and wise women. Isn’t the English language odd? To those for whom it is not a first language wise guys and wise men are clearly synonyms. In the most literal sense they are correct, but we all know from experience that there is a world of difference.

A study done as a master’s thesis which analyzed the mission statements of various American colleges over the past 100 years found that during the 19th century, the word “wisdom” frequently appeared in mottos and purpose statements. The message the schools sought to send to prospective students was, ***“Come here and we will do those things necessary to make you a wise person.”*** But by the middle of the 20th century most colleges and universities had begun to refer not to imparting wisdom, rather to presenting knowledge. The clear, if unintended, message was that the emphasis in higher education had shifted from making you into a certain type of person, that is making you wise, to simply filling you with as much information as possible. The master’s student concluded that the day will come when even knowledge is no longer the focus, rather colleges will simply say, ***“Come here and we will dump a huge amount of data on you.”*** I fear we are there.

On the one hand I find the shift alarming. What a shame that our scholarly institutions seem to be losing sight of the importance of cultivating wisdom. But on the other hand I recognize that true wisdom and real truth come only from God and can never be instilled by any human institution, not even by the church. While knowledge is generally born of hard work and diligent study, true wisdom comes only as a gift from God. That is not to say that the church and her teachings are unimportant, quite the contrary. The church is an instrument used by God to point God’s people toward the truth, toward true wisdom. Knowledge, data, information, even when dispensed on the most secular of college campuses has value and can be used of God to lead toward true wisdom. But such are not in and of themselves wisdom. It is only by God’s grace, and as we open ourselves to the gift of God’s Spirit, that we will ever attain true wisdom.

So if we don’t find it on the college campus, if it is not even necessarily attained here in God’s own house, where is it that we are to encounter the wisdom of God? Our scripture from the wisdom literature of Proverbs offers a clear answer. Proverbs is an intriguing book. It is mostly a collection of brief sayings, intended to convey wisdom and to guide us toward practical, prudent, and honest decision making in our daily lives. Like all biblical wisdom literature, Proverbs seeks to equip readers to think and to act in accordance with divine wisdom and affirms the truth that there is divinely inspired order and meaning in lives lived wisely.

The passage we read us this morning is the conclusion of an opening poem, a prologue of sorts, which addresses the source and nature of the wisdom which will be the focus of the many sayings to follow. Biblical scholars love to debate the authorship and structure of the book. While it may be interesting to ponder such things, we must be careful to insure that as we read we do not become so caught up in the pursuit of knowledge concerning the book that we miss the wisdom it contains. It matters not whether Solomon wrote the words. Nor do we need to fret over the personification of wisdom.

In a classic demonstration of knowledge being mistaken for wisdom, some years ago there was a major flap in our denomonation over a women’s conference which focused on the celebration of Sophia, the Greek word for wisdom, which is of feminine gender in the original language. On the one side were those who insisted it was time to come up with a feminine image for God and that Sophia ought to be it. On the other side were those who considered such to be pure heresy. Lost in the foolishness of arguing over perceived knowledge was the true wisdom which this often overlooked book seeks to foster.

So back to our question. ***“Where are we to go to encounter true wisdom?”*** The Message puts it in a contemporary setting, ***“Lady Wisdom goes out in the street and shouts. At the town center she makes her speech. In the middle of the traffic she takes her stand. At the busiest corner she calls out.”*** In other words, wisdom can be found anywhere and is calling out to be heard no matter where we find ourselves, no matter what we experience in life. The problem is not that wisdom is ever unavailable, the problem is that she is so often ignored. The problem is that we often are so focused on knowledge that we fail to pursue wisdom, fail to open the eyes of our hearts to her. Knowledge is not bad, data is not evil, but neither is sufficient for an understanding of what really matters in this life and beyond.

Why is it that there are so many wise guys and gals and so few wise men and women? Perhaps it is because, like those who compose college mottos, we have become a people who prefer the black and white world of knowledge to the often grey realm of wisdom. To make matters worse, we have begun to abandon even knowledge, putting in its place data, data which is often fed to us as propaganda, data which can just as easily be a lie as the truth. Yet because it comes from a source who supports our own prejudice, or is repeated by a pundit who reflects our political or social agenda, we accept it without question.

So, this wisdom which is ever available, ever offered by God’s grace, how do we recognize it? I can tell you what it is not. Wisdom is not that which is found in a neatly packaged set of rules. There is a popular acronym going around on the internet for Bible. It asserts that the bible is Basic Information Before Leaving Earth. I suppose there is a bit of truth there, but not nearly enough. First of all, anyone who has read more than a few snippets of the Bible knows that there is nothing basic about this collection of 66 books. Nor is it simply filled with useful information. Neither is it, as many seem to think these days, a book of rules which can teach us what we ought to think about every issue which comes up.

The Bible is about wisdom more than knowledge or data, it is about Godly, eternal, truth. To be sure there are some rules, some very good rules in the Bible. As the Disciple group discovered this week, there are also some rather odd ones, you can find them in Leviticus in particular. It is true that Jesus offers some guidelines, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. But taken as a whole scripture, especially New Testament scripture, carries within it a deep awareness that rules, even divinely authorized rules, are never enough. For so many of the challenges and moral dilemmas of life we face, we need more than a set of rules.

Aristotle, in speaking of lying and truth telling, said that it is never enough simply to tell the truth. Rather, he asserts that real truth, I would call it Godly truth, is that which is told to the right person, at the right time, for the right reason. There are no rules for that. But it is certainly true. Don’t we all know folks who are masters of speaking true words in such a way as to destroy or injure. Haven’t we all been guilty on occasion? Gossip is often true, but it is never wise. Words spoken to intentionally hurt may be true, but are rarely, if ever, wise. Half truths spoken craftily may be technically true, but are always designed to distort by omitting certain facts and are not wise. Wisdom goes beyond truth and requires judicious employment of both discernment and prudence. Wisdom is never puffed up, never mean-spirited, never destructive. Wisdom is always humble, loving and constructive.

But what about all that wisdom has to say in this morning’s scripture about her reaction to the calamity that overtakes those who don’t pay heed to her? Is it not puffed up for her to laugh and to mock those struck with panic? Is it not destructive to ignore the cries of distress and anguish of those in peril? Is it not mean-spirited for her to remain hidden from those who seek her in their distress? At first blush it certainly seems so. But we need to look a bit more deeply into the remarks and consider what prompted them.

Remember how wisdom cried out in the streets, on the street corners, all around town? So she does today. Wisdom is calling out to us here in this sanctuary. She cries out for attention at home, in school, on the football field, next door, in your office, at the store. She cries out long and loud, but her voice is often drowned out by our foolishness and our selfish motivation. Lady wisdom calls out, but eventually she must be saying to herself, ***“Is anyone out there listening to me?”***  It is then that she issues the warning that to ignore her will bring dire consequences. She does so not out of anger or bitterness, rather out of frustration and concern. Before wisdom warns those who foolishly ignore her and begins to display the limits of her tolerance for those who delight in scoffing at her truth she has spoken the truth to them, she has sought to enlighten their dark spirits, she has poured out before them God’s truth.

Such is always the way God deals with folks. God seeks to redeem all, to embrace all, to bring into the kingdom all folks for all time. But God never imposes God’s will. We are granted the wonderful and challenging gift of free will and some folks just don’t ever get the picture. Offering wisdom to them is not unlike offering an all-you-can-eat buffet to those who have just eaten. They are so full of other stuff that they have no room left for wisdom. They have gorged themselves on self-righteousness and self-destructive behavior and foolishly reject as life-threatening the very medicine which would heal them.

I am convinced that God does not actually laugh at the calamities we bring upon ourselves, rather I believe God’s heart breaks as God witnesses our foolishness and pride. But, it is difficult to argue with the truth of Wisdom’s warning. When we forget about the ways of God, we often get ourselves into terrible predicaments. When we think we are beyond the basic lessons of loving justice, doing kindness, and walking humbly with our God, we often end up doing things and saying things we regret. When loving God and loving neighbor as we love ourselves are mere platitudes for us, it seems that disaster often finds us. When we come to think we are smart enough to make our own way, we will sooner or later come to realize that our way leads astray. It is never the case that the wisdom of God seeks to destroy, but those who foolishly refuse to heed the voice of wisdom, that often still small voice which calls out all around us, will in the end self-destruct, destroyed by their own rejection of Godly truth. That is the message of warning Lady Wisdom delivers in our scripture.

But that is not where the message ends. In verse 33, wisdom offers hope and promise for those who heed her words. ***“Those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.”*** In the Message we read ***“First pay attention to me, and then relax. Now you can take it easy - you're in good hands.”***  In Proverbs wisdom is personified as a mysterious woman. But as people of the New Testament we know that the ultimate personification of wisdom was born in a stable long ago. In John’s gospel we read that Jesus was and is “the word”. In Greek, the word is “logos” which can be translated “The Wisdom of God”. Jesus came not only to proclaim true wisdom, but also to embody it as he walked the way of wisdom in our midst.

As Jesus’ life clearly reveals, the way of wisdom is not free of challenge. When we read in Proverbs the affirmation that those who heed wisdom will be secure and may live in ease, we must recognize that God’s security may well seem insecure by the world’s standards. And we must recognize that those who are “at ease” by the measure of God’s true wisdom may actually find themselves surrounded by dis-ease as they seek to proclaim God’s wisdom. And a close reading of the end of verse 33 reveals that what is promised is not the absence of disaster, rather it is freedom from the dread of disaster.

Still, in the end, those who cast their lot, not on the side of the false pride and selfish gain which mark those who live as wise guys, those who put their faith, not in the ever enlarging stash of knowledge and data which accrue to wise gals, in the end, those who heed the voice crying out in the street, and follow the example of the one who came to reveal all Godly wisdom will come to know the security, the peace and the joy which mark the lives of wise men and wise women. For your sake, for the sake of a world far too lacking in wisdom, and for the sake of the kingdom of God, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.