

## WISDOM

The Book of Proverbs, the oldest of Israelite wisdom literature, opens with an explanation of its purpose. It is...

*“For about wisdom and instruction,  
to understanding words of insight,  
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice and equity;  
to teach shrewdness to the simple,  
knowledge and prudence to the young—  
Let the wise also hear and gain in learning,  
and the discerning acquire skill,  
to understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles.”*

There is something desirable for everyone in this preamble: wisdom, knowledge, shrewdness, instruction and learning. The author(s) underscores the need for street smarts as well as pointing to our thirst for waters from the mysterious wells of wisdom. Several hundred years after the formation of this book of wisdom, Jesus urged his disciples to “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” His instruction balances survival skills with a call to innocence and wisdom.

Is there really a difference between knowledge and wisdom? While having a stack of degrees hopefully suggests abundant knowledge, it does not guarantee wisdom. A lawyer friend of mine, a Harvard alumnus, once skeptically and proverbially observed that higher education may be overvalued and that there are “many over-educated fools”. Over fifty years ago, theologian, Paul Tillich advised, “Wisdom is not bound to old age. It is found equally in the young. And there are fools at all ages of life.” Tillich later goes on to say, “Wisdom is universally human. It is present in the spiritual life of all (hu)mankind. And it is present not only in (hu)mankind, but in the universe itself.”

((The recent confirmation hearings of Judge Sotomayor provided a lively theater for a dramatic encounter between wisdom and knowledge. Clearly, an essential precondition for being a Supreme Court Justice is a deep and broad knowledge of the Constitution and The Bill of Rights. However, do we desire a judge who is *only* knowledgeable, objective and almost clinically detached (if that were possible)? Or, would someone in whom knowledge is joined by wisdom serve the cause of justice better? Sotomayor was defamed by some for her now famous commendation of a “wise Latina woman”. For myself, I want our *all* of our justices to have wisdom as well as knowledge.))

Again quoting Tillich, “It was a grave loss when the term ‘wisdom’ almost

disappeared from Christian preaching and teaching. Of course, it is still used sometimes in both popular and philosophical language. But its original significance and power have vanished.”

Although Lady Wisdom still calls us, she often goes unheard, unnoticed and without acclaim. For the last four hundred years or so, empirical knowledge and science have had the upper hand. In the last few decades, however, we have seen the many scientists witnessing to the beauty, mystery, and even sacredness of creation. Because we are part of God’s creation, we still hunger for wise men and wise women, for poets, musicians and artists, for naturalists and spiritual leaders to bless our hunger. A bridge between knowledge and wisdom is emerging from the mists of an overly zealous scientific worldview.

The wonders of information technology have led to dramatic advances in communication and the organization of data. Your automated GPS friend, let’s call her “Dolores”, astonishingly can tell you how to get from Doolittle Pond in Norfolk to a certain address on Selleck Hill Road without even batting one of her digital eyelashes. But Dolores cannot tell you which path to take in life. That is the role of wisdom, which is often the shared gift of a community, not a private possession.

Two days ago I was sitting outside studying today’s reading from the Book of Proverbs. A grey mild morning was gradually becoming a beautiful and warm, sunny day. At first I heard, then saw, a Piliated Woodpecker. This amazing bird, the largest of its species, only slightly smaller than a crow, has a call that sounds screechy and alarmed, like something from the movie, *Jurassic Park*. The bird I saw flew from the hedgerow, over the field and landed in a tall poplar in our back yard. Seeing and hearing *one* Piliated Woodpecker is a delight by itself, but, *mirabile dictu*, soon I heard and saw another! It also flew over to the tall tree, perched high up and began searching and pecking at bugs. Then in their loopy flight pattern, they both flew to the woods. They were soon pursued by a fledgling, which had the same nervous, squawky call of its parents. It landed on a low bush near mom and dad.

Piliated Woodpeckers usually lay about four eggs. The male sits on the eggs for about two weeks until the chicks hatch. Both parents feed the young birds with regurgitated food for about 27 days until they are ready to fledge. The parents then spend a month or more teaching the fledglings how to find food. In September, the offspring graduate and are on their own. I understand that the young of human beings are supposed to do something similar.

Thinking of the reading from Proverbs in front of me, I wondered, “Are the parents of this fledgling imparting wisdom to the youngster as well as practical knowledge about survival?” To our pragmatic, scientific minds this sounds absurd. But still I wonder. Is there wisdom in the creation itself? Do we need it? Is there wisdom in us who are made in the mysterious image of God?

Chapter 8 of Proverbs describes how Lady Wisdom is present with God both before and during creation. She is co-creator with God, not necessarily equal, but nevertheless essential. I don't imagine the author(s) of this section of Proverbs would use contemporary feminist nomenclature to describe her. But today many find in Lady Wisdom a much needed and vital representation of the feminine aspect of the godhead, otherwise almost completely absent from the Judeo-Christian theological lexicon. Too much "masculine" reason and logic parches the soul and endangers society. We need both aspects.

I would like to share with you some beautiful verses from Proverbs in which Wisdom herself describes her role in creation and her close relationship with God the Creator,

*"Ages ago I was set up, at the first,  
before the beginning of earth.  
When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs abounding with water;  
Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hill, I was brought forth—  
When he had not yet made earth and fields,  
Or the world's first bits of soil;  
When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,  
When he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
Then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was his daily delight, rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race."*

Joy, delight and affection are the signs of this male/female collaboration and companionship...as if Wisdom and God were young children playing in the cosmic sandbox of creation.

In today's reading from Proverbs, a poetic allegory, Lady Wisdom is presented in various roles; as a builder of a temple with 7 pillars; as a priestess who offers animals for sacrifice, and as a hospitable hostess who sets a lovely table and prepares wine for her guests. She sends out her servant-girls to invite people and calls out from the highest places in town,

"You that are simple, turn in here!"  
to those without sense she says,  
'Come, eat of my bread

And drink of the wine I have mixed.  
Lay aside immaturity, and live,  
And walk in the way of insight.”

This allegory sounds like the parables of Jesus in which people all of walks of life are invited to a banquet. In his teaching, the underlying question is will you and I attend? There is a striking similarity in Wisdom’s invitation and today’s gospel in which Jesus refers to himself as “the living bread that came down from heaven”. In both cases, there is a sacred meal at which spiritual food is offered.

The movie, *Chocolat*, starring Juliette Binoche, is based upon a book of the same name. It is a fable for all times. Vianne, a traveling single mother arrives with her six-year-old daughter in a small, tranquil and religious French village right at the beginning of Lent. To the horror of the pious mayor (in the book it is the village priest), Comte de Reynaud, and the indignation of prudish villagers, Vianne opens up a chocolaterie with Sunday hours! As more and more of the faithful sheepishly find their way to Vianne’s controversial shop the stage is set for a delightful battle between the local, male religious establishment and Vianne.

It seems that Vianne is wise as well as talented in the culinary arts. She creates just the right confection for whatever kind of problem her customers bring to her. The religion of the village diminishes souls. Vianne, on the other hand, provides sensuality, beauty and wisdom along with chocolate delectables. She offers a kind of healing communion that is unsanctioned by the establishment. And this really gets their goat. Who will win this battle? No telling. See the movie or read the book.

If we listen we can hear Lady Wisdom’s call to us, “Come, eat of my bread,---and walk in the way of insight”. The invitation is here, how will we reply?

“And now, my children, listen to me;  
happy are those who keep my ways.  
Happy is the one who listens to me,  
Watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.  
For who ever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord;”