

Wisdom from Above

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Disability Awareness

September 23, 2012

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Proverbs 31.10-31;
Psalm 1;
James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a;
Mark 9.30-37

If you have an idea to start a business and don't know exactly where to begin, you will look for the person who has been successful in business and you ask them for advice. You have a member of your family struggling with addiction and you do not know where to turn, you look for the person with experience in substance abuse and you seek their counsel. Your child isn't doing well in school and you know they need some extra help but the system is not listening to you or working with you, you find the person who has connections in the educational system and you call on those connections to get some action. That is the way of the world. We capitalize on the experience, the knowledge, the connections, the wisdom of the people around us.

I am grateful for the accumulated wisdom and expertise and knowledge of people in this very congregation. In fact, we are planning to conduct a survey this fall to see what people are interested in, what experience they have, what skills they've developed so that we can do an even better job of networking in our congregation. We are doing the survey partly for the sake of connecting people with shared interests and affinity. But we are doing it also to facilitate the sharing of resources and to make it easier for people who want to offer their gifts in service or find some help in time of need.

Discovering our interests, cultivating skill and knowledge, and gaining experience and expertise - it's a sacred calling. Our reformed tradition has valued education for this very reason. The new president at Calvin is quoted in the alumni magazine as saying "Our work here is grounded by

our study of every square inch of God's creation.¹" He's referring to a concept by the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper that lays out the scope of our investigation as people of faith. Every square inch of creation; that is the realm of our inquiry and the scope of our interest.

We've been reading from the book of Proverbs this fall and the theme of wisdom has been circling through the lectionary for several weeks. Wisdom in Hebrew scripture is, on the one hand, something you aspire to obtain to assist you in living the good life. On a certain level the book of Proverbs is the accumulated wisdom of the generations on what constitutes a good and fruitful life. It's a book of advice.

This figure of Woman Wisdom, though, goes beyond that practical purpose of passing down proverbs from one generation to the next. She is more than a Dear Abby kind of guide giving advice on social etiquette. She is a metaphor for an aspect of God. She draws those who will listen to discover the ways of wisdom in every aspect of life: providing instruction, giving insight. She will "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..."²

This is how the book of Proverbs opens and it ends with this *Ode to a Capable Wife*. I know many women, and men for that matter, who hear this quite literally as a description of the ideal wife and therefore the ideal marriage. I don't hear the text that way. I hear it as circling back to the metaphor of Woman Wisdom with which the book of Proverbs begins. I hear this passage sketching out for us the kind of life that God calls all of us to live: with relationships built on trust that seek the well being of those connected to us³, who work in ways that provide for the needs and desires of those around us⁴, and who share the fruit of that labor with those beyond our own walls.⁵ It's a description of the good life that God intended

¹Michael Le Roy quoted in an article by Michael Van Denend in the Fall 2012 issue of *The Calvin Spark*, pg. 18. The actual quote by Abraham Kuyper is ""There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, "Mine!"

² Proverbs 1.4-5, NRSV.

³ See Proverbs 31.11-12

⁴ See Proverbs 31.13-15 and 21-22

⁵ See Proverbs 31.20

for us from the very beginning. And like the quote I mentioned above, the ways of wisdom lead us to be engaged in every square inch of creation.

I really appreciate the way that our tradition holds up this view of the Christian life. (I don't mean only RCA or CRC – I mean any kind of Christian who lives into this vision.) I'm grateful for the emphasis on education. I'm proud of our institutions and the vast reach that Reformed and other Christians have in the world: they are academics, and politicians, and entrepreneurs, they work in industry and manufacturing, in the arts, in the sciences, they make discoveries and raise families and contribute to communities all over the world. I look out at this congregation and I see all of those many gifts at work and I am grateful.

Did you notice, though, that the book of Proverbs ends exactly where it began? Not with a litany of accomplishment but with the claim that all wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. As Gordon said last week, as Gordon will say every time this phrase “the fear of the Lord” comes up in Scripture – the real essence of this word *fear* is not fright...it's not about being afraid of God but having of reverence or awe for God. Another way of saying this is that you cannot have wisdom without being oriented toward God. Wisdom is a relational gift. In fact, wisdom from above is a gift of grace. This is good news!

As you've been listening to me this morning have any of you wondered where it leaves you or someone you know when I describe the wisdom that people with great success and incredible knowledge and lots of connections bring to the world? What if you never had the chance to finish school? What if you learn in way that is different from the way that schools are set up? What if you have physical challenges that make it difficult for you to navigate your daily life, let alone build a successful business or make the next discovery that changes the face of science? Are you left out then of the ranks of the wise?

Absolutely not! All of us have gifts and all of us have access to the wisdom that James called “wisdom from above.” Because wisdom from above, as the book of James states so clearly today, is not grounded in our

accomplishments. It is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”⁶

We all have gifts. They come in many different forms. Some move us into the public realm and others keep us closely connected to the people right around us. Quite frankly, those of you who have gifts that move you into the public realm actually have to be quite cautious that you don't fall into the traps described in this text: being driven by envy and selfish ambition and letting your craving for more – success, money, power – lead you away from the truth. The truth about you is that you first and foremost a child of God. You are beloved, yes, but also in need of mercy and utterly dependent on the grace of God.

Those who live with less opportunity, those who have disabilities of various kinds, those who have profound challenges also need to be cautious. All of us, no matter where we live or what we do, can struggle with envy and selfish ambition. But those who regularly bump up against the challenges of living with disabilities have perhaps a slightly different variation on the same temptation. The temptation is also to forget the truth about who you are. Because the world is not set up to make your life easier (and as we are becoming more honest about it – neither is the church) and because people often notice what is different about you and see you **AS** your disability, I imagine that it is easy to forget that you are first and foremost a child of God, deeply beloved.

Here is where it takes a slightly different turn, though. Precisely because you know how utterly dependent you are on God's grace, you have tremendous wisdom to share. You have been forced because of the challenges of your disabilities to come to terms with your dependence on God. You cannot pretend otherwise. The circumstances of your life have required that you acknowledge your need for grace—for people to come around you to help and support you. And while there is, I am sure, a world of pain that comes with those challenges, those whom I have known who inspire me beyond measure are the ones who have turned toward God for strength and have discovered the gifts they have to give and share them

⁶ James 3.17

freely. Some share those gifts in the public realm and other much closer to home.

My friend, I'll call him Jeffery, is probably in the closer to home category. I first met Jeffery when I was living in New Jersey. Jeffery lives with profound physical disabilities because of complications at his birth. He cannot speak, he cannot move more than a finger, and when the extent of his disability become known his mother began to receive people's sympathy for how hard it was going to be for them to raise Jeffery. When I met them, Jeffery was in his early twenties and thriving. He was the most joyful person I have ever met. You could tell that Jeffery was excited because of the vocalizations he would make – just a sound – no words. His way of communicating was through those sounds and by looking up for "yes" and down for "no".

He would plant himself in the aisle on Sunday morning and as people came by and said hello he would grin and shake and make the most excited sounds. You felt truly treasured when Jeffery greeted you. You may have walked in feeling the weight of the world on your shoulders. After a greeting from Jeffrey you could feel a bit of that weight being lifted from you. He was upbeat. And he was creative. In his school they had process by which students would work with artists and Jeffery would create this stunning abstract art with his partner. His mother once told me that raising Jeffery was actually one of the greatest gifts of her life.

No individual person can possess the full extent of God's wisdom. There is no single person who can embody all the dimensions of the Ode to a Capable Wife. Wisdom, from above, is a gift that we receive as we lean toward Sophia (the Greek word for Wisdom), listen for her voice, as we watch for her presence in the people around us and begin to live into her ways. Her gifts come to us from so many places - many of them unexpected – from people with a wide variety of strengths and abilities, challenges and struggles. The promise of God's Word to us today is this: As we draw near to God – as we draw near to one another – God will draw near to us. For this is the place from which wisdom flows. Thanks be to God!