

“The silencing of wisdom in American life”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Proverbs 1:20-33*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

I want to tell you about something magical that happens in my house. At first, I thought this only happened to me, but then I saw this video...

A woman is arguing with her boyfriend about why he never helps out around the apartment until he shows her a secret. He says, “OK. I’ve been doing this since you moved in... I don’t know how it happens. If it’s the house or what. But... plates, cutlery, pizza boxes, dirty tissues, anything you leave on this coffee table, just vanishes over night.... It’s magic.”

The video then shoots to the next scene where this man is talking with two police officers, saying, “No, she wouldn’t have left me. This is what I think happened. I heard her get up in the middle of the night... She must have fallen onto the magic coffee table and just vanished.” The woman officer says, “Are you insane?” to which the male officer replies, “No, he’s not insane. I’ve got the same coffee table at home.”

I tell this story because it’s funny, and because many of us can relate, but also because the woman officer was right: this is insane. There are among us those who, like this guy, would prefer not to understand reality, because, if they did, if they had one clue, they’d have to pick up after their own mess; they’d have to be responsible to someone else.

And to all of them, from the pages of Proverbs, Woman Wisdom cries out.

She cries out in the streets, stands tall in the public square, sings at the busiest corner, holds high her sign at the city gates. Proverbs tells us that she was the first of God’s creation, and through her, the world came into being (8:22-36). She delighted in humanity and sought to bring people together in righteousness and truth. But they did not listen, and brought calamity upon themselves.

To be fair, this is not the only definition of wisdom in the Bible. There are two kinds of human wisdom talked about in Scripture, and we need to sort them out. There’s a bad kind of wisdom, that really is not wise at all. This is the guy who loves to remind you how much smarter he is, who thinks knowledge is a path to power. It’s this so-called wisdom that got the disciples arguing about who among them was the greatest. Jesus points them to a second kind of wisdom when he says that only one humble like a child can enter the kingdom of heaven. Proverbs chapter one defines this wisdom as “fear of the Lord” (1:7). Not “fear” as we think of it, but respect and honor. This wisdom knows that its strength lies not in itself but in God, and so, in the words of James, it is “quick to listen, slow to speak” (1:19).

If the first kind of wisdom is arrogant, this kind is humble. If the first thinks that wisdom is all about building oneself up, the second gives the self away in a flurry of love. This is the true intellectual, one who is so committed to the life of the mind, that they are ever curious, ever desirous to know and love God in every atom, every face, every leaf, every word scribbled on a page, every note of music, every splash of paint or handful of clay, every idea humanity ever dared to dream. There is always more to learn for this person; it is she who, as Harold Rosenberg says, “turns answers into questions.”

And it is she who cries out still today. She cries out because we have chosen illusion over reality, and the result she says, in Proverbs, is death. We are a culture fearful of ambiguity and unanswered questions, enthralled instead with soundbites and gimmicks, partisanship and quick answers. And so always we are quick to speak, and slow to listen. Instead of reasoned, civil discourse that seeks God in the other, in difference, we have shouting matches between pundits that thrust us deeper into silos of sameness. Instead of facing our sin, we seek the magic of scapegoats, be they immigrants or Muslims or black men in hoodies.

It is the age of the anti-intellectual, the anti-wise, designed for whoever can appeal to the basest of people’s emotions and fears. It is an age in which children are afraid to raise their hand in class, lest they appear too interested. In this theater of politics and media, the words *intelligence*, *experience*, *passion*, and *virtue* have become insults.

How did this happen?

Some suggest that it’s because we’ve democratized communication and thus lost the capacity to distinguish between truth and falsehood. We have thousands of blogs, none of them edited, or fact checked. We have Twitter, and Wikipedia, and YouTube, which has millions more videos claiming the earth is flat than videos explaining why the earth is round.

Others, going all the way back to Plato, suggest it is democracy itself. Richard Hofstadter in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* said that “the democratic and businesslike character of American life put a premium upon... quick decision... and that all this activity was not propitious for deliberation, elaboration, or precision in thought.”

As democracy lifted up the common man, it tended to pull down the professor, the scientist, the priest. In fact, Hofstadter traces much of this anti-intellectualism to evangelical Protestantism, which put so much emphasis on ecstatic revelation that it downplayed education. “Simple dogmatic formulations” replaced theology and mystery; “the Puritan ideal of the minister as an intellectual and educational leader was steadily weakened in the face of the evangelical ideal of the minister as a popular crusader and exhorter.”

But, if you really want to know where all this comes from, you’ve got to go all the way back to Eden. It wasn’t humanity’s desire for knowledge that was sinful. God invited Adam and Eve to know the garden, its trees, its animals, each other—to know even God, who walked and talked among them, face to face. The sin was wanting to be self-sufficient and not need God or questions anymore. When Adam and Eve ate that apple, it wasn’t knowledge that they sought; it was power. And what’s the first thing they do with that power? They hide—from God, from each

other, from reality, buried beneath layers of clothing. Adam even tries to scapegoat Eve, rather than own up to the truth of what he had done.

Sin and wisdom have been contending ever since—wisdom seeking to bring us back to each other, to God, to a truth bigger than ourselves; and sin trying to keep us under those clothes, stuck in this little magic vacuum where only our ideas, only our needs and desires, can be heard.

The irony is that this sin ends up giving us exactly what we think we want: power over ourselves, and only ourselves. The guy with the magic coffee table... he ends up alone. And there is little wonder in the fact that we are a lonelier people than we've ever been.

The good news is that Woman Wisdom, Sophia, is still shouting. Proverbs says she is still pouring her thoughts, her spirit, into us, making her words known to us. All we have to do is listen. All we have to do is start asking her questions. That's it. All it takes is one question to change the world. One hand raised in a classroom, or a town hall, or a church.

We ask questions of Wisdom first by reading Scripture, reading it closely and deeply—and then through prayer, through talking with each other, through reading and art and music, through hikes in the woods, through microscopes and telescopes, through acts of service that awaken us to the humanity, and divinity, of others. Anything that takes us beyond ourselves.

We break open these bubbles. We tear off these clothes of Eden (not literally!). We throw away our magic coffee tables. We choose reality, even if it's hard, or confusing, or tells us we messed up.

We choose reality, because it's only there—only that big, encompassing, inclusive reality that is God—where there's room enough for more than one of us.

Proverbs says that a happy life, a wise life, is a shared life; it's a life that practices friendship, humility, justice, and faith. It's a public life that revels in diversity, always seeking our shared excellence. It's a life that wants you, and me, and God, and everything—and never stops.

That's an intellectual culture worth being a part of.

Protestantism and democracy were right to insist that wisdom not be the prerogative of the privileged few. They were right to demand that more than one story be heard. They were right to question the authorities that claimed wisdom. But the result should not have been a debasement of wisdom itself. The goal of the priesthood of all believers, of the citizenship of all people, was not to eliminate priests; it was to make all people priests, to invite everyone into this awesome act of learning, growing, and questioning.

Because wisdom, in the end, isn't about what we gain; it's about what we share. **Amen.**