

Sticking Close to Woman Wisdom

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1 Cor. 1:18-25

Proverbs 8:32-9:6

In a few months, I will have two children in college. The financial implications of this are frightening enough. But what really keeps me up at night is wondering whether they will stick close to Woman Wisdom. “Happy are those who keep my ways,” she says. “For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Holy One; but those who miss me injure themselves. All who hate me love death.” I want my children to bind these words from Woman Wisdom as a sign on their hands, fix them as an emblem on their foreheads, write them on the doorposts of their dorm rooms. (Deut 6:8).

Gaining wisdom is a lifelong pursuit. It’s a matter of watching daily at her gates, waiting beside her doors. The wisdom taught to a child not sufficient for a young adult. “Don’t talk to strangers,” we told our girls when they were little. Soon two of my daughters will be far from home, surrounded by strangers. They need the wisdom to discern which strangers they can trust. Which ones they should befriend. Which ones need their help. God’s wisdom is dark and deep. It’s enough to dogpaddle around in its shallows when you are young. But the older you get, the more you have to venture into the deep waters of God’s wisdom. It’s dangerous out there. Everything gets murkier, more confusing. It’s like the time my husband went deep-sea diving, and rested his hand on a huge, barnacled rock—which turned out to be a whale. It is easy to be deceived when we try to follow Wisdom into the depths, and deception can be deadly. There are other voices calling to us, other invitations to share bread. Woman Wisdom

has many counterfeits. You can see in the book of Proverbs itself a gradual progression towards acknowledging the ambiguities of human attempts to gain wisdom. It's not as simple as "Listen to your mother," or "Don't talk to strangers." As Proverbs 16:25 says, "Sometimes there is a way that seems to be right, but in the end it is the way to death." So how do you stick close to Woman Wisdom?

In the preceding verses in chapter 8, Woman Wisdom has gone metaphysical on us—she tells us that she was in the beginning with God, that she is the wisdom by which all things were made. The writer of John's gospel later uses some of this same language to describe Jesus Christ. What Woman Wisdom offers is not just commonsense, the 7 habits of highly effective people, a biblical QEP. She is the true wisdom of God. By her kings reign and rulers decree what is just. In her paths are life and peace. Her wisdom is deep and dark—there from the beginning. There to the end. She is the powerful Wisdom woven into creation. She is the loving Wisdom that is at work healing and reconciling all creation. How do you stay on the path of that Wisdom?

A member of my Sunday School class told me about a friend of his, a young white man from Chicago who took a teaching job in Alabama in the 1950s. After his first week teaching there he took his clothes to the town Laundromat and noticed that there were in fact two Laundromats side by side. One had a sign saying *White Laundromat* and the other sign read *Colored Laundromat*. This seemed kind of strange to him, but he figured maybe that was the way they did it in Alabama. So he proceeded to wash his white clothes in the white Laundromat and his colored clothes in the colored Laundromat.

That young man had a simple, innocent wisdom. The wisdom that says, “You sort your laundry according to the color of your clothes, not the color of your skin.” But in that situation, innocent wisdom wasn’t going to be enough. His wisdom was innocent of the laws of segregation that fed racial oppression and bigotry. His innocence had to make room for a deeper, darker wisdom. The wisdom to recognize that it was his white skin that had made it possible for him to grow up innocent of segregation laws. The wisdom to decide what to do once his white neighbors helpfully “enlightened” him about the real significance of those Laundromat signs. What is Wisdom’s way here, and how do you stay on it as a white person in the segregated south, even when it comes to something as basic as doing your laundry?

The book of Proverbs is often thought of as a moralistic, upbeat little book that upholds the status quo—“The wicked get what their ways deserve,” it says, “and the good what their deeds deserve” (Prov. 14:14). It can sound like a theology primer for Job’s friends.

But the basic convictions of Proverbs can be powerfully subversive in situations of injustice. Let’s look at a couple of snapshots of Woman Wisdom in action. Desmond Tutu, in the face of the brutal immoralities of apartheid in South Africa, insisting, “This is a moral universe—the upholders of apartheid have already lost.” (*No Future Without Forgiveness*, 86-7) Martin Luther King, in the face of the cruel injustices of racial segregation in North America, saying, “the arc of the universe is long, but it tends towards justice.” In saying these things, Tutu and King were keeping to the ways of Woman Wisdom. They resisted the counterfeit wisdom that says, “O c’mon, the world will always be a mess. Get used to it.” They knew that God’s wisdom is alive in the world, and that it is inseparable from justice and righteousness. By faith, they

embraced a wisdom they could not see, a wisdom that looked to a lot of people like foolishness.

Christian faith is like that. Trusting God beyond what you can see, beyond what you can understand. Trusting the wisdom and power of God in the cross of Christ, in what looks for all the world like weakness and foolishness. Trusting, sometimes in face of all the evidence, that love and justice, mercy and peace, will have the last word on us and on our world. Woman Wisdom's path is a path that protects life, that makes peace, that refuses to give up the claims of justice, that nurtures hope for the redemption of the world. It is not always an easy path, or even a safe path. But it is the way of life, the way of God's blessing.

God's wisdom is dark and deep. We stand on the edge of it like little kids at our first swimming lesson, afraid to take the plunge. And so Wisdom puts on an apron and invites us to this table. Woman Wisdom has set her table and mixed her wine for us. She calls to us all—the simple, the confused, the frightened—saying, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed” (Prov. 9:5). Welcome to this table. Here your faith will be fed, your hope refreshed. This is food for the journey, nourishment for those who keep Wisdom's ways.