

What a gift this text is to us this morning! I have to tell you that I didn't choose it. It was given to me through what we call the Lectionary—or the calendar of biblical passages that many preachers use to designate their texts for the week. This gift of Proverbs 8 and 1 Corinthians 2 is one of listening to the voice of Wisdom in our midst. The gift of remembering a character in the bible, Wisdom, who has been repressed and suppressed and deemed as dangerous. But this morning we remember her.

Now, context is important. We know that where we are in life, that there is so much about ourselves that influences how we experience the world, the color of our skin, our sexual orientation, our gender identity, our physical abilities, our class background, whether or not we are employed, whether or not we have been abused, whether or not we have had cancer, whether or not we have lost someone close to us. All these things, and so many more create our context for how we experience the world, how we interact with others and with ourselves.

And so this morning as we delve into the gift of the text we are given, we have to talk about context, my context as I approach it and the context in which it was written.

The Hebrew Scripture reading this morning, the Proverbs reading needs a lot of explanation. So, are you with me?

Here we go. This book, Proverbs features a character of the bible that very few of us have ever heard about. The character's name is Wisdom and she is introduced this morning at the beginning of the reading in this way: "On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out." Wisdom stands in public places, and at the edge of the city, at the gates, at the portals. Throughout Scripture important events happen at the gates of the city or the sacred space at the entrance of a tent or a camp. This is where God appears often and these are very dangerous places which are mostly controlled by men and the patriarchy of the time. But here, wisdom, a female character is claiming her power at the crossroads, at the entrance.

Wisdom is both a divine and a human figure, not unlike how we understand Christ, or angels, or the Child of Humanity who descends from heaven on the clouds in the book of Daniel or the Logos figure in John 1, she is not unlike these folks, some of which you may be familiar with and some of which you may not be. She may be hard to get your head around because in our world we have serious distinctions between divine and human but in the Hebrew tradition this distinction was not a reality. So, in asking the question, "Is wisdom a divine figure?" we have to answer "yes" and "no." It is just as slippery as the question "is Jesus a divine figure?" which to those who did not grow up in Christianity or in a Christian world, or heck, those of us who did grow up in Christianity is very confusing.

But more about this divine/human figure of Wisdom. Wisdom appears over and over again in the scriptures, in the Hebrew Scriptures and then again in the Christian Scriptures. Wisdom refers to herself as "she" and in the original language she comes in a feminine form.

In my reading to prepare for this sermon I found out that "only four persons have more written about them than Wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures: God, Job, Moses and David. There are more pages in the Hebrew scriptures about Wisdom than there are about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob,

Solomon, Isaiah, Sarah, Miriam, Adam, or Noah.” This may come to a shock to you, the fact that if she is all over the place how come we don’t know her? “Churches and synagogues alike insure that children can recite the stories of Aaron or Joseph, but they never even allude to Wisdom,” the uppity woman that speaks her mind at the entrance to the city. “Literature classes in schools and colleges examine the epics of Abraham or Solomon or even the story of Ruth, but Wisdom, who stands taller than any of them, is ignored.”

But why? According to some theologians:

“Western society has chosen to ignore Wisdom throughout its history. In almost every case, she has been either repressed or used superficially. Wisdom fit neither the dogmatic categories nor the models of human behavior which the Church developed. She was much too ambiguous and pliable to fit neatly into the discussions of humanity versus divinity which dominated the Church’s thought for centuries. Since she was not clearly God and she was not clearly human, she was confusing to the dogmaticians so they chose to repress or ignore her.”

“Nor did Wisdom act as society, especially the Church, wanted people to act. Wisdom is proud, assertive, angry and threatening, creative, and energetic.”

In our reading this morning Wisdom claims her role in creation—she claims those traits of pride, assertiveness, creativity and energy. She asserts her power at the entrance to the city, claims that she has something that needs to be heard, and then expounds on her role in creation with energy and passion. She claims that God created her at the beginning.

This is actually better translated as God conceived her. All of a sudden God is no longer a passive figure that is separate from us but conceives and gives birth to a divine/human creature, Wisdom, who delights in the mystery and wonder of our very own creation, delighting in the reality that God has called all of us to live into ourselves, regardless of that social context we come from, regardless of how larger society views us and deems us along the spectrum of cultural acceptability.

Wisdom debunks popular understandings of God being an old white man who sits on high with a beard and spends the day making and reading lists and making punitive decisions, but is a figure who is present with us in the highs and lows of life, in every decision and every opportunity.

The church and society can find proud, assertive, creative and energizing traits threatening. They force the church to question the whole moral fabric on which they stand. So, why do we know nothing of Wisdom? Because there is something dangerous about Wisdom’s gustiness at the entrance to the city where only men are allowed to stand. Because she calls us to understand the various and rich images of God in the Scriptures and in our life. Wisdom calls us to seek out the divine in our everyday lives as we witness to God’s creating and powerful acts. Wisdom calls us to recognize where God is present and to celebrate and rejoice and revel in these nuggets of hope. When we seek God we find life.

Now, Wisdom is not only in the Hebrew Scriptures but also in the Christian Scriptures. The word for Wisdom in the Greek is “Sophia.” Sophia becomes God’s Wisdom, Christ, that human and divine figure who is, let’s face it creative, energetic, threatening, assertive and even angry sometimes. This morning we find Sophia in 1 Corinthians, a Sophia who is secret and hidden, a Christ Sophia that is threatening to the world around her, a Christ Sophia that calls her community to challenge social structures and the very

patriarchy that wants to silence her, that wants to nail her to the cross. 1 Corinthians tells, "if the rulers would have understood this Christ Sophia they wouldn't have crucified her."

So, what does this have to do with our church, with our work together, with why I am here this morning, you may ask.

I, for one, find great strength in this Sophia figure that we have lost and put in the back of closets. In my ministry with lesbian gay bisexual and transgender people, their churches and their families, I meet people, I know very personally that at the crossroads, at the entrance to the churches, we have been taught not to talk about our relationships, our struggles, our social lives, and our deep questions of faith from our perspective and context of being sexually marginalized. You see, lesbian bisexual gay and transgender people, we can sit in the pews but we learn over and over again that if we begin to talk about the creativity we have had to use to form families and relationships anew, or we begin to talk about our anger at the church and the world for prescribing how we are to express ourselves, our anger because of the exclusion, abuse and hurt we have experienced. If we express the deep connection between our sexuality and our spirituality, well, it makes people real uncomfortable so we best keep that to ourselves and outside of the church.

Wisdom, Christ Sophia has been closeted in our Bible studies, from our pulpits, from our seminary educations, because she is just a bit too threatening. She has been kept out of the church. Her proud, assertive, angry, creative and energetic spirit may be hidden and it is best that we just not acknowledge her. That we pursue keeping out of the church anything or anyone that resembles her.

This morning Christ Sophia is asking us if we are letting her in the church doors, her embodied proud, assertive, creative and energetic spirit. And in the areas that we are not, how would we respond if we did? In relationship to your witness as a welcoming congregation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, we need to ask how we welcome the embodied, proud, assertive, creative and energetic spirit of those who have been told that they have no place at the portals or the entrance gate.

I am going to propose a number of scenarios that I have experienced first hand or have been hold about, some of which you may have experienced yourselves as a congregation and others which you may not have thought about. As I relay these scenarios I just ask that we think together today about where Wisdom's Spirit who has been shoved in the backs of closets and textbooks and is present as we seek to live into our welcome. Do we let her in or do we force her out? Do we let Christ Jesus into our midst or do we say "no, thank you, not today."

What if a partnered lesbian couple comes to you with the need to share with you the desire they have to be married by their church, for their church to recognize their relationship and the joy they find by being with their partner, how they have grown closer to God with this person in their lives. Will you welcome Wisdom?

What if you visit a member of your congregation in the hospital and discover that the person who you thought was a man has the organs of a female body. You don't know what to do with that information and you realize that this church hadn't been a safe place where he was able to really be honest with you. Would you welcome Sophia?

What if your pastor tells you that she has fallen in love with a woman and that she is leaving the church because she has been damaged from so

many years of living a lie and she can't be open about her lover, too afraid to be honest about herself because of denominational policies. Would you welcome Wisdom?

What if one of your gay parishioner dies and you hold the funeral and people come in the door who may not be so socially acceptable, you know, who act a bit too "gay" and "queeney" and then you realize that there was a whole other part of his life that this parishioner just didn't feel comfortable or safe acknowledging in the life of your congregation. Would you welcome Sophia's friends and invite them back on Sunday?

What if any of us gets a hold of Wisdom's Spirit and has the audacity to take the microphone at the crossroads, to claim our part in the creation of this church and world, to claim our voice and are able to live into the fullness of who God has created us to be.

Christ Sophia calls us all to live into our fullness, to take out of the closet that which has been hidden for too long. She calls us to break down the distinction between us and them, between sacred and human. She calls Riverdale Church to continue to live into its welcome with audacity, with boldness, with creativity and imagination. She calls you to be her co-creator, to marvel at the diversity of God's creation and to do everything you can to give God a fertile, healthy space to continue creating things anew.

It is this honor and privilege of ministry that we are called as Presbyterian Welcome and Riverdale Church come to Christ Sophia's table today. And Christ Sophia's spirit is here with us today, guiding us, begging us, welcoming us. It is this ministry of truth and audacity and boldness and creativity that Presbyterian Welcome and Riverdale Church stands on the brink of. I think we are ready.