

Today's Reflection – “Holy Wisdom” Rev. Martha Daniels

Will you pray with me? Holy One, may our words, spoken and heard, sink into our hearts and fill our spirits. In all your names, amen.

Wisdom. Now there's a slippery word. What do you think of when you hear that word, “wisdom?” What image comes to mind? Maybe a older man with a beard, a sage, a book of knowledge, Buddha, the classic statue of The Thinker, or Blake's picture of the creator with the compass?

But in these readings from the Bible, the image of Wisdom is of a woman—and not the kind of woman you might expect, either! The image isn't the older, gray haired woman sitting passively and handing out advice. This is a strong, bold woman—she's standing on the street corner, calling out to people to listen to her! She's on her soapbox, and you'd better listen! She is shouting out to the people passing by—“Hey, listen! You—yes, you! Listen to me!” At the SAGE lunch Friday, we started talking about something—I can't even remember what now—I think maybe health care and pre-existing conditions—and I got on a roll and started on one of my rants before I stopped myself and apologized, saying something about having one of my buttons pushed. Someone else said, laughing, that it didn't take much to push my buttons, and I had a lot of them to push! That's Lady Wisdom, only she's much more eloquent and has much better things to say.

Solomon—David's son, and frequently called the wisest of the rulers of Israel—in his book of wisdom praises wisdom, calling her beautiful and desirable and the source of all good things. In fact, Wisdom seems to be a creator to Solomon—of order and beauty and renewal.

Some traditions, primarily Eastern Christian traditions, such as Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox, have churches dedicated to wisdom. Some churches are dedicated to St. Peter or St. Stephen or St. Mary—these are dedicated to Holy Wisdom. Don't be fooled because they are called Santa Sophia—Sophia means “wisdom” and Santa means “Holy,” so just as Santa Maria means Holy Mary, Santa Sophia means holy wisdom. Now, there's no human to depict, no Mary or Peter as in the case of the saints—so the image or icon is usually Jesus holding a book—the Word become flesh. And I have one here from my trip to Poland, I'll pass it around—Jesus holding a book, with an angel on one side, pointing to him—glorifying him, in other words—and a saint on the other. I choose to think of the saint as Martha, because she's holding a shuttle, or distaff, a symbol of the housewife—and remember Martha was the one doing all the house work, so that is often her symbol in icons. Oops, speaking of pushing a button, I almost went off on a tangent about iconography!

But what is wisdom, then? The iconographers thought of it as the Word; the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon—whether it was Solomon or not—thought of it as creation—of order, of light, or beauty, or something new altogether. The author of Proverbs, on the other hand, sees wisdom as the veneration or awe of the Divine—which is what “fear” really is, properly translated.

I think each of these have a bit of truth to them; put them together and there’s something to fully grasp.

Here are some things wisdom is not. Most obviously, wisdom is not fear; it is not intimidation or terror. It is not hidden knowledge or mysterious things that only the initiated may know. It is not esoteric or mystical, and wisdom doesn’t require us to grovel in the dust and call ourselves worms. Those are the negative things that wisdom is not.

But wisdom is not other things, too. Wisdom is not knowledge. You can be well educated and not wise. Wisdom is not experience. Someone may have a lot of experience, either in a specific area—from nuclear engineering to car repair, or simply living—and still not be wise, either in that area or in general. Wisdom is not being well-read—which is not the same as knowledge, either. Wisdom is not intelligence, either. Wisdom is not being kind, although wise people are usually kind. Nor is wisdom simply creativity, although, again, many creative people are wise—but many are not. Wisdom is not cleverness or quick thinking. Wisdom is not spirituality or being religious, or even being called to a religious vocation—i hope that goes without saying.

However—all of these things can lead to, or may be a part of, wisdom. None of them are required for wisdom; but a wise person does possess some of them. Which ones will vary from person to person depending on their circumstances, but they will have some of these—and a few more traits. Wisdom may wax and wane over a person’s lifetime, too—as a person gains experience from life events, they may become wiser. Or, on the other hand, they may suffer trauma, and lose wisdom, or choose to not exercise it.

So what does wisdom in action look like? When solutions to problems are found that benefit everyone involved—there is wisdom. When individuals are able to grow and flourish and become more themselves, there is wisdom. When a town or school or family or relationship is based on hearing each other, on supporting each other's best interest—because that is how everyone flourishes—there is wisdom. Wherever hope blooms, there is wisdom.

Tiny houses made from shipping containers set up on abandoned lots for homeless people—that's wisdom. Community gardens, also in abandoned lots, especially with subsidized seeds and tools and gardening and cooking classes—that's wisdom. Reconciliation rather than revenge—that too, is wisdom. Rebuilding rather than tearing down and abandoning—that is wisdom.

Wisdom grows from caring, from hope, from understanding that we are not alone, that we must mutually support one another. Wisdom thinks not only of the now, but of the future; not only of the self, but of others—the ancestors and the children. Wisdom can imagine more than the eye can see, and can create what it imagines.

That is wisdom. That wisdom stands on the corner and calls to us with impatience —“Come and see what I have for you! It is so good! Don't turn away! Come and try this grace, this beauty, this hope! There's more than enough for everyone, now and in the future! Come and see!”

May we have the courage and grace to respond to wisdom's call! In all God's names, amen.