

# *Listen to Her*

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

September 16, 2018

Proverbs 1:20–33

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A few years ago, the great violinist Joshua Bell and a journalist friend of his conducted a little ad-hoc experiment in social psychology.

Bell went to L'Enfant Plaza Station, one of the main stations for the subway system in Washington D. C. Bell went to the terminal with no fanfare, no advance publicity, wearing plain street clothes and carrying nothing but his violin case. Like any other common busker, he made his way to a decent spot in the middle of the terminal's lobby, set his case down, took out his violin and bow, and began to play.

What he played was Bach's "Chaconne," from the Second Partita for solo violin. This is not just any piece. The Chaconne is for the violinist one of the "high peaks." One has to have really good chops and deep musical intellect to navigate intelligibly this 12 minute solo journey through the musically profound.

So Bell starts playing this piece, and he plays it with all the skill and passion for which he is rightly famous. And as he plays, people rushing to get to their trains stream past him. No one pauses to listen. No one seems to pay attention.

This goes on for 45 minutes, with Bell playing six classical pieces, two of them by Bach. And the same thing happens, or doesn't happen. It seems that no one even notices, that here is one of the world's greatest living violinists playing some of the finest works ever written for unaccompanied violin.

Oh, yeah: there was one little boy, who stood there for a moment, delighted, amazed, transfixed at Joshua Bell's playing.

But soon his mother pulled him away by the hand — "Come on, sweetheart, we have to go." And off they went, into the crowd, on to their destination, as did many people that day, all of them rushing by the beauty and insight that called out to them.

I wonder. Would we have listened?



Today and next Sunday I have picked Bible passages that are about wisdom. I didn't have any specific motive in doing so, no subtle criticism I intended to make. I didn't do this to be clever, or wise. I didn't set out to point fingers.

I just liked the passages. They appealed to me.

But as I have looked at them more, I can't help but feel that these verses, both for this week and for next, they *do* criticize, they *do* point fingers.

Basically, they're not nice!

(Hmm, maybe that's the point.)

This morning's verses are, as you know, from the Book of Proverbs.

This book, the Book of Proverbs is different.  
It sounds different. It reads different. It feels different.  
And by “different,” I mean different from other parts of scripture that may be more familiar to us,

like accounts of things Jesus did,  
or the parables Jesus taught,  
or stories of God’s guidance from the Old Testament,  
or Paul’s passionate words of living in Christ,  
or hymns of praise or lament in the Psalms.

Much of the Book of Proverbs has short statements, “proverbs,” of two lines or so each, making some point about right and holy living. And one proverb might have very little to do with the proverbs around it. Or the connection between them may be not so easy to figure out. Or, a series of proverbs might be very much about the same thing, in a way that could feel a bit repetitive.

All of this makes for a kind of Bible passage that’s difficult to focus on in a Sunday morning sermon. They’re too awkward, too strange, too brief, too simplistic. So most preachers, myself included, usually don’t. We rarely preach on Proverbs.

Maybe you remember that I did preach on a passage from Proverbs four weeks ago. And if you had remembered before I said so, then Wow! am I impressed! I sometimes have trouble remembering that very evening what I preached Sunday morning!



In those verses from Proverbs I just read, wisdom is portrayed as a woman. Lady Wisdom is the central figure here.

She’s no wimp.  
She’s not dainty.  
She’s not weak.  
She’s not to be messed with,  
or taken for granted,  
or disrespected.

Lady Wisdom is out there in the bustling and busy parts of the city speaking her mind:

in the street,  
in the town square,  
at the city gate;  
where business is conducted  
and where law is debated  
and where justice is decided;  
among those who sell and those who buy,  
leaders and followers,  
owners and laborers;

with disruptors and disrupted,  
judges and judged,  
politicians and prostitutes.

She shouts out to all around her, being loud, and, it seems, being at least a little bit of a nuisance.

She threatens. She cajoles.

She pleads. She warns.

She mocks.

She lobbs insults.

All of this to try to convince people to pay attention to her, to hear what she says and heed it, to be open to the wisdom she herself would give them.

But apparently very few people want anything to do with her. Most ignore her, or mock her.

So she let's them know what they can expect.

As they have mocked wisdom, so wisdom will eventually mock them.

As they have ignored wisdom, so will they eventually find themselves ignored by her when they need her.

They will get what they deserve.

*Because I have called and you refused,  
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,  
and because you have ignored all my counsel  
and would have none of my reproof,  
I also will laugh at your calamity;  
I will mock when panic strikes you,  
when panic strikes you like a storm,  
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,  
when distress and anguish  
come upon you.*

*Then they will call upon me,  
but I will not answer;  
they will seek me diligently,  
but will not find me.*

*Because they hated knowledge  
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,  
... therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way...*

Now, this may sound harsh. It may sound far from merciful.

But remember this is an imaginative portrayal of wisdom. And it's one that uses straight lines and contrasting colors, even favoring black and white juxtaposition.

It has no patience for shades of gray. It has no time for subtlety. There's work to be done! There are people to be convinced!

All of this is for effect, all of this to make points and to convince minds and to change hearts.

So this mocking and berating is all to warn people so they will change their ways.  
She berates because she cares.  
She mocks because she loves.  
Gee, thanks.  
Well, sometimes people need that. Right?  
Sometimes the only way to get through is to be forceful. Right?  
So, she gets forceful.  
Will they listen?  
Will *we* listen?

Listen to her.



I think it's not just an irrelevant thing that wisdom is depicted here as a woman. I think it's really important.

This may be hard to grasp, or it may simply be hard to accept. Maybe, instead, to you it's obvious. But the Book of Proverbs was written down in a male-dominated culture. Those who first shared these proverbs were men, and those who were expected to learn from them were men. To these men, women were not equals, were not peers. Women were understood to exist in categories

of either/or,  
good or bad,  
saint or sinner,  
paragon or prostitute.

Good women were to be protected. Wayward women were to be avoided, lest they bring good men to ruin.

Such ways of understanding women, and treating them, were reflexive, habitual, assumed for the men of that time (and, sadly, for some in our time as well). And you can see a good deal of that assumed perspective even in the Book of Proverbs.

And yet the appearance of Lady Wisdom, in these verses and in the ones I preached on a month ago, tends to pull apart those cultural assumptions. It serves to challenge the men who were the original intended audience of these sayings. It calls into question the simplistic assumptions about women often made in that culture (and perhaps even in ours).

Because here wisdom is a woman, who speaks bravely, loudly, with authority.

Wisdom is a woman, who walks confidently into the places of power reserved for the men and tells them what to do and gives them what for.

Wisdom is a woman, who puts to shame the foolishness of men who think they know it all and live as if the rules are for their benefit only, or maybe even don't apply to them.

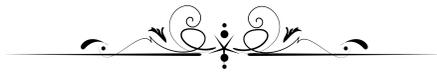
Wisdom is a woman, who pushes against men's expectations and demands to be heard by them.

Wisdom is a woman, who teaches the men about God.

Wisdom is a woman, who points the way to godly living and obedience to God.

And concerning this woman, the not-so-hidden question is: Will they listen?  
Will *we* listen?

Listen to her.



I ask this, and urge this, not only because I believe that the Word of God compels me to. I do so also because I think that we don't show much interest in wisdom.

And by "wisdom," I don't mean intelligence. I don't mean book smarts. I don't mean degrees and diplomas.

No, by "wisdom" I mean a life actively and intentionally, with self-discipline and love, focused on God.

As understood in Proverbs, and many other places in the Bible, those who have wisdom earnestly seek

to know God,  
to obey God,  
to follow God,  
to honor God,  
to serve God ...

*and they do.*

Biblical wisdom is about the heart *and* the head,  
the emotions *and* the intellect,  
willing and acting and knowing altogether.

Biblical wisdom points to a life of disciplined learning  
of God's will,  
God's character,  
God's attributes,  
God's deeds,

all of these especially as scripture bears witness to them, but also as one finds them declared, or denied, in the world around you and in your very heart.

Biblical wisdom, she urges us to seek the Lord who first seeks us and finds us. She demands that we devote time and energy to prayer and scripture and worship. She pesters us to be attentive to the shape of our souls and the condition of our hearts, mapping our inner lives by their conformity with God's word.

And I am not convinced that most of us want that.

We want a faith that is easy.  
We want a grace that costs us very little.  
We want a Christianity of good feelings.  
We want religious emotions without religious understanding.  
We want church without service.  
We want belief without wisdom.

After all, we live in a culture that has no understanding of, or appreciation for, Lady Wisdom.

We are immersed in a world-view that splits apart heart and head, faith and action.

Our world cannot comprehend the truth that God's love for us was so pure, so deep, so full of wisdom, that God took the seemingly foolish step of embracing our reality in Jesus Christ, even to the point of death.

And this Jesus, whom we rightly worship and adore, whom Paul rightly called the wisdom of God and the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), he calls us to heed his words, compels us to be attentive to him, challenges us to see him as the one in whom wisdom truly resides and to whom Lady Wisdom rightly points.

She calls out to us. Will we listen?

She urges us. Will we listen?

She pesters us. Will we listen?

Listen to her.

Listen to her.

Listen to her.