



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

“Know Your Place”

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Ben Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On September 22, 2024, from Job Proverbs 8 & Wisdom 7*

*I have seen the longest of winters;
I have seen compassion conquer despair;
I have seen that hope is a flame
that can't be extinguished.
Is this wisdom or is it the ad copy for AcuVue contact lenses?*

*Follow no one
because the only path to our purpose
is the one never taken before.
We determine our fate;
it has to come from within.
Yet this course demands sacrifice:
forsaking the certainty of the familiar to risk
confrontation with the inevitable.
Is this wisdom or is it the ad copy for a Lexus SUV?*

*Sometimes you got to go back to actually move forward.
I don't mean going back to reminisce or chase ghosts,
but go back to see where you came from,
where you've been, how you got here,
see where you're going.
I know there are those that say you can't go back.
Yes, you can, just have to look in the right place.
Is this wisdom or is it Matthew McConaughey waxing existentially in an ad for a Lincoln MKZ?*

To hear a hundred modern proverbs, all we need to do is turn on our televisions or scroll social media. Proverbs are everywhere today in pithy statements, tiny poems, ad copy, and sayings. But unlike the one's we find in scripture; these modern proverbs do not provide us instruction on how to live a wise and righteous life. More often they provide instruction on what we should buy, what we should spend our money on and what we should consume.

In our society which is dominated by conspicuous consumption, all our proverbs have become advertisements and marketing copy pumped into our ears by large corporations for quarterly profits. We may believe they have no effect on the way we think or feel, but we are not immune to the vision they cast for us.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Make no mistake, like the biblical proverbs, these modern-day versions invite us into a particular form of life and way of being in the world—one that is determined by having the nicest things, the latest gadgets, the coolest stuff, the best belongings, the perfect possessions. In fact, these modern proverbial ads call us into a life where we can easily become possessed by our possessions, the ones we have and those we don't yet. Where are we supposed to turn for true wisdom amidst a cacophony of cheap proverbs? Where does true wisdom reside? Where can true wisdom be found?

On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. There the great Italian artist, Michealangelo, painted one of the finest examples of High Renaissance art depicting nine scenes from the book of Genesis, including the famous *Creation of Adam*. Even if you've never been to Rome, you've most likely seen this image in a book or movie. God is on one side of the fresco, surrounded by angels, Adam is lying in repose on the other, and the spark of life is passing from God's right arm to Adam's left. It has become the most iconic depiction of the creation story in Western history, but what I'd never noticed is that God's left hand is wrapped around the shoulders of a young woman who is strong and eager, eyes open and alert, staring intently at Adam, with her knee bent, poised for action. Scholars agree she's the most realistic portrait of a woman Michelangelo ever painted, and her name is 'Wisdom.'

Why does Michealangelo's God have an arm wrapped around Wisdom? It is because in the book of Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman, a divine feminine character, who was present with God before the foundation of the earth and who partnered with God as a "master worker" in the creation of the world and the birth of humanity. Throughout the pages of this stuffy ancient collection of poetic instructions on how to live in relationship with God and others, Lady Wisdom cries out from the streets, calling to humanity, offering counsel for our edification, singing her song of truth and virtue, and telling us the story of righteousness and justice. She recommends we learn prudence and acquire intelligence, and warns us against wickedness, evil, arrogance, deceit, and perverted speech. Mark Robinson, it seems, has never heard her message, but I digress. Lady Wisdom proclaims, "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me."

Wisdom loves those who love wisdom, who search for it and strive for it. Her presence and partnership with God in the creation of the world has led many theologians to point out the obvious parallels between story of Lady Wisdom and the incarnation of the "Logos" or "Word" we find in the prologue to the Gospel of John where it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through the Word, and without the Word not one thing came into being... and the Word became flesh and lived among us." In his poetic introduction to the gospel, John was clearly influenced by the primordial power of Lady Wisdom, and thereby permanently connected the ancient tradition of the divine feminine with life and death of a new wisdom teacher named Jesus of Nazareth of whom we sing each Advent, "O come thou Wisdom from on high, who ordered all things mightily; to us the path of knowledge show and teach us in her ways to go. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel."



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

If God created the world and all its inhabitants with an arm around Lady Wisdom, then the patriarchal theologies that have dominated the church and oppressed women throughout Christian history are nothing more than foolish nonsense. Amen! Lady Wisdom's primeval attendance and activity in the formation of the earth proves that femininity, was never meant to be a scandal to God, but a pathway to divine wisdom. As the California poet, James McMichael, wrote:

Whose order was it
that made the ends of the earth?
Who put clothes on the deep?
What is his name, and what is his
son's name,
if you can tell?
Wisdom can. Still a child,
she attended God when God had not yet
divided the waters.
Wisdom
was God's delight.
She was with him over the waters.
God and
Wisdom were two.
Day and night were two also.
Wisdom confides that
God's around all. Inside all God holds,
Wisdom's at the work of meaning for the faithful that there's
good to be had,
if God is heeded.ⁱ

Lady Wisdom and God co-creating the world together is a beautiful image, but what does that have to do with here on the ground with our feet in the soil? For starters, Proverbs teaches us that wisdom is written into the fabric of creation itself, therefore, creation is its own kind of wisdom. From the foundation of the universe, the earth was imbued with divine wisdom, which is a way of saying that the earth is wise. Creation lives and breathes with the unforced rhythms of the divine wisdom. It moves in cycles of eat and sleep, work and rest, bloom and fade, birth and rebirth, harvests and fallow seasons. Sabbath is the law of the land. Death and resurrection are built into its framework. Nothing in creation imagines it exists as a self-sufficient or independent entity, instead everything relies on and participates in a complex network of interdependence, communication, and cooperation. The principles by which creation is governed and operates are the oldest and deepest form of wisdom.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

There is only one species on earth who consistently fails to attend to the unforced rhythms of divine wisdom that are written into the fabric of the universe and that is us—human beings. Oh, we have knowledge, vast amounts at our fingertips, an infinite source of information at the push of a button, more knowledge than we can process.

But the Proverbs and it's leading Lady Wisdom, testify to that there is a profound difference between knowledge and wisdom. Augustine was one of the first to parse this out at the end of his *Confessions*, where he distinguished *scientia* or “abstract knowledge” from *sapientia* or “wisdom.”ⁱⁱ Both are forms of information about the world, but according to Augustine the key difference is that abstract knowledge (like science) can be perverted toward evil ends as we've seen in the advent of technologies like the atomic bomb, the internet, social media, smart phones, or artificial intelligence. Whereas wisdom, for Augustine, is never about power, but goodness. Wisdom, he wrote, “is that which no evil use can ever be made of it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Today we have more knowledge than we've ever had before in history and yet we have very little wisdom. We have the knowledge to build skyscrapers, aircraft carriers, airplanes and spaceships that can go to the moon, but we can't build a solution to hunger, poverty, or the housing crisis. We have the knowledge to create computers, the internet, social media, and smart phones, but we can't create a solution for loneliness, alienation, or social isolation. We have the knowledge to cure polio, tuberculosis, malaria, cholera, and other diseases, but we can't cure the diseases of racism, classism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, or homophobia. One of the most maddening paradoxes of the modern life is that we have all the knowledge in the world, and yet we are no wiser for it. We are living in an age with an overabundance of knowledge and an extreme scarcity of wisdom.

One of the finest insults I've ever received is, “Ben, wisdom has been chasing you. But you have always been a little faster.” It could be said of all of us at some point in our lives, but now it could be said of our nation and our world. No other generation has been so successful at using our technological knowledge to manipulate the world and satisfy our own appetites and now, more than any previous generation, we are witnessing the effects of perverted knowledge that is not connected to goodness. We have greatly increased our technical ability, but our wisdom has not grown in due measure, and now we are seeing the impact of this knowledge that is devoid of wisdom manifested on a global scale. “Our current ecological catastrophe can be seen precisely as a crisis of knowledge without wisdom; of knowledge run amok. In this century, powerful technological knowledge has proliferated, yet it has not been sufficiently tempered or disciplined by a humble and discerning understanding of how God and Lady Wisdom have ordered the world.”^{iv} And our future looks bleak if we can't find the gumption to change course. As scholar E.F. Schumacher once said, “We are now far too clever to be able to survive without wisdom.”

Proverbs teaches that if technology is to be helpful and not destructive, we must learn to contemplate the world and ask what God's intention is for it and humbly accept the limits this sets on our manipulation of Creation. Wisdom is found in observing the Creation and learning from it to live in ways that do not violate but contribute to the well-being of the whole created order, not just our small corner of existence.



To become wise human beings, we must learn how to move beyond abstract knowledge, to accept our place in the order of things, and to live in concert with the unforced rhythms of divine wisdom. This is easier said than done, which is why there are so many books of Wisdom Literature in the Bible trying to help us figure out how to embody these lessons. But where should we begin?

We can start by following the lead of Lady Wisdom who proclaimed, “When God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside God, like a master worker, and I was daily God’s delight, playing before God always, playing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” There is an extraordinary revelation here in this verse: the Creator of the world and humanity is a God who not only works and rests, but who plays with Lady Wisdom and the universe is their playground. They play together not for some great moral purpose, but for its own sake, for the sake of pleasure and enjoyment—taking great delight in the inhabited world and in human beings. It turns out that just like the grief we talked about last week, play itself is a form of wisdom, a divine attribute, and an essential aspect of our existence as creatures who were made in the image of a playful God.

The God who plays is an arresting surprise for those of us who were raised as “sinners in the hands of angry God” by fundamentalist communities who took themselves too seriously, where the definition of religion was ‘no fun at all’ and having a good time was considered an affront against God. For the Puritans, God was all work and no play, but unbeknownst to them, their rejection of divine playfulness, was a form of blasphemy. One of my teachers, Roger Owens, once said that when it comes to spirituality the rule is: “If it’s human, it belongs,” and play is most certainly human. In fact, play is an innate capacity given to us by God that flows from who we are as beings created in God’s image. Play is one of the quintessential activities of human existence that has been celebrated in virtually all cultures throughout history. We know play is essential to human development and flourishing, not only for children, but for people of all ages, and that a life without play is not only dull and boring, but a lesser fragmentary form of life that misses out on God’s abundance.

As one writer said, “What the toddler or the ball player does is not so very different than what the artist (especially the dancer) does or the philosopher. Singing, dancing, rhyming, scribbling on paper, building towers with blocks—in the case of the child, these are rudimentary, but they are also the basic ‘skills’ that can develop into the highest forms of human art. What is especially remarkable, when one begins looking at play is that you discover its material and social residue everywhere, in what we commonly call culture. Play and culture go hand in hand, in fact one derives from the other. And without play, there would be very little in the way of culture and our society would be deprived of joy and delight. To play is to create a life for oneself and to develop a culture for everyone that is not completely dominated by the never-ending tedium of work and labor.

In our world today, many of our neighbors do not have any time for play. Leisure is on the decline as our economic model prioritizes productivity and profit over every other good and extracts our labor in ever-demanding ways to achieve these ends.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Evenings have evaporated, weekends have disappeared, as work reigns supreme. The forces that make play impossible bear down most heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable. The privileged positions of social class, race, and gender permit only certain groups to play and reject the fundamental right of play as necessity for all human beings. Everyone deserves the proper time for play, and those of us who have the time should never squander a right so many of our neighbors do not have and commit ourselves to fight for the right to play for all God's people.

We constantly hear about the decline in American religion and the need for radical renewal, but have we considered the fact that nobody wants to be a part of an organization where people don't look like they're having any fun anymore. What if we learned how to play together? Just like prayer and preaching, play is a form of worship that connects us with the God who plays. What if we learned how to lean into leisure not only as a way to fellowship, but as a program we offer to the community? What if we became witnesses of what it looks like to enjoy being with each other, to delight in our neighbor's presence, and to create time and space for play?

As the leading Lady in Proverbs teaches us, delighting in each other and creation through play is one of the truest and most profound ways to wisdom. So, for God's sake, let us play. For Lady Wisdom's sake, let us play. For Creation's sake, let us play. For the Church's sake, let us play. For our children's sake, let us play. For the worker's sake, let us play. For each other's sake, let us play. For the poor's sake, let us play. For our life's sake, let us play. For the world's sake, let us play. Because to work is to be human, but to play is to be wise. Lady Wisdom is strong and eager, her eyes are open and alert, staring intently at us, her knee is bent, and she is poised for action. She is ready to delight in the earth and all its inhabitants. Wisdom is ready to play with us. So, my friends, what are we waiting for?

ⁱ James McMichael, "Wisdom" from *If You Can Tell*. Copyright © 2016 by James McMichael. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. <http://us.macmillan.com/fsg>

ⁱⁱ Ellen Davis, *Getting Real with God*, Crowley: Cambridge, MA, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, AD 400.

^{iv} Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, WJK: Louisville, KY, 2000.