

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, September 13, 2015)

Text: **Proverbs 1:20-33 (The Voice)**

There's another voice in town.
It belongs to Lady Wisdom, who calls out in the street.
She cries out in the town square,
At the city gates, in the noisy city streets,
you can hear her speaking over the racket:
You simple, naive people, how long will you love your feeble ways?
You simpletons, how long will you enjoy making fun of what you don't understand?
You fools, how long will you hate learning what truly matters?
Turn to me and receive my gentle correction;
Watch and I will pour out my spirit on you;
I will share with you my wise words in order to redirect your lives.
You hear, but you have refused to answer my call.
My hands reached out, but no one noticed.
All my advice, all my correction, all have been neglected—
you wanted nothing of them.
So I will be the laughter you hear when misfortune comes, and it will come.
I will be the mocking sound when panic grips you—
When panic comes like a stormy blast,
when misfortune sweeps in like a whirlwind,
when sorrow and anguish weigh you down.
This is when they will call on me, but I will not respond;
they will be frantic to find me, but they won't be able.
Because they despised knowledge of my ways,
and they also refused to respect and honor the Eternal,
Because they rejected my advice
and turned down my correction,
They will surely get what's coming to them:
they'll be forced to eat the fruit of their wicked ways;
they'll gorge themselves on the consequences of their choices.
You see, it's turning away from me that brings death to the simple,
and it's self-satisfaction that destroys the fools.
But those who listen to me now will live under divine protection;
they can rest knowing they are out of harm's way.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Wisdom Quest"**

"Simpletons! How long will you wallow in ignorance?

Cynics! How long will you feed your cynicism?

Idiots! How long will you refuse to learn?"

That's wisdom shouting at us from the street corner as heard in The Message. Nothing like being called on the carpet, or on the street as it were, is there?

Now you see why I had Rev. Lorraine read The Voice's interpretation of our text for today – a bit easier to hear, I think, as there Lady Wisdom calls us simple and naive, – but, really, is there a difference in being called a fool as opposed to an idiot? Both terms serve to wake us up and put us on the defensive. Although I prefer the Care-Bear approach, I understand Wisdom's need to shout loudly at times because the din surrounding us is so profound.

There are so many voices and so many distractions calling to us and begging for our attention that the wisest voices, the most profound truths, the still small voices still speaking in the midst of the cacophony can be all but drowned out if we're not aware and consciously listening for the voice of God which will guide us through our lives. And sometimes, She really does need to shout to get our attention.

As I considered all the ways in which we can be distracted these days – from phone calls to text messages to FaceBook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram and, oh yeah, even those ancient instruments known as the television and the radio, I remembered being so turned off by these kinds of warnings when I was a teenager. What's the matter with listening to music while I do my studies, I'd grouse, or have the TV on while I work on a homework project? I thought my parents were just being old fuddy-duddy's – not keeping up with what was hip and "now" and trying to drag me backwards instead of push me forwards. But, of course, as with most things one grouses about at earlier times in one's life, wisdom beckoned to me later and showed me that it wasn't just about the distraction of having other sounds and voices playing and speaking while I was supposed to be focused on something else, it was also about what those other sounds and voices were saying to me and how I was absorbing them into my consciousness. Was I truly hearing what was being said or was I allowing messages and ideas to pervade my mind that I wasn't even aware of?

"At the city gates, in the noisy city streets, you can hear her speaking over the racket... Turn to me and receive my gentle correction; Watch and I will pour out my spirit on you; I will share with you my wise words in order to redirect your lives."

Only by paying attention to what we are receiving through all the voices and sounds that assault us every day can we truly attune our ears to hear Wisdom's voice calling over the racket, helping us to go in the best direction with gentleness and love. Only by being aware of who and what we are allowing to guide us can we receive the wise words that will direct our lives in path of righteousness and peace.

You don't have to search far to find the consequences of not heeding the voice of wisdom or allowing the world's wisdom to guide your life instead of God's wisdom. Those who would seek after money with no thought of others' needs reap the sadness and emptiness of a life lived without love and devoid of compassion; those who don't care who they step over to get what they want often end up living lives of profound loneliness and fear, wondering if they can trust anyone or if anyone trusts them.

"Wisdom speaks, but is anyone listening?" Dr. Bruce Epperly wrote in his commentary on today's passage. "Wisdom cries out hoping for a response, but does anyone care? The whole universe is speaking forth the glory of God and the wisdom of divine creativity, but we are too busy to notice. Day after day, wisdom speaks through sunrises, bird songs, human voices, and synchronous encounters, but we seldom listen. The news headlines alert us to the signs of the times, but we go on with business as usual. To forsake wisdom – to silence her voice – is to bring calamity upon yourself and the nation. This isn't a threat," he writes, "nor is it divine punishment, but the natural order of things when we turn away from what is truly best for ourselves and the planet."

We can see the consequences of not listening to the Wisdom of God as expressed in Creation. When we don't heed the wise warnings of the ways in which we are destroying our earth and

overusing her resources we, and especially the generations to come after us, suffer the consequences and impede not only our path to fulfillment but the paths of so many others as well.

“Wisdom ([or] Sophia [in the Greek]) sees God in the details of life,” Dr. Epperly writes. “Nothing is too small or too large for Sophia’s sensitivities. Everything matters and brings us closer or further away from God’s micro and macrocosmic vision of Shalom. Pay heed to Wisdom, for she sees the big perspective and recognizes that even small actions can lead in the long run to positive or negative outcomes for a society. It is easy to panic and focus only on the urgency of the moment and let the future be damned” he continues. “Wisdom looks at the long haul as well as immediate gratification and reminds us that living in relationship to God’s vision is the ultimate source of well-being.”

Living open to the word and allowing God’s wisdom to touch us takes tremendous humility and a daily practice of coming before God in silence and wonder to hear Wisdom’s voice and to accept Sophia’s call. Putting the wisdom you receive into practice gives you further indication of whether what you’re receiving is truly wise or needs to be tested and proven in the fire of the here and now. Sometimes holding fast to an old idea or a belief someone told us we SHOULD have truly isn’t the wisest course of action. With true wisdom we have to be willing to say that what we thought or believed in the past has been changed by God and that we are hearing Christ’s call anew and acting on the wisdom we have received NOW for the love of ALL God’s people and the protection of ALL of God’s creation.

Another hallmark of Wisdom and whether we are receiving and following her call is through that which issues forth from our lips.

Listen now, to what our Greek text for today has to say to us about the wisdom of being directed by God and watching that what comes forth from us by way of our tongue is as wise as that which comes into us from our Creator. Our writer James has much to say about just that.

Only a few of you, my sisters and brothers, should be teachers. You should realize that those of us who are teachers will be called to a stricter account. After all, each of us falls from time to time.

However, those who never say anything wrong are truly close to perfection, because they can then control every part of themselves. Once we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we control the rest of their bodies. The same with ships—no matter how large they are, and even if they are driven by fierce winds, they are directed by a very small rudder to wherever the captain wants to go.

*The tongue is like that. It’s a small part of the body, yet it makes great boasts. See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze! The tongue is such a flame. Among all the parts of the body, the tongue is a whole wicked world in itself. It infects the entire body. Its flames encircle our course from birth, and its fire is kindled by hell. All kinds of animals—birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea—can be tamed by us, but no one can tame the tongue. It’s a restless evil, full of deadly poison. We use it to say, “Praised be our God and Creator”; then we use it to curse each other—we who are created in the image of God. Blessing and curse come out of the same mouth. This shouldn’t be, my sisters and brothers! Does a spring emit both pure water and brackish water? My sisters and brothers, can a fig tree produce olives, or can a grapevine produce figs? No—and neither can a fountain produce both salt water and fresh water. (James 3:1-12 from *The Inclusive Bible*)*

“See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze!” Indeed! In the same way that the tongue is such a flame, so the Spirit can be seen as the spark to alighting us with the Wisdom of God that our whole beings may be on fire with the knowledge of God. In this way, we can spread the goodness of God rather than the illness of this world and the things that destroy rather than build up.

“With our words we name the world and each other, and in some sense our naming creates a genuine reality,” writes Dan Clendenin in his article, ““Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak.” “Once our speech and narratives take hold, they have a tremendous power for good or evil. They can exclude or

embrace, heal or humiliate, lift up or tear down. How many of us have internalized self-hatred that resulted from repeated criticisms from a parent? How many can still remember a compliment made by an elementary school teacher even though it was made many decades ago? Or who has experienced the futile attempt of over-compensation to prove your self-worth against school yard taunts?"

The Wisdom God brings us through the speech of others can build us up and keep us going. Conversely, when we are assaulted by words born not of Wisdom but of ignorance and hate we can be left broken and battered. In allowing Sophia to speak before we do ("be sure brain is engaged before putting mouth into gear"), we become part of the fountain of life, spreading God's love through our words AND our actions.

I haven't read a poem for you in a while, so I thought it might be WISE to share one with you today as we conclude these reflections on wisdom.

It's a short one, called "Help Me Listen" and it's by Ted Loder.

O Holy One,
I hear and say so many words,
yet yours is the word I need.
Speak now,
and help me listen;
and, if what I hear is silence,
 let it quiet me,
 let it disturb me,
 let it touch my need,
 let it break my pride,
 let it shrink my certainties,
 let it enlarge my wonder.

Amen.