

“Wisdom's Call” / Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 / 30 June 2013

“Does not Wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice?” I've wondered that myself from time to time. Perhaps you have, too. Do they hear wisdom's voice in DC, in Harrisburg, on Wall Street, in Hollywood, wherever it is that they make video games for kids—“Does not Wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice?”

The nice thing about being older than forty is that we did many of our stupid things before the Internet. I've never lived to regret some ill-advised statement that I launched out into cyberspace in a fit of anger or sadness that was fueled by one-too-many. That's a fact of modern life that I missed. In fact, in the part of the world where I was living, email didn't even catch on until I was thirty; you had to go to a cybercafe and pay \$5 an hour to use it. I didn't discover FaceBook until I was a bald, bespectacled clergyman, a husband and father, a member of the local Rotary Club. By that time, I was far too cautious and polite to broadcast anything untoward over the worldwide web.

Nowadays, public figures are forever getting in trouble for offhanded remarks that they've committed to the world by means of Twitter, or email, or FaceBook, or a blog. Some politicians have ended their careers by putting compromising photos of themselves out into that unforgiving and unpredictable sea called “The Internet.” Technology has changed the way we communicate. It allows us to say and do things before our good sense has a chance to stop us. Well might we ask again, “Does not Wisdom call?”

But consider, too, the ways that technology is changing the way we speak. For good or for ill, television, radio, and the Internet are weeding out those local expressions that we people over forty know, but failed to pass along to our children. If you want to see a kid perplexed, just try using “yinz” in a sentence with one of my children. I grew up knowing “yinz” as the standard second person plural pronoun. But my kids have only one significant person in their life who still says it. The world is changing. Technology is erasing differences that used to define one group over and against others.

What do you call the small lobster-like creature that lives in freshwater streams? Around here, we always used to call them crayfish. A little to the west of here, it was a crawdad. Down South it was a crawfish or even a mudbug. I do believe that Food Network will have everyone calling them crawfish within the next twenty years because no one actually talks about these critters (much less eats them) except the Louisiana chefs on TV. What do you call a long sandwich made from sliced cheese, and lunch meat, and lettuce? Well, most of the living world calls it a sub or a submarine sandwich. A few people in Boston might call it a grinder. But if you call it a “hoagie,” then you're either from Philadelphia or Pittsburgh or someplace in between. You probably don't want “manaze” on your hoagie, much less “maya-naze”? Do you say “carmel,” or are you actually one of those people who says “caramel”? Food Network is going to side with Websters on this one, but we'll get our pronunciation from the former, not the latter. “Pajamas” or “pajamas”? For me, as a child, you would put maple “sear-up” on waffles, though nowadays most of the world is opting instead for “sir-up.” And I must admit that I've made that switch myself, not wanting to sound too provincial. There are a lot of words I've switched in my vocabulary, probably under the influence of television. In my life, I've gone from “jaggers” to “thorns,” from “crick” to “creek,” from “pop” to “soda.” I always said “catsup” until my wife and children ridiculed me into saying “ketchup.” And now, at the age of forty-three at last, I seriously contemplate making the big jump from “tennis shoes” to “sneakers.” I do.

My children will never sit on a davenport, or wear galoshes, or reheat their coffee in a radar range. How far will it go? Well, don't worry; you'll never catch me saying “caramel.” But consider how the world grows smaller. Consider how the things that used to identify and separate us are diminishing. The markers of identity, like accents and local expressions, are being lost in a sea of sameness. It's called “the monoculture.” It means that you don't have to go to Bangkok anymore to find glass noodles. You don't even have to go to The Strip anymore! The monoculture is powered by technology, and it's not necessarily a bad thing in itself. Our rich human diversity, which adds to the beauty and the wonder of life, is also one of the things that keeps us from understanding each other. It's

not only our spoken language that is changing. As the world shrinks, we are exposed to each other's beliefs and attitudes; there is constant interchange between cultures, between generations, between religions. Protestants act a little more like Catholics, and Catholics act a little more like Protestants. Now, I know that there is admittedly some reactionary kickback and polarization, as people cling to their own traditions and reject the ways of others. But on the whole, don't you think that there is better mutual understanding in the world today? In the long arc of history, aren't things tending toward acceptance? And so, my question to you today is this: In a world where people are coming to talk, and think, and act more and more alike, are we going to discover that there is—at the heart of all human cultures—one shared moral core, a universal wisdom, to which we can all appeal?

In today's reading from the Book of Proverbs, we meet a lady known as Wisdom. The Proverbs depict Wisdom as a woman calling out to all the world's busy people as they go about their way through life. Lady Wisdom takes her stand at the city gates, and on a hillside above the road; she cries out to all the great crowds who flock to the earth's busiest places. She's standing beside the entrance to the Fort Pitt Tunnel, where you make your morning commute. She's waiting by the water cooler at the office, glancing at you meaningfully from above the half-wall of your cubicle. Wisdom whispers in the morning birdcalls, in the sunlight, in the rain. "Come to me. Embrace me." Wisdom beckons to you right there in your kitchen, beside the open refrigerator. I hope, too, that she makes an occasional cameo appearance here in our pulpit. Lady Wisdom raises her voice above the clamor and the din of modern life. She says, "Hey, people, you're running around like so many ants—without a queen to direct you. Hey, people, you scuttle, and you scurry. You rush from place to place. Hey, people, listen to me! You work, and you plan, and you worry, but what's your goal in all of it? What do you hope to accomplish with all your anxiety and labor? It doesn't have to be this hard. Ask for me, Wisdom. Seek me, Wisdom. I was there when the world was created. I was God's adviser at creation. I took pleasure in God's workmanship. I danced," Lady Wisdom says, "I danced before God, rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race." In our troubled world, in our turbulent and uncertain era in history, in the quiet of your spirit: Does not wisdom call?

She does. Wisdom's call goes out to all humankind. Wisdom's call is universal and timeless. Look into your heart. Wisdom has been calling out to you for a long time. You already know the right thing to do. Now, all that remains is for you to bite the bullet and actually heed her call. Wisdom calls, but you and I tend to screen our calls; we might even have the ringer turned off. We all become selectively deaf when wisdom calls, and that deafness is due to our deep-seated commitments to the status quo, or to pleasures, or to people, or attitudes, or even to economic realities that we know—deep down—are not wise. A true story is told of a young white man who lived Down South in the 1960s, and he supported the Civil Rights movement. His father, however, was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. One day, he said to his dad, "You're a Christian, aren't you dad?" The man said, "Indeed, I am! I've been a deacon in the Baptist Church for thirty years. You know that." The son said, "Next time you sneak off to a Klan meeting, what do you say we sit down together and pray about it first?" The father was quiet for a moment; then he looked at his son and said, "Boy, you know Jesus won't put up with the Klan's..." He ended the sentence with a word that I cannot repeat from the pulpit, but one that precisely describes the actions of the KKK in the 1960s. Deep in the old racist's heart, he knew what was right. He knew what was wise and good, but he didn't want to heed it.

Does not Wisdom call? She does, and most of us hear her call—in our heart of hearts—if only we weren't so committed to the foolishness of our own choosing. Above all the differences of culture, and race, and tradition, above all the customs and commitments that we cherish, Wisdom's call—the Proverbs say—is to all people...not just to Jews, and not just to Christians. Wisdom's call is the same across all the divides that we can create or imagine. She calls us to kindness. She calls us to patience. She calls us to love. She calls us to take the long view. And whenever one of our personal or cultural values calls us away from these things, then it is calling us away from Mother Wisdom.

It's the pride of accomplishment, or nationality, or family, it's the pride of puffed up egos that

keeps us from heeding Wisdom's call. I recently read an excerpt from a Bill Bryson book that bears the ambitious title: *A Short History of Pretty Much Everything*. Bryson makes this claim: "Every atom you possess has almost certainly passed through several stars and been part of millions of organisms on its way to becoming you. We are each so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled that a significant number of our atoms—up to a billion for each of us, it has been suggested—probably once belonged to William Shakespeare. A billion more came from Buddha and Genghis Khan and Beethoven, and any other historical figure that you care to name. So we are all reincarnations—though short-lived ones. When we die, our atoms will disassemble and move off to find new uses elsewhere as part of a leaf, or another human being, or a drop of dew." When you stop to think about the bigness of existence and the smallness of you; when you stop to ponder the fact that you've received so much more than you've ever given back in this life of years; when you pause to consider the fact that you have within yourself—both figuratively and literally—pieces of Adolph Hitler and Mother Mary...how can you allow the small commitments of time and place to prevent you from heeding Wisdom's call to kindness, patience, love?

Walter decided to ask Gladys to marry him, but he didn't have the nerve to do it in person. Nervously, he picked up the phone and called. When she answered, he spoke as fast as he could. "Gladys, I love you, and I want to spend my life with you. Will you marry me?" Gladys replied, "Of course I will, you silly boy? But who's calling, please?" You will know that it's Wisdom calling if she urges you to acts of kindness, and patience, and love. Her call is universal, and it goes out alike to people of all faiths and all political and cultural stripes. Wisdom will call us away from the things that divide us, for her call is always toward mutuality and cooperation. Anne Lamott—in her slightly irreverent way—has this to say about the life of faith: "We should try to stay on God's good side, but it's not hard. God has extremely low standards. Pray. Take care of people. Be actively grateful for your blessings. Give away your money. You're in."

Does not Wisdom call? Yes, she does call. And we all hear her call. But sometimes we pretend not to hear it, because we've got so much invested in the other voices placing lesser calls and claims upon our lives. We give our allegiance like mercenaries to so many unwise things. Our troubled world is growing smaller, but perhaps above the chaos of our age, Wisdom's voice is becoming clearer, too? I don't know. But I do know that Wisdom has been calling out to you, too. And you surely know what she's been trying to say. Isn't it time to heed her call? Amen.