



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Way of the Wise (Proverbs Series)

Dining at Wisdom's Table

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

August 9, 2009

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Proverbs 9:1-18

During the sermon a few weeks ago I actually sang some of the words from a song that had been sung to me more than twenty years ago on my final Sunday at the church where I worshiped during college. It had that great refrain that encourages listeners to “hold fast to the right, hold fast to the right, wherever your footsteps may roam, and forsake not the way of salvation, my boy, that you learned from your mother at home.”

As I said then, that song has been living inside me for more than 20 years, and I find it popping into my mind and out of my mouth before I can catch myself. That may explain why I have absolutely driven my children (and my wife) a bit bonkers over these past few weeks. All I have to do to send them over the edge is to hum the first six notes of that song, and they grab their heads saying, “Don’t get that song stuck in my head!” But it’s too late. It’s there. And, if they’re anything like me, it will still be there some twenty-plus years later as they continue to make their way in the world, as they continue to stand at the crossroads of the way of life and the way of death.

That’s where the youth from the book of Proverbs is now standing. We have just come to the end of the opening section of the book of Proverbs. For the first 9 chapters of the book, we have been sitting in the family household. We have been listening as the parent has been training his child in the way of wisdom. That parent is doing what we hope to do with those we teach. He is hoping to draw a compelling picture of living wisely and well in the hopes that the youth will accept the invitation to become a fearer of the Lord. What the parent is hoping is that his child will know both the amazing sovereignty of God who rules over all things as well as his own limitations as part of God’s creation.

As chapter 9 ends, you can almost see the youth walking out the front door of his house, and if you listen carefully, perhaps you can hear him singing those words to himself, “Hold fast to the right, hold fast to the right, wherever your footsteps may roam, and forsake not the way of salvation, my boy, that you learned from your (parents) at home.”

And what he’s learned at home are lines like these: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

He’s listened to his father’s repeated warnings about the two ways in life, and he knows well that one way leads to life but the other way leads to death. And he’s listened as his father has described the world he is entering as a place where voices will compete for his attention. And he’s taken in that each step in life is a choice, and each choice has consequences, and he knows that if he wants to live wisely and well—if he wants to find life—he must choose carefully.

And so, as he makes his way out the front door—as he prepares for the voices to beckon him to turn in their direction—you can almost hear the soundtrack stuck in his

head—a soundtrack of his father’s voice, saying things like this: “Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure.” (I remember the same sort of soundtrack playing in my head as I walked down Bourbon Street for the first time.)

But remember: there are two ways in life. One way leads to life; the other to death. And throughout these first 9 chapters, these two ways are represented by personified wisdom and personified folly. And, while you and I may have our reservations about using women as a teaching tool, the parent in Proverbs doesn’t. And so we have these two women—personified wisdom and personified folly—representing opposite ends in the youth’s world: good and bad, death and life, folly and wisdom. (Yoder, 100)

The chapter we read this morning—chapter 9—presents two invitations. The first is from personified wisdom, and the other is from personified folly. And, since the choice of which table to sit down at is a matter of life and death, it may come as quite a shock to hear how much wisdom and folly have in common: Throughout these first chapters we’ve learned that both use speech to persuade; both have houses and offer luxuries; and both seek the attention and affections of the young man, whose choice will determine whether he becomes a victim or a beneficiary. (Yoder, 99-100). And now, as the opening section ends, we have wisdom and folly calling out with invitations to the youth to feast at their tables, and they each begin with the same words: “You who are simple, turn in here.” Apparently, the two women are not always readily distinguishable from each other, so you have to pay attention to more than their first words. (Yoder, 108)

And when you do pay attention to more than the first words in this text, you can see some interesting things. First, the youth finds himself at the doorstep of personified wisdom. “Turn in here,” she cries, doing her best to get his attention in the commotion that is his life. And the first thing you notice is that wisdom has prepared well. She has built her own house, complete with seven pillars, and there’s no doubt that we are to see that as evidence of her stability and prosperity.

But that’s not all wisdom has done. She has also thoroughly prepared for the banquet spread out upon her table. She’s folded the napkins and put out the silverware and prepared the sumptuous food and drink even before she offers her invitation. Well before the guests arrive at her doorstep, personified wisdom has gone the extra mile in making sure that the table is prepared, the food is abundant and ready, the wine bottles are uncorked, and the room’s temperature and lighting perfect for conversation and reflection.

Wisdom’s table, in other words, calls to mind other tables in the Bible prepared for some feast, and you can hear echoes of the prophets describing the reign of God as an unending banquet of rich food and well-strained wine. The Bible, you see, often describes the table as a place of discernment, “where hosts and guests may glimpse God and learn about God’s activity in the world. . . .(In fact, as Christine Yoder points out, the Bible paints the picture of a God who is the) quintessential host, providing water, manna, and quail in the wilderness; preparing a table in the presence of enemies; and stirring creation to yield food and wine to strengthen and delight the human heart.” (Yoder, 105)

The book of Proverbs tells us all that wisdom has done to prepare her table—and it does so in the past tense. All of a sudden, however, the tense shifts from the past to the

present, where wisdom calls out, “You who are simple, turn in here. Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

It’s clear from that invitation that much is expected of those who accept. First, you have to turn aside and enter the house of wisdom to enjoy the food and wine. In other words, “wisdom’s guests must change their direction and enter,” which is what that word repentance is all about. Repentance is never so much about feeling bad as it is turning around—about changing directions.

Second, to dine at wisdom’s table, you have to abandon naiveté, which means that you can’t cling to your immaturity as an excuse for failing to choose what is right. I can remember as a child the times I would do something wrong and then point to my immaturity, my childishness, as an excuse. Wisdom seems to suggest that those who love their naiveté can also fall out of love with it.

Finally, to sit at wisdom’s table requires us to live and walk in a new way of understanding. I love the way Christine Yoder puts this when she writes, “Acceptance of (wisdom’s) invitation requires one to choose a new direction and lose an attitude.” (Yoder, 106)

And this is the promise: those who dine at wisdom’s table will find life in all of its abundance.

It is not so at folly’s table. As I said, folly’s invitation starts out the same. Like a phishing email that seeks to scam you by directing you to a fraudulent website by sending what looks like an official invitation from the real website, accepting folly’s invitation also ends in disaster.

After time—after discernment—what looks and sounds like wisdom is revealed as the folly it is. You just hope that discernment doesn’t come too late.

“Whereas the description of personified wisdom... focuses on the preparations she makes for her guests, the...description of personified folly (focuses) mainly on her character. She’s loud, thoughtless, completely lazy, sitting at the door of her house and on a seat at the high places so that she can get the attention of those who are passing by—especially those who are trying to stay on the straight and narrow way. And, unlike wisdom, who requires her guests to abandon their naiveté, folly aims to capitalize on it. (Yoder, 108)

And this is the painful truth: those who dine at folly’s table will find nothing but death.

In that sermon a few weeks ago, I told a story from my college days—a story that ended with me standing in the hallway outside my dorm room—and I was about to choose which direction I would go, but I moved on before telling you my choice. I’ve heard from a number of you that you were none too happy with me for that unresolved ending. You are desperate to know the choice I ultimately made. Which way did I go that Saturday night in Nacogdoches, Texas?

Well, I’ve got news for you. You’re not going to like the end of this chapter of Proverbs any better. As this chapter—in fact this opening section—ends, the youth is standing there at the crossroads. As Christine puts it, he “hears voices calling him home

for supper. Two invitations. Two houses. Two hosts” (Yoder, 109). And a huge choice to be made, a choice between life and death.

It is a striking conclusion to the opening chapters of the book. So how will he choose? “The spotlight centers on the youth as the parent slowly exits the stage. (And) the lack of an explicit answer to the question leaves it perpetual. All of us, you see, just like that youth at the crossroads, must decide anew whether to ‘turn in’ to folly’s house and put the book down, or choose wisdom and step over the threshold into the rest of the book. And, as the parent tells it, it remains a decision of life and death” (Yoder, 109-110).

The idea for this sermon series from the book of Proverbs was prompted by the engaging presentation made by Dr. Christine Roy Yoder in January, 2009, to the *Lectio Jubilare Group*. meeting in Malibu, CA. In addition to the insights generated through notes taken at that gathering, I have also been greatly helped by Christine’s commentary on the book of Proverbs. (*Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Proverbs*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).