

“Wisdom’s Feast”

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Proverbs 9:1-6

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

Many remember King Solomon as a powerful king, the writer of many books and sayings of wisdom that remain in the Bible, and the one who succeeded in building the grand Jerusalem Temple his father David had dreamed about. Even foreign rulers traveled far to sit in his presence and seek his wisdom. And our story from this morning tells of his humble wish when God asked Solomon how God might support his kingship. His reply?

“I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?” Solomon’s request delighted God so much for its thoughtfulness- that he did not first ask for a really long life, or riches, or defeat of his enemies, that God granted Solomon wisdom, *and* riches and honor such that no other king could compare to Solomon.

Some people will remember Solomon that valiant way.

There is another way we might remember Solomon, and all these things are right in our scriptures too:

Solomon is the worst kind of nepo-baby. As one of King David’s younger sons, he ordered the murder of his eldest brother who was next in line to the throne, to clear the pathway to kingship for himself. The riches God granted him initially weren’t enough. He heavily taxed his own people to increase his personal wealth. Not only that; he enslaved thousands into forced labor to create the elaborate buildings of his kingdom. Like his father David, Solomon enjoyed women. But while David had 8 wives who were named in the bible and probably more than that, the Bible states that Solomon had *700* wives and 300

concubines. And while he worshiped God, his love for the divine was not monogamous, either. He also worshiped pagan gods, including ones who supported child sacrifice. His leadership confused the people and set the stage for further departure from the ways of justice and faithfulness God had set before them.

Biblical commentator Debie Thomas points out that both ways of seeing Solomon as true.¹ While he was blessed with wisdom, he was also cursed with foolishness.

But we mostly remember Solomon for his wisdom, and even the Bible gives Solomon credit for writing the book of Proverbs, which is a book of wisdom sayings— as well as Song of Solomon, which is a short, steamy book of biblical love poetry. Scholars suppose that Proverbs actually had many writers and was developed over several centuries; still, its oldest sections do seem to date back to the time of Solomon’s court.²

One thing I love about Proverbs is it gives one of several biblical examples that adds a feminine representation of God; Jewish tradition sometimes refers to her as the Shekhina, or the feminine spirit of God. In the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, wisdom was called Sophia. Proverbs shows Sophia as working alongside The Lord at the beginnings of creation. She stands at the crossroads and beside the gates in front of the town. Her call? Prudence for the simple ones, a mouth that utters truth, and a wisdom that is better than jewels. “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed,” she says, “Lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

Proverbs contrasts the virtue of Sophia-wisdom with that of a strange woman, Folly, who will mislead and seduce someone into excess and greed, a quick rage, and ultimate death. Thinking back to Solomon, who had asked for wisdom but clearly made choices that were not wise, I wonder if this contrast between wisdom and folly points right at *him*. But it also points to all of us who share that struggle.

¹ “The Beginning of Wisdom” by Debie Thomas on blog *Journey with Jesus*. August 12, 2018.

² “Proverbs” by Christine Roy Yoder in *Women’s Bible Commentary* ed. Carol A. Newsom p. 232.

The wisdom sayings throughout Proverbs try to persuade the listener to choose Wisdom. They have a folksy common sense about them:

“Doing wrong is like sport to a fool, But wise conduct is pleasure to a person of understanding.”

10:23

Or this one, which is not the kindest towards women but too colorful not to mention:

“Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout Is a beautiful woman who is without good sense.” 11:22

“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, But those who are kind to the needy honor God.” 14:31

Or maybe the sleepy teenager needs this one in order to get out of bed for back to school: Proverbs 6:6-8 “Go to the ant, you lazybones;

consider its ways and be wise.

Without having any chief

or officer or ruler,

it prepares its food in summer

and gathers its sustenance in harvest.”

In most of our cultures, we have sayings such as these. After worship, I encourage any of you who have wisdom proverbs to share them from your language and your culture. We may even find some wisdom sayings that repeat across cultures.

The common-sense nature of much of the Wisdom sayings in Proverbs paints Wisdom as

something universally accessible to all of humankind, it is a feast at a banquet open to anyone, if only we pay attention to what Wisdom offers.

My best friend from seminary, Erik, has a younger sister with some mental illness and developmental delays. Tara will never be able to live independently, and in some rough years, despite lots of care and intervention from her parents, she was drawn to danger like a moth to a flame; Tara even spent some time as a

young adult living under a bridge. Now things for her are stable; she lives in a group home and has a job she's proud of. While my seminary friend and his parents are bookish, philosophical, nerdy types, my friend's sister loves what a middle schooler today might describe as "skibidi toilet" TV. Tara is not one that people would commonly look to as "wise." But still, a wise person should see beyond what meets the eye.

My seminary friend has come to deeply respect the sage wisdom of his younger sister Tara. He may be struggling with a problem for many months, discuss it with his therapist with no resolution, and finally share with Tara what is going on. In the plainest of terms, his sister will lay out a hard truth, and help him resolve his struggle and ultimately find peace. Tara does not only do that for her brother; they talk regularly, and sometimes my friend will share a problem one of his friends is having, and again, with the sharpest of insight, Tara will dish out profound advice using the simplest of words. She has a special knack for cutting through the BS and knowing what motivates someone to do something, and can uncover underlying issues that someone often cannot yet see within themselves. She can do that for herself, too. She has outgrown her more dangerous impulses, and was living by herself in supportive housing— but realized the ache of loneliness was too much for her. So, she returned to the group home, because she likes living in community. I admire how Tara can articulate what she needs, better than many of us. I have learned that Tara is so wise.

I think about the special relationship my friend Erik has with his sister Tara, her mental illness and struggles around that, and her wisdom. When I heard about the police killing of a mentally ill woman in Fort Lee last month after her family called 911 for help when the woman, named Victoria Lee, was having a mental health crisis. It should not have happened like this. I ache for the Korean community to which she belonged, and for those with mental illness. I ache because the woman who was killed shared the same name as one of our beloved church members, and I can imagine her being one of our own church members in crisis, which has happened before. I ache for the police department, which includes one of our church families, and for the police member who shot her in a moment's reaction— he doesn't belong to our church and I don't know him, but what if he had belonged to our church? I realize that like Solomon, he likely is a man of heroic virtue as well as tremendous human flaw. I realize that you or I could be described like that, too. I long for more wisdom: wisdom not

only in how to look at the situation, but also more broadly in how we look at healthcare and mental healthcare, wisdom in how neighbors provide care for immigrants, wisdom in how we extend care for one another.

In the pursuit of wisdom, I plan to address our own Leonia police department, to ask what one should be able to expect if they call 911 for a mental health crisis, and what they are doing to make sure people feel safe in doing so. Decades before I got here, this church set up meetings between the Leonia police and the growing immigrant Korean community, because people then were afraid to call the police over things like domestic disputes; they feared a call like that would bring more harm than good to their households. These meetings built connection and understanding of both groups and helped residents know what rights they should expect to have. We all need to grow in wise awareness of our neighbor and what they may need.

It occurs to me that the wisdom writings may indeed speak to Solomon's pursuit of both wisdom, and foolishness. The truth is, we each have the capacity of both inside of us. We are, each of us, flawed people of God, and we are sometimes drawn to the more appealing ways of foolishness. Which is why Wisdom invites us to feast at her table. This table is a crossroads, a is a point of meeting, stopping, pausing for people coming from and going in different directions. It is a place of coming together, even when paths diverge. Here Wisdom chooses to preside. Pull up a chair, and join Wisdom's feast.