

# Wisdom Raises Her Voice

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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The preaching experts say that you're supposed to start a sermon with something funny or provocative to grab people's attention and perhaps retain it a bit longer.

So, I want to begin this morning with a quote that might raise your temperature a bit.

The quote was the subject of an episode of CBC's Ideas a while back.<sup>1</sup> It has been mistakenly attributed to Winston Churchill and Oscar Wilde, but the source remains unclear.

Here it is:

If you're not a socialist at twenty, you have no heart, and if you're not a conservative at forty, you have no brain.

Some of you are probably inwardly seething right now; others might be congratulating yourselves.

No one enjoys being implicitly told that they do (or don't) have a brain or a heart. Those are fighting words, right there. Which is of course why the quote is repeated and why it's memorable.

Is it true?

Do we tend to get more conservative as we age? Do youthful ideals inevitably give way to world-wise pragmatism as the years drift by?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/conservative-with-age-why-your-political-stripes-change-over-time-1.4442808>

Is conservatism that logical destination of those whose compassion is tempered by the cold blast of realism delivered by “the way the world really works?”

Most of us wouldn’t have to think too hard to come up with exceptions to the rule that this quote supposedly describes.

I know people whose trajectory runs in the opposite direction: conservative at twenty and liberal at forty. I know others whose views haven’t changed much at all from twenty to forty.

I know many more people whose political and theological perspectives are much more nuanced and flexible than a pointing to a single spot on a continuum running from left to right.

And, of course, I know some people for whom the quote above would ring absolutely true. We are all over the place.

I walked away from this podcast more suspicious of the categories it employs than anything else.

Words like “liberal” and “conservative” and “left” and “right” are very narrow gates to squeeze people through.

And I walked away thinking that we need to ask better questions.

The important question for me isn’t, “Do people by and large start liberal and become conservative or vice versa?”

The question I am more interested in, the question I think we should *all* be more interested in is, “Do people become wiser with age?”

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Wisdom is the focus of our main text this morning. Wisdom is personified in the shape of a woman (which is probably telling!).

Wisdom is described as the “first of God’s works” (Prov. 8:22), as delighting with God in the creation of the world and of humankind.

It is a marvellous poetic depiction of the theological truth that wisdom is woven into the very fabric of creation. There is an intimate connection between wisdom and God’s creative activity in the world and in our lives.

Wisdom is not something that human beings gradually invent along a long process of trial and error and self-discovery. It is a pre-existing reality that we *discover*.

It's a stream that we join rather than fighting against its current. It's a voice that we choose to heed rather than ignoring.

It's a dance whose steps we learn rather than stumbling confusedly around the floor (as I did at the party after a recent baptism celebration with our Syrian friends! ).

It's a story that we find our place in instead of insisting upon making up our own.

When we pursue wisdom, when we listen to her voice, we are aligning ourselves with the fabric and structure of creation. There is a way that things are supposed to go, a way that human lives ought to be lived, because God made them this way.

I think this is a desperately necessary truth that we need to recover in our time when are drowning in knowledge and information but starving for wisdom.

We have never had access to the sheer volume of data that we do today; but we are increasingly clueless about bigger questions about what to *do* with all of this information, how to synthesize and incorporate it into lives that are meaningful, which contribute to human flourishing and the flourishing of all creation.

Proverbs 8 describes wisdom as always calling to all people. But we don't listen as often as we should. Wisdom can be an inconvenient taskmaster. She pokes and she prods, and she unsettles.

At least she does, if we're listening, at any rate.

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I have tried, and failed, and tried again to listen to Wisdom as she calls out at the city gates. This morning I want to share a personal and partial list of what Wisdom has taught and continues to teach me along the way.

Some is general; some more specific to our cultural moment. There is much that I will leave out.

There are probably things that Lady Wisdom has taught you along your journey that I won't cover. But I submit it to you nonetheless in the hopes that it will be helpful.

**Wisdom tells me to grow up.** She demands that I resist cultural tendencies toward easy categories and self-flattery. She asks me to hold some things in tension, to perhaps withhold judgment, to listen. She groans when I say things in order to be praised.

**Wisdom teaches me to guard against the assumption that progress is inevitable or linear.** She warns me to pay attention to how terms like "progressive" and "traditional" and "liberal" and "conservative" are wielded in public discourse. She tells me that human beings love to think of

themselves as right and virtuous and that these words are most often employed toward those ends.

**Wisdom tells me that there's almost always another side to the story.** Claire and I went on a long walk on Wednesday as part of the Walk for Common Ground and reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous people. Every time I inhabit these spaces and conversations, I am reminded that things look different from other perspectives. Wisdom invites me to listen to the stories of others, and even after I have attempted to listen, to not assume that I have fully understood.

**Wisdom trains me to be suspicious of those who stand to profit from keeping human beings reactionary and angry.** The internet feeds on these things. Wisdom whispers, "Don't trust those who seek to monetize tribalistic thinking and herd mentality." She rebukes my tendency to click, click, click away at headlines that tell me (implicitly or explicitly) how stupid my enemies are and how virtuous I am.

**Wisdom tells me to take a long view.** It's easy for me to get anxious about how things are going, particularly when they're not going well. Wisdom reminds me that God isn't finished with me, with those around me, with the church, with the world. She tells me to be patient, to persevere in hope. She reminds me that God can be trusted with the future.

**Wisdom insists that human beings make very poor and unreliable gods.** She scolds me for the many ways in which my worship can be misdirected. She warns of the dangers of putting the self where God alone should be. She teaches me there are parts of me that must die in order to live the life I was created for.

**Wisdom tells me to shut up more than I would like her to.** She reminds me of how little I really know. She patiently and insistently holds silence before me as a viable option. She informs me that I don't always need to have an opinion and that even when I do it doesn't necessarily need to be shared.

**Wisdom reminds me to rejoice always, to give thanks for goodness.** By nature, it is easy for me to dwell on the things that are not as they should be in this world. Wisdom reminds me that joy is a spiritual discipline and an expression of determined hope. Douglas Groothuis is a professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary and was given to pessimism, particularly after the death of his wife. This week, he published an article for *Christianity Today* called "The Risk of Happiness." In it, he says:

Why not embrace happiness now and expect more—in this broken world, on this groaning orb? Every happy thought, every feeling of joy... is a strike against the fall and Satan and his devils... I am learning to welcome the pleasant as just as real as the unpleasant. No, it

is more real! God made all things very good before the fall. Sin is a parasite on goodness, which is aboriginal in God and creation. Joy will find a way, even through the detours.<sup>2</sup>

**Wisdom loves the truth.** She invites me to love it more than I do—even when I’m convinced that I’m already quite fond of it. She shows me that truth is—incredibly!—bigger than my apprehension of it.

**Wisdom demands humility.** She’s very insistent upon this point. She doesn’t like it when I pretend to be wiser than I am.

**Wisdom invites me to come to Jesus.** She points to him and says, “This is what it means to be human.” And while I’m chewing on all that this might mean, she adds, “It’s also what it means to be God.” She smiles at me while she watches the gears grind in my brain on this deepest of mysteries.

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**Wisdom never tires of repeating, “Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”**

This is the one I want to end with.

Each one of us has been given an incredible and beautiful gift. A life. And we have been invited to discover what it means to become a fully human being.

We have been called by Lady Wisdom to keep moving toward love.

This is a lesson that Wisdom has been teaching me for some time now—that a life of spiritual maturity involves a movement away from the imperative to be right and toward the invitation to love.

I have always wanted to be right. The truth of the matter *matters* to me. More than it probably should. This is what drove me into the study of philosophy in university, what had me poring through systematic theologies in grad school, what dominates pretty much all the writing I have done for the last decade and a half.

The desire to be right has sent me off into unproductive and unwise conversations on social

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/june-web-only/risk-of-happiness.html?fbclid=IwAR1Yrrc28eQ6ITInPGteqwre0L2A\\_U8meEPXQfBDzB-ffkSxticeE6lhcs8](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/june-web-only/risk-of-happiness.html?fbclid=IwAR1Yrrc28eQ6ITInPGteqwre0L2A_U8meEPXQfBDzB-ffkSxticeE6lhcs8)

media. It has opened my mouth when said mouth should remain closed in the domains of marriage and parenting.

At times it has reduced my faith into a sterile cognitive exercise, as if God's main interest in granting me a handful of decades on this planet was to ensure that I was right about enough things to pass the cosmic test.

I don't think God has any particular interest in me being *wrong*. The truth of the matter—whether of the human condition or the meaning of the universe—is not some incidental detail.

I think God cares about what I think. But the older I get, the more I am convinced that God cares a fair bit more about *what* and *who* and *how* I love.

The movement of wisdom and spiritual growth is, for me, very much a movement away from a need to be right and toward a commitment to learn how to love.

I can be right—even about God!—and still act like a donkey. I know this because I have some natural talent for it.

I can also be wrong but loving. I can be kind and merciful and sensitive, even when it turns out I was misguided about this or that idea or issue. I have less experience with this, but I'm getting there. I still have some growing up to do.

I've discovered that loving well is actually quite a bit harder than being right. It is for me, at any rate.

I've learned a lot of stuff in four decades or so on the planet. I've picked up a few degrees, I've clogged up an entire little corner of the Internet with my writings, I've made real progress, I think, in understanding some of the complex issues that are part and parcel of life in the twenty-first century. I've probably even been right a time or two.

But to grow in love (I mean, real love, not the innumerable feeble imitations that lay claim to the word)? The kind of love that Christ taught and modeled?

The kind of love that sacrifices and keeps no record of wrongs and always protects and perseveres? The kind of love that lays down its own prerogatives and seeks the good of the other?

The kind of love that finds its way into the cracks and seams of all that hurts and is broken? The kind of love that doesn't need to be right?

Here, I fear, my progress has been less impressive.

Love is hard. But love is, more than anything, what I want for the remaining chapters in my own story, for my kids, for the church, for all that God has made.

I would be willing to be wrong about a lot of things if it meant that I would grow in love.

As Christians, we read passages like Proverbs 8 through the lens of Christ, even though it was obviously written long before Jesus arrived on the scene.

As Christians who believe that God is and has always been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we believe that Jesus was there, at the beginning of it all, delighting in wisdom.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus was and is the very embodiment of wisdom.

And the Christian conviction is that the separation between what is true and what is loving is artificially construed.

It's a distinction that occurs to fragile and fallen human beings because we struggle to imagine things could be other than our many binary distinctions.

But of course, it is in Christ that we see the good, the true, and the beautiful coalesce into a glorious singularity.

In Christ, the question, "Should we seek to be right or to be loving?" makes little sense because his life embodied (and embodies) a single word in reply: "Yes."

But for those of us who are not Jesus? Well, we should probably start with love.

My sense is that Jesus would say to all of us seekers: "Why don't you try to love as I have loved you? And in so doing, you will come to see that you are right."

Wisdom raises her voice. At the highest point along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand.

She raises her voice and she invites each one of us to listen with our lives and with our love.

Amen.

