

## The Cross in the Dumpster – Wisdom in the Streets

Proverbs 1:20–33

Responsive Reading: Voices United Wisdom 7, p. 891

Mark 8:27–38

Our reading from Proverbs describes in active terms that aspect of God we know as Holy Wisdom. Holy wisdom is decidedly feminine in imagery. Many scholars feel that it is a remnant, an echo of Goddess worship. Holy Wisdom is also associated with “Ruah” that breathe of God, or the wind of God that blew over Creation. Our Christian story also associates her with the Holy Spirit, that connecting, enlivening, creative aspect of God that propelled and continues to propel Christians gathered together.

The book of Proverbs begins with Holy Wisdom, Sophia God. We find Her throughout the entire book. She has something to say, to teach. The trouble is, she can't get any traction. No one is listening - in the temples, in the places that people usually gather to listen to God. In religious gatherings, religious rituals, and spiritual places – no one is listening; no one is there. She decides to take it to the streets; to the city gates and to the market places where the throngs gather – where people sell their wares. These are the places where political debates happen – where the other women who are selling something people might want – where the prostitutes gather and shout out – this is where Holy Wisdom goes. She shouts out too. It is a remarkable image: Holy Wisdom on the loose.

This week I could not see Her – at all. I hope you indulge me as I whine a bit. I had a difficult week. My computer died at the beginning of it; that meant I had to beg borrow and steal bits and pieces of computer time from other people in order to do the basic minimum of my job. Presbytery was this week. We had some cases of Ministers being anxious and saying unfortunate things. It is just an outcropping of the edge of anxiety that churches everywhere are feeling about the future. We know that the institutional church is finishing up. People are leaving the temples for gatherings in the marketplaces. Wisdom, as Russell Daye would say, is calling for us to dwell in Tent Church. She is calling for something new, something to be set loose. But we can not get a picture of it. Not yet. It is difficult to know what is coming around the corner.

To cheer myself up I read the September issue of the *United Church Observer*. There I learned even more about the collapse of institutional church. Sociologist Reginald Bibby says that in 1984, 20% of teens between the ages of 15-19, self identified as mainline protestant. That has fallen to 5% today. In 1984, 1% of this same age group identified themselves as Muslim. That has risen to 5% today. I am glad that God is moving within the Muslim teen community. However, I was sad about our failure as mainline churches to create a home that teens find engaging and meaningful...Just sad.

Then on Friday morning I was part of a group that tried to gather together some political people to get accurate information about resources available to St. John's as we move forward on this redevelopment project. Our Municipal Councilor Jennifer Watts showed up as well as our Member of Parliament, Megan Leslie. Our provincial person was not able to make it. That made me sad too. I was sharing with Megan the stats about youth and young adult involvement in a casual conversation and she stated that this is a general civic problem as well. There are many, wonderful youth and young adults active

and committed to causes and the common good, but they will not exercise their right to vote. In fact, some will not vote on principle. Sad again, I was. We both agreed, something is happening. It is not bad, there are still just as many good people in the world as there ever were; it is just that it is hard to know what the future will look like – what is around the civic corner.

In terms of St. John's, I realized the road ahead of us, as we move around in this tent church in the desert is long, and arduous. None of us in ministry have been trained for this particular time in Christian history. There is no map. I believe I was having what is known as a vocational crisis last week. So, on Friday afternoon, I read the scriptures for Sunday again and reflected. That usually inspires me. Instead I read about Holy Wisdom ranting in the streets with no one listening. Where are the people? Why won't they listen? I read about Peter who recognized who Jesus was and then denied who Jesus was to become. Who do we say that Jesus is these days? I was just sad, sad, and sad.

I decided to walk the streets of Bedford with my dog. Maybe Holy Wisdom would give me some inspiration. Fat chance. I gave God a serious talking to as I paced the streets. God, I said, you are going to have to help me. Jesus says to take all things to you in prayer. I need *something* – some spiritual uplifting, some inspiration. Something big. No minor inspiration, no ambiguous signs; I want a smack-up-the-side-of-head sign. I acknowledge, as I stride, that this is ridiculous, maybe even sacrilegious. Turning the corner, two young teen males, Junior High age, are hauling a very large, worn, wooden cross.

I am so shocked I almost run right past them. I turn back and meet them. They stop their labour.

"Um. Hi" I said. "You boys have a big wooden cross here. What is up with that?"

The boy at the head of the cross walking with the cross bar over his shoulder stopped and answered, "We found it sticking out of a dumpster."

"Oh. So you took it out. Can I ask why?"

"I'm a Christian." He replies.

Hardly comprehending that he must be one of the tiny number of Bibby-predicted "self professing" teen Christians in Bedford, I could not respond. Then he added, "Hey, you can't let a good cross go to waste!"

Pausing to collect myself, I manage to say, "Look, I'm a United Church minister. My name is Linda Yates. What are yours?" Turns out Jacob is the name of the talkative boy holding the top of the cross and the boy holding the bottom of the cross is Andrew.

I am still suspicious. They are probably scamming me. Perhaps they are going to take it home and burn it or something. Jacob speculates, "You know, this is heavy, I can see why Jesus needed someone to help him carry it."

He knows the story!! I am talking to a self professing Christian boy who actually knows the story!"

"Well, Jacob and Andrew, what are you going to do with the cross?"

"I don't know," Jacob responds, "I was just going to take it home until we could figure something out."

"Well, why don't you bring it to my house? I can always use a big wooden cross. Tell you what. For your trouble I will give you guys ten dollars, because it is a long way and it is all uphill."

Two other boys approach. “Hey Jacob” one of them shouts. What are you doing with the cross?”

Andrew shouts back, “We were going to bring it to Jacob’s house but now we are bringing it to this lady’s house and she’s giving us ten bucks to do it.” The other boys think this is “cool.”

So I give them my address and tell them to explain to my son Matthew what has happened. I continue my walk. I am just stunned by this encounter. I am filled with the love and inspiration of God.

I arrive home about an hour later looking forward to inspecting my new, old cross. No cross. I look everywhere and then realize that it has not been delivered. Young people – just can’t follow through, I grouse to myself. More than that - I am locked out. My son has taken the car and very sensibly secured the house by locking all the doors. I am just, sad, sad, sad. Maybe God is torturing me, like Job. Matthew comes home and asks me why I appear so sad. I explain that God is torturing me like Job. Matthew responds that if there is a God who is personally involved in people’s lives, He probably has better things to do than torture me. Good wisdom, that. Matthew asks what has happened to make me think such things. I look at him and realize that it is just too much work to tell the whole story. I am too tired and too discouraged. Who would believe it anyway? Best to let it just slide. As we are talking, the door bell rings, the dogs go mad and Sarah, Matt’s partner, comes to find me. “Um, there are two boys with a very large cross out there. Do you know anything about that?”

I rush to the door. Jacob bows his head a little. “I know Jesus carried it the whole way,” he says, “But my Dad has a pick up truck.”

I thank them both and give them fifteen dollars. But then, I stop them. I call them back to the porch. Someone has done a good job of teaching these boys the faith and the story. Where did they go to church, I ask them? Jacob says he had checked out the “Catholics, the United and the Baptists” and still had not figured out where he wanted to be. Andrew says most of the time he is just Catholic. Jacob then says “God bless, and they left in his Dad’s truck. I tell them to keep trying to find a place in a church they can feel comfortable with.

Two self identifying Christian boys of about 13 years of age, carrying a large, rugged wooden cross through the streets of Bedford. They recognized the symbol, THE SYMBOL of our faith, sticking out of a dumpster and thought it just wasn’t right. They went through the trouble of dragging it out, took the risk of ridicule in the streets from their peers and planned to bring it “home” for safe keeping. They took the time to talk to a cranky, middle aged United Church minister questioning where God is in the midst of all the radical change in our world. Holy Wisdom and an old rugged Cross in the hands of a boy who church surfs and knows the Christian story. As long as there is a child whose connection with a faith community enables them to look at a cross and recognize a call from God, we will always be called to gather together to tell the old, old stories and to create some new, new ones.

I stared at that cross a lot this weekend. Funny how when you stare at an old wooden cross delivered to your house by two young teenage boys, your views change about what you think God can do and what happens in church despite your own semi-adequate skills and abilities.

Holy Wisdom left the Temple and went into the streets. She cried out at the city gates and in the city centre. People gathered round her. You have already heard her and you answered. You would not be here this day if you did not. More than that, You ARE her. You are Holy Wisdom in your workplaces and in your home life when you live out your faith, when you talk about your faith, when you teach your children about God and when your children teach you about God. Holy Wisdom has spoken. Holy Wisdom is speaking.

As I stared at this cross all weekend, I realized that the collapse of institutions is not a new story. If there is one constant in the Bible, it is this. The institutions, the governments, the human systems that we create, sooner or later, change or fall. The Temple collapsed, the Babylonian Empire Collapsed and the Roman Empire collapsed. The Protestant Reformation radically changed what was known as institutional church four hundred years ago. The morphing and changing of institutions happens and should always happen. The Bible tells us so. Our responsibility is to gather together in the midst of it all, to worship, to care, to tell the stories of our faith. We will do that in all times and all places in new forms and in old. What is emerging in these new times both for our national United Church and for St. John's? We don't know. Maybe we don't need to know. We can't know what is around the next corner as we walk along. Maybe that is okay. Maybe as we move forward, we just need to listen for Holy Wisdom crying out in the streets. Sometimes, her voice sounds like a thirteen year old boy saying matter-of-factly, "Hey, you can't let a good cross go to waste."



The wooden cross against the shed at St. John's House, 6233 Willow St. Halifax. (Closed up Church in background). September, 2009.