

Wise and Wild Voices

Michigan Annual Conference
RCO Sermon

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Bishop David Alan Bard

Texts: Proverbs 1:2-6; 8:1-5; Matthew 11:7-19

Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit.

No matter the context, no matter what else has transpired at annual conference, no matter what all is going on in the world, this service brings me great joy. It encourages me. These are difficult days in so many ways and we can quickly recite the reasons why: pandemic lingering, racial reckoning sporadically moving forward and desperately needed as evidenced by the recent shooting in Buffalo, overall increases in violence – including the horrific school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, a war in Europe – and who would have thought that might happen, a country divided and often unable to have creative and constructive conversations about important public policy and the common good.

One of the Scripture readings for this service was from Proverbs. Isn't it interesting that in the middle of our Bible we find a book of songs and poems, songs and poems that sing for joy and cry out in lament; and a book of wisdom that ponders the world and tries to make some sense of it all.

A faith rooted in the God of this Bible is a faith inviting us to hold all that we know and experience in our souls. It invites us to let God's Spirit work in us so that we have large souls, capacious hearts, and expansive minds. I think of the Charles Mingus song from his seminal 1959 album, "Mingus Ah Um, "Got To Get It In Your Soul." Prayer, in part, is meant to help

enlarge our souls, increase the space and capacity in our hearts and grow our minds. It is making time and space for new thoughts and deeper imaginings, fresh dreams and impressions from God's Spirit. In one of her poems, Mary Oliver writes of praying as "the doorway/into thanks, and a silence in which/another voice may speak" ("Praying"). Large souls, capacious hearts, expansive minds speak of a kind of maturity that seems lacking in too many places in our world.

Our world. Sister Joan Chittister: "A world gone badly askew stands on the cusp between authoritarianism and freedom, between universal compassion and national self-centeredness. It is a world scarred with violence, institutionalized fraud, rapacious human degradation, political suppression, economic slavery, and rampant narcissism. It is a world in wait. It waits for some wise and wild voices to lead us back to spiritual sanity." (The Time is Now, 15). The world waits for some wise and wild voices to lead us back to spiritual sanity.

You are called to be such wise and wild voices. The church is called to be such a wise and wild voice and you have responded to the call to help lead us in this. Wise and wild voices. What might that mean? What have you gotten yourself into? It might be good to think about this together again before you take the next step. "Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?" It might be good to ponder this voice of wisdom and what she calls us to be and do.

Wisdom. In her book, Becoming Wise, Krista Tippett writes: *Wisdom leavens intelligence and ennobles consciousness.... Religious and spiritual traditions have borne wisdom across time, though in charged cultural spaces they can become parodies of themselves. When I speak of these things, I'm speaking of places where we pay essential humanity an attention*

unmatched in our other disciplines – our capacities to love and take joy, our capacities to damage and deceive, the inevitability of failure and finitude, the longing to be of service. I love the deep savvy about hope that religion tends, its reverence for the undervalued virtue of beauty, its seriousness about the common human experience of mystery. (3). Frederick Buechner writes: “Wisdom is a matter not only of the mind but of the intuition and the heart” (Whistling in the Dark). Wisdom – four thoughts with some sub-thoughts within those.

The very next verse in Proverbs 1 after those we read: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” We also read some verses from Proverbs 8, and in the next chapter find these words: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (9:10).

What might it mean to say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom? First, I think this makes wisdom a spiritual exercise. Learning, seeking wisdom, cultivating wisdom is as important to our spiritual lives as prayer, worship, acts of compassion and justice. If we are not learning and growing in our spiritual lives, there is something amiss. Certainly prayer, worship, bible study, acts of compassion and justice contribute to wisdom, and we need to be intentional about that.

Second, to say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom is to understand that wisdom provides perspective. Our lives, our work need to be understood as part of God’s on-going work in the world. We are working toward God’s dream for the world, the reign of God – where justice and peace kiss, where there is beauty and joy and dancing, where dividing walls have broken down, where all share a place at the table in the feast of God in Jesus. In a rabbinic saying from the Talmud: “It is not up to you to finish the task, but you are not free to

avoid it” (Pirke Avot). Perspective in our lives and ministry needs to hold together what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the fierce urgency of now” with the words of John Lewis: “Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime” (David Gergen, Hearts Touched with Fire, 40).

Finally, when we say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom we are saying that the spiritual discipline of wisdom necessarily includes the cultivation of humility. Krista Tippett says humility is “woven through lives of wisdom and resilience.” She calls humility “a companion to curiosity and delight.” “Like humor, it softens us for hospitality and beauty and questioning and all the other virtues.... Spiritual humility is not about getting small, not about debasing oneself, but about approaching everything and everyone else with a readiness to see goodness and to be surprised.... It has a lightness of step, not a heaviness of heart.” (266). What if we approached every ministry opportunity with a readiness to see goodness and be surprised?

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, 1 a, b and c.

Two, wisdom asks us to use our best knowledge and our deepest thinking. I would call this “prudence” something raised up often in Proverbs – “to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young.” You are all aware of what we call the Wesleyan quadrilateral. “As United Methodists, we have an obligation to bear a faithful Christian witness to Jesus Christ, the living reality at the center of the Church’s life and witness. To fulfill this obligation, we reflect critically on our biblical and theological inheritance, striving to express faithfully the witness we make in our own time” (Book of Discipline, ¶105). This part of “Our Theological Task” from The Book of Discipline goes on to say: “Wesley believed that the living

core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”

The world cries out for a thoughtful Christian faith, one that does not ignore important sources of knowledge while integrating that knowledge within our faith tradition. The early Christian theologian, Justin wrote in about 150 CE: “whatever has been uttered aright by any person in any place belongs to us Christians; for next to God, we worship and love the reason (Word) which is from the unbegotten and ineffable God.”

The world cries out for a thoughtful Christian faith that can think critically. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Never must the church tire of reminding [people] that they have a moral responsibility to be intelligent. Must we not admit that the church has often overlooked this moral demand for enlightenment? At times it has talked as though ignorance were a virtue and intelligence a crime.” (The Strength to Love, 31). We are awash in information, yet are drowning in it for our lack of critical thinking to sift through some of the garbage that we hear and see and read. The moral obligation to be intelligent, making use of the quadrilateral, thinking critically, wisdom as prudence.

Wisdom as prudence and wisdom as humility both lend themselves to a third dimension of wisdom I want to call to our attention on this special night – wisdom as a deep appreciation of complexity. The author F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (The Crack-Up, 69). We find such complexity throughout our Scriptures. We are justified by grace through faith and that is not of our own doing (Ephesians 2:8-9) – work out

your salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Abraham was reckoned righteous by faith (Romans 4), Abraham was justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2). Both/and.

“Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles” (Proverbs 1:5-6). If we are awash in information, some of which is just garbage, we are also too often captive to overly simple accounts. Being in Minnesota much of the past three weeks, I couldn’t help but see some political ads for an open House of Representatives seat in the state. One ad, sponsored by a political action committee, extolled a candidate by calling him a conservative fighter and Trump appointee. Within ten minutes, another ad, sponsored by another political action committee, labeled the same candidate a socialist and weak on voting integrity. Are those really the options – conservative fighter or socialist? When I issued my pastoral statement following the shooting in Buffalo, where ten people were killed in an attack by an eighteen-year-old that was clearly racially-motivated, one response I received referred to “your antifa.” My antifa? Calling out the clear and clearly claimed racial motivations of a young man who killed ten people at a grocery store makes me a part of antifa?

The world cries out for a thoughtful Christian faith that can take complexity seriously.

The world waits from some wise and wild voices to lead us back to spiritual sanity. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. Wisdom is a spiritual exercise, one in which you need to engage, in which all leaders need to engage so as to be able to lead. Wisdom is perspective and humility. Wisdom is prudent – taking in knowledge and engaging in critical thinking. Wisdom understands, appreciates, and incorporates complexity.

Wise and wild voices. While two adjectives are used, I think wisdom and wildness overlap, the fourth dimension of wisdom is that wisdom can and should also be wild.

I first heard this Seamus Heaney poem years ago while driving from a meeting back to my pastor's office. Heaney had done a reading at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and they were replaying it on Minnesota Public Radio.

Human beings suffer.
They torture one another.
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave,
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a farther shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

The poem continues from there. Hear the realism, the complexity – human suffering not easily alleviated. Voices of hopelessness that need to be heard, though not capitulated to. Wisdom. And hear the wildness. Once in a lifetime/the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up/and hope and history rhyme. So hope for a great sea-change/On the far side of revenge./Believe that a farther shore/Is reachable from here./Believe in miracles/And cures and healing wells.

Biblical wisdom, deep Spirit wisdom in Jesus Christ knows that God continues to be at work in the world in amazing and surprising ways. Biblical wisdom, deep Spirit wisdom in Jesus Christ listens to the often unheard or underheard voices that speak of alternatives, that speak of deep pain and radical hope. Biblical wisdom, deep Spirit wisdom in Jesus Christ remains open to being surprised by how it is the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up and hope and history rhyme.

Attending to the wild dimension of wisdom is soul work. It is listening to those deep places in our hearts, minds and souls, places we may have difficulty naming, voices we may have difficulty putting into words. We pay attention to our Spirit-formed intuitions. We ask questions. We interrogate our intuitions, and we remember that wisdom is a matter not only of the mind but of the intuition and the heart.

Joan Chittister encourages us to “trust those whose heart has been formed in the scriptures and whose sincere commitment is to the coming Reign of God” (The Time is Now, 94). If you, if we, are to be those wise and wild voices who will lead toward spiritual sanity, we need to be leaders whose hearts have been formed in the scriptures and whose deep soul commitment is to the coming Reign of God.

In this reflection, I have given none of you three steps to a great sermon, the four best kept secrets of successful leaders, organizing 101, or reading a financial spreadsheet. Such technical skills matter. And in this world so often tottering on spiritual insanity, whose brokenness is evident, where we are deeply divided and are finding it difficult to affirm our common humanity in God, where there is too much injustice, where we are too often brutally unkind, we need wise and wild voices to lead us toward spiritual sanity. This is the voice of

Jesus Christ. This is the voice of the Church. And if the Church is to speak with the wise and wild voice of Jesus we need leaders steeped in wisdom. We need leaders who continue to nurture and hone habits of mind, habits of heart and practices of wisdom.

“For John came neither eating nor drinking and they say, ‘He has a demon;’ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” Wisdom helps us to know when to neither eat nor drink, and when to eat and drink. Wisdom as perspective, as humility, as prudence, as encompassing complexity, wild wisdom attending to the gentle whispers of the Spirit, wisdom is vindicated by the lives changed for those on the wisdom journey, for the good done for the Reign of God for those who attend to wisdom. Wisdom as spiritual practice, as developing habits of heart and soul and mind is eminently practical. It knows the importance of developing technical skills, and the habits of wisdom are the habits needed by a less-anxious, adaptive leader. The spiritual practices of wisdom help us to know both the need for change and the need to pace change. Wisdom guides us to develop as leaders with large souls, capacious hearts, expansive minds; leaders with soft fronts, strong backs and wild and courageous hearts. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

The spiritual practices of wisdom help us attend more deeply to the movement of God in Jesus Christ, and attune our lives more thoroughly to that movement. The spiritual practices of wisdom remind us that while we know something of this movement of God, there is always surprise along the way. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, “we know only enough to sing songs and speak poems. That, however, is enough. We stake our lives on such poems.” (Finally Comes the Poet, 41)

At the center of our Scriptures are books of songs and poems and a book of wisdom. To sing the songs of God, to speak the poems of the Spirit in ways that lead toward spiritual sanity, requires we do the work of wisdom. We need your wise and wild voices, my friends, we need your wise and wild voices. We commit ourselves to cultivating such voices alongside you and encouraging you in the practices and habits of wisdom. Together we will do our best to lead the church in being a wise and wild voice leading the world back toward spiritual sanity. Amen.