

How Long?

The collection of wisdom known as Proverbs is sometimes attributed to King Solomon, because of his reputation for being a wise king. And some of the sayings may, in fact be things that Solomon said, but the book as a whole was put into the form that we see (except in Hebrew), in about the 6th Century B.C., sometime after the exile. This is actually kind of important to know, because a lot of Proverbs appears to be the sort of wisdom that one acquires only by getting one's butt roundly kicked.

Lady Wisdom, or as the Greeks call her, Sophia, is pretty clear in her warnings: "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?" Now, the Hebrew word, *patah* is pretty mild. In fact, I think the southern expression, "bless your heart," pretty much sums up what it means. It means you're stupid in the sense of being naïve and gullible, it's not wicked, it's just ignorant, and maybe even willfully so. She ratchets up the invective against the scoffers, who are the cynics and the ones who like to think they know all about things, and then she comes down on the fools who "hate knowledge." I think you can probably picture people you know who fit into all of these categories, from a "bless your heart" bumpkin to hostile sociopaths.

Lady Wisdom is not so crass as to lump every type of foolishness together, she knows there is a big difference in the motivation of the simple, the scoffers and the wicked fools. But she also knows that they all pose a danger to the "shalom" of God's people. It doesn't really matter why you head down the path of wickedness, whether it is ignorance or willful wrongdoing, the destruction that waits is a terrible thing. But I want you to notice that the consequences are going to be that they have to "eat the fruit of their way, and be sated with their own devices."

In other words, they're going to get what they want, and that, as Oscar Wilde once observed, is the only thing worse than not getting what you want. But it takes wisdom to know that, it takes a certain kind of humility to accept that your plans and schemes may lead to naught. It takes another level of depth, often only acquired through bitter searching of the heart, to see that the way of the Lord, does not usually lead us into safety and security, but into justice and mercy instead. Jesus said, "if you would be my follower you must take up your cross and follow me..." to paraphrase: let go of your plans, let go of your foolishness, let go of your scoffing, let go of your ignorance, put it down in favor of the wisdom that cries out to you on the corner.

Now, I will tell you that this is just chapter one of Proverbs, there are thirty more chapters of suggestions as to what is and what is not wise, some of them make a lot of sense even now, and some of them may be lost on us modern folk, but sufficed to say it's pretty complicated. If you start to explore Ecclesiastes and Job, it gets even more difficult to figure out what wisdom really means. Which is why Jesus is so important, if we follow him we will see an example of what living in harmony with wisdom really looks like. He is not simple, in other words he understands things deeply and sees people clearly, even when they do not wish to be seen. He shows us, as with last week, that ignorance is a thing to be conquered, overcome and even transcended, certainly not accepted and celebrated. Jesus can be confrontational and

challenging, but he's not a scoffer either, his anger is righteous and is firmly aimed at those who take advantage of others, even if the others are simple. And Jesus is in no way a fool who hates knowledge, he is always for the light and the truth, even when it is difficult to accept. His disciples even have a hard time dealing with how much he would stay on the righteous path, even if it means laying down his life.

A warning to keep in mind, as we glance at the other text for today, about taming the tongue. Jesus warned his disciples that they should not despise others, and not call people fools. And I think this is because, in the world out there, there are a lot more simple ones than there are fools. In the best possible sense the word *patah* means open minded, or simply open in the sense of innocence. Fools are malignant in their intent, not merely ignorant, but honestly, current events to the side, that is actually quite rare. The simple can be a danger to their community because of their gullibility and because what you don't know really can hurt you, but they are not set against knowledge and wisdom, they just lack it.

Simple ones have the capability to turn and heed Wisdom's call, they can awaken from their slumber and see the light. On Jesus' way we should be conscious of that before we go and get all cranky like Quohemoth (writer of Ecclesiastes). Real wisdom often only comes when you have been beat up, but not beaten, when you have been crushed but not destroyed. Real wisdom is knowing that laying down your life with Jesus means taking it up again with him too. In the wake of the exile, the Hebrew people knew what calamity could befall the simple, the scoffers and the wicked fools alike. They saw that the unaware and the rotten scoundrels had fallen into the same pit, they had lost the illusion that not knowing was okay. We need to learn that lesson right now in so many ways and on so many different fronts.

Listen to the promise of wisdom: "but those who listen to me will be secure, and will live at ease, without dread of disaster." You might think that means that you will be safe, but wisdom will show you that secure means something different than safe, secure means that you are not in danger of being lost, you might be in danger of suffering, but it will not break you or destroy what you are in God's hand. You might think that living at ease means that you get to take it easy, but wisdom will show you that truly being at ease means leaning on God for everything, and it means going where the Good Shepherd takes us, whether it is green pastures or the valley of the shadow. You might think that living without dread of disaster means no disasters will come, but wisdom will tell you that the disasters are inevitable, it's the dread that is not.

How long will you hold on to your simple-mindedness, your scoffing and your foolishness? Are you ready to put it down and heed Wisdom's call?