

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, May 22, 2016
Text: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-15

The Fourth Person of the Trinity



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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I was baptized in a Methodist Church as an infant in the 1940's and confirmed in an Evangelical United Brethren Church when I was in eighth grade in the 1950's. The fact that those two denominations merged in 1968 to become the United Methodist Church helps me to see the continuity of my early church life. I do not remember my baptism, obviously, and I remember little of my confirmation (I do not think that we wrote faith statements in those days), but both steps were important to me in my religious journey.

Coming to the University of Wisconsin as a college student was important, too, not because I did much here, religiously speaking, but because my first three years as an undergraduate provided me with a context within which to frame my own questions of faith. I knew reasonably well what I had been given by my family and the congregations in which I was nurtured, but what did I believe and why did it matter? High school and college can provide us with intellectual concepts and personal relationships that provoke new ideas.

After three years of a hiatus from the church, in my senior year of college I began attending worship with this congregation in the former building. J. Ellsworth Kalas was the minister, and he preached a sermon series on great novels and the faith, just what an English major needed to hear. He kindly invited me to talk with him in his office, which had bookshelves on all four walls from floor to ceiling. "Have you read all of these?" I asked. "No, what good is a library if you have read all the books," he answered. And with that, I began a journey that led to divinity school, a year's internship in England, being a minister in a dairy farming community, pastoring a small church in an industrial city, serving as a campus minister, overseeing a large suburban congregation, being on the Conference staff, and living and working at an historic city center church.

It all began with baptism, and then confirmation, me confirming what was pledged on my behalf by my parents at baptism, activity in my youth group, a time of lying fallow and questioning all that I believed, and then returning to the church under my own auspices.

Participating in the class of inquiry for these last several months is crucial for you, the confirmands, to decide what each of you believes. If you choose to be confirmed, and it is a real choice, that will be taking another step. Likewise, joining the church is a further step. But it is not the end of the journey of faith. Confirmation is not graduation from church; it is a pledge to keep learning. Anyone who stops thinking and wondering and questioning, and even doubting along the way, has missed Jesus' call to be wise disciples.

"Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: 'To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.'" Her cry is for us to learn prudence and to acquire intelligence, to learn what is noble and right and true.

"Wisdom," referred to as "she;" the word in the Greek version of the text is "Sophia." And what does she tell us in Chapter 8 of the Book of Proverbs? That she was the first creation of the Lord and then assisted during the rest of the process as a co-creator. She was there before the oceans were created, before there were mountains and fields, before there was a sky above, before there were humans on earth. In the creative moment "I was beside (the Lord), like a master worker," she says, "and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race." (:30,31)

Tucked away here in the text of Proverbs is what we might consider a fourth creation story. The first is the account in Genesis 1 where God creates everything in a matter of six days, leaving until last his crowning glory – us. We are just a little lower than the angels. And then in Genesis 2, just as we are ready to read of the generations of people who inhabited the earth, we are introduced to a second creation story, the one about Adam, Eve, a snake, a tree, and a garden. In that rendition humans are formed out of the dust of the earth and divine spittle, and God breathes God's own spirit into us so that we can live. This second account counterbalances our nearly angelic elevation of the first one and brings us down to earth. The beginning of the Gospel of John can also be termed a third creation story, though highly abstract in a Greek philosophical sense. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." And who is "he"? Well, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory . . ." It is Jesus the Christ.

So, we have God the creator of all in the first story, who grants us the Holy Spirit of life in the second story, with Jesus Christ declared to be present from the beginning in the third story . . . a fitting triumverate for this Trinity Sunday, and now here comes Wisdom portrayed as a co-creator. We have just added a fourth person to the Trinity.

Blasphemy? Not exactly, though unorthodox, as well as illogical. We cannot have a four-person Trinity by definition. And from the early days of the Church the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which we sometimes refer to in functional terms as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, was an essential creedal affirmation. There were no Unitarians in the early days; either be Trinitarian, or your life was in danger.

I have appreciated the view of William Sloane Coffin, Jr., offered some years ago that creeds should be understood as guideposts, not hitching posts. Yes, by all means, be a Trinitarian; that is definitive of who we are as Christians, even as United Methodist Christians, though I suspect that deep down many of us favor one person of the Trinity over the others. But on this day, a day when we honor the hours of study the confirmands have invested, when we give thanks for all of the work of their mentors, when we cherish Seth and his ministry, and when we see our own faithful understanding as being a work in progress, let us not be afraid to add Wisdom to the picture.

Learning prudence, acquiring intelligence, discovering what is noble, right, and true is the task of faithful inquiry. It will make our world bigger, our beliefs more complex, and our sense of what is truly human more expansive. In what sometimes appears to be a world shrinking in on itself and imploding with prejudice, we need wisdom all the more.

How narrow can faith be without wisdom? Emo Phillips, a bizarrely engaging comedian, portrays it this way: "Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, 'Don't do it!' He said, 'Nobody loves me.' I said, 'God loves you. Do you believe in God?'

He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Are you a Christian or a Jew?' He said, 'A Christian.' I said, 'Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?' He said, 'Protestant.' I said, 'Me, too! What denomination?' He said, 'Baptist.' I said, 'Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?' He said, 'Northern Baptist.' I said, 'Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?'

He said, 'Northern Conservative Baptist.' I said, 'Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?' He said, 'Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.' I said, 'Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?' He said, 'Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.'

I said, 'Die heretic!' And I pushed him over."

Faith without wisdom . . . it can make our world tiny, indeed, and it can make us useless to God. Wisdom is there to protect us from ourselves, to keep us from making easy assumptions, to persuade us to follow Christ and not go along with the crowd. And the tradition of wisdom in the Bible is not just there in the Book of Proverbs, which most likely was not a collection of sayings from the Hebrew tradition but a compendium of good advice of rich Egyptian fathers to their aspiring sons. It also is present in Ecclesiastes, Jonah, Ruth, Daniel, and Job.

The Book of Job is a compelling example of how wisdom can reveal the falsehood of commonly held opinion. The prevailing assumption in the Bible, and it still holds for our culture today, is that God rewards those who are good and punishes those who are bad. And the first two chapters of Job, as well as the last one, all written in prose, are predicated on that popular view. God makes a bet with Satan that, no matter how bad things get, Job will not lose faith in God. Satan takes the bet, and God does terrible things to an innocent man. Job witnesses the deaths of his seven sons and three daughters, but he keeps the faith. God then inflicts Job with terrible health, but Job's devotion to God does not waver; his patience is legendary. Finally, Satan concedes, God wins, and Job's fortunes are restored twice over.

But that is not the story of Job in the intervening 39 chapters, which are written in poetry. Here Job still is blameless and upright, having suffered all the losses as indicated in the first two chapters, but he is hounded by three friends who insist on asking, "Job, what have you done wrong to deserve all of this suffering?" He answers, "I have done nothing to deserve this." But his trinity of friends respond, "You must have done something terrible, Job, otherwise God would not be punishing you like this. All of us standing over at the village well are speculating on your sins. Our imaginations are running wild. Why not confess them to us? After all we are your friends."

Job has nothing to confess! It is God who is the sinner in his view. Job is anything but patient, shaking his fists at heaven, cursing God, and turning common piety upside down. While the psalmist rejoices in God's attention, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (8:4), Job pleads with God to go away, "What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment? Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle?" (7:17-21)

Job's wisdom demolishes the common beliefs of the day. He refuses to give in to the easy answers of his friends. He will protest to the end to find the truth. Whenever we are looking for a vocabulary with which to confront God or to challenge the witlessness of our neighbors, we should look at Job.

Wisdom . . . our unconventional addition to the otherwise customary vision of the Trinity. Wisdom calls us, as she delights in God's creation, to stand far enough away from the conventional opinion to know for ourselves what is noble, right, and true. Inquiring in the company of others, confirming what we believe, and joining a community of others to put what we believe into practice . . . it is a life-long process, and we cherish the encouragement we can give and receive from each other along the way. Amen.