

*Proverbs 1:20-33*  
*September 12, 2021*  
*"Wisdom Cries Out"*  
*Rev. Randy Smith*

One of the **best professors** I had as an undergraduate at the University of South Carolina I had in my freshman year for Biology 101-102 Honors. His name was Wallace ("Wally") Dawson. While the non-Honors people were memorizing bold-type terms in the textbook, and dissecting fetal pigs, Dr. Dawson enlisted us in some of the animal behavior experiments he was conducting -- real, **original research!** -- with the "oldfield mouse" (species: *peromyscus polionotus*). So, my group injected a poor virgin female (in the back of the neck) with the Depo-Provera hormone concoction to see if we could induce pregnancy-related burrowing behavior in a non-pregnant female.

When all was said and done -- in case you're interested -- the data we retrieved (from carefully measuring the mouse's burrow in a large, glass-enclosed tank) was suggestive but inconclusive, *viz.*, it failed to cross the statistical threshold of "significance".

But, as you can maybe tell, from the details I am able to share, the whole experience was truly educational, and I truly valued Dr. Dawson as a teacher. He was the first person to acquaint me with **the overarching dilemma of our modern, scientific era**, namely that we have more knowledge ("science") than ever before, but are struggling more than ever before, as the human race, to know how to *sort* and *catalogue* it and, of course, how best to **use** it.

E.g., nuclear weapons, genetic engineering, human cloning, etc. Should we modern people actually *do* all that we know *how* to do? By what **wisdom** might we *restrain* ourselves from doing all we know how to do or, i.e., put "the genie back in the bottle"?

The answer from the Book of Proverbs is found earlier in the opening chapter from which our Scripture Reading comes today: "**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom**" (1:7). As another of my wonderful teachers (Roland Murphy, at Duke Divinity School) says of this verse -- which is really the key verse which opens up the whole of the Book of Proverbs: "It is remarkable that a **commitment to [the God of the Bible]** lies at the basis of the wisdom enterprise." In terms, i.e., of our being able to live genuinely wise lives, it's finally not **what** we know that counts, but **who** we know.

So, what *is* the "fear of the Lord"? I would have us think of it in terms, first of all, as "**reverence**". Those of you were ever Boy Scouts will remember that "reverent" is one of the 12 Points of the Scout Law, and means, "Be reverent toward God. Be faithful in your religious duties. Respect the beliefs of others."

And that's not a bad understanding of "reverence". Paul Woodruff, in his book (*Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, 2002), defines reverence as "the recognition of something *greater than* the self -- something that is *beyond* human creation or control, that *transcends* full human understanding."

Reverence is, then, says Woodruff, what keeps people from acting as if they were gods -- which, Biblically speaking, is one of our truly fatal human inclinations (going all the way back to Eve and Adam in Gen. 3, second-guessing God and God's promises in the Garden of Eden, and trying to take matters into their own hands). "Reverence" helps people to have a proper understanding of *their* place in the world, and that **others also** have a place in the world. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "An *irreverent* soul who is unable to feel *awe* in the presence of things *higher* than self is also unable to feel *respect* in the presence of things it *sees* as *lower* than self."

If you think about -- as I have, for a long time -- you could say that the biggest social, and moral, deficit in our culture over recent generations is a **lack of reverence**, even in the most general sense. We hear most of the time about a lack of *religion*, specifically a steady rise in the number of people in our country who have no involvement in organized religion, Christian or otherwise, whatsoever. We who are the Church, of course, have been worrying over this for now decades, and trying to enact "fixes" of various kinds for the problem. A long-time church consultant here in S.C., Mark Tidsworth, recently posted something on Facebook which is important for we who are the Church to keep in mind: "That which is dying," he says, "[is] not THE Church, [but] only culturally shaped *expressions* of church."

The *larger* problem for our society, I would argue, is *not* the decline of the expression, or *form*, of Church I, and everyone older than I am, was born into. It is rather the decline of a *generally prevailing* sense of **reverence**. And I have thought about this, specifically, in the longstanding debate over "prayer in school", going all the way back to the 1963 SCOTUS decision in favor of a lawsuit brought by a woman, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who was once labeled "the most hated woman in America". As you may know, there are plenty of folks who think that, if we would go back to some bygone era in which Christian prayers (and Bible reading) were still mandated in public schools, it would solve America's social and moral ills.

While I have always doubted *that* claim, I have wondered if, in honoring the claims of O'Hair and others (have you heard of the "Freedom *From* Religion" organization?) to create an absolute legal "separation of Church and State" in America (based on the "non-establishment clause" in the U.S. Constitution), the result hasn't been to throw "the baby out with the bath water",

*viz.*, that we have now produced several generations of Americans who have grown up in a society which seems to have no *grounding*, as a whole, publicly, in a sense of **reverence**.

In *any* case, the compiler of the Book of Proverbs would not be able to make any sense of our modern efforts to differentiate the "**secular**" (or "civil") realm of public life from the "**sacred**". The kind of wisdom Proverbs offers is based on the understanding that *everything* in our world, and *everything* about our way of life-together with others, is sacred -- *viz.*, lies within the created purposes of God, the sight of God, and the ongoing concern of God. As James Howell says,

Wisdom is all over family life...and also [what's going on in] the street[s], the workplace, [when we go] shopping, friendship, strangers, politics...

And speaking of the *streets*, Proverbs wants us to understand that it is "out there" - - in public -- that Wisdom's voice is *most* to be **heard**, and *needs* most to be heard, and *needs* -- *most of all* -- to be **heeded**. And did you notice? **Wisdom is a lady**. Wisdom is a lady street preacher. This is one of the remarkable features of the Book of Proverbs -- it's personification of God's Wisdom as "Lady Wisdom".

And what she is calling people to is not any particular religious tradition (there is no mention of the Law, or of Covenant, or of the Temple in Proverbs!), but rather to **live and relate with others wisely**, in *recognition* of, and in *respect* of, the **boundaries** for human moral choices which were actually **built into** *the world*, and into *human life*, from creation (the work of creation for which Lady Wisdom was not only present for, but actually an agent of -- Prov. 8:22ff.), boundaries which -- if ignored -- *inevitably* create adverse consequences for those who **ignore** them. Abuse any part of the created order -- either the natural world or other human beings, and suffer the consequences.

And what we hear in this morning's Scripture Reading is her terrible **lament** that *ignoring* them *is*, in fact, the path human beings choose to take. We hear her "crying out" against "being simple", "scoffing" at learning (v. 22), and "hating knowledge" (v. 29). I can't help, when I hear these accusations, of the situation our culture is in right now, wherein large numbers of people boast of their "simple" understanding of, and approach to, problems which plague our society, wherein large numbers of people "scoff" at what used to be widely regarded as sources of authoritative knowledge, and wise counsel, and wherein large numbers of people seem to "hate" any "knowledge" which contradicts their prior understanding.

Which makes a **teachable spirit** perhaps the fundamental virtue of any people who would claim to be in faithful relationship with the God of the Bible. We become "teachable" people when we are willing and able to hear, and absorb -- from God, from others of God's people -- that which challenges our perspective, our convictions, about the truth of what is going on, within us, or around us.

Cf. My graduate student Teaching Assistant in Christian Ethics at Duke: a teacher who, because he could never be wrong, was un-teachable.

Yesterday was the 20th anniversary of the atrocities committed on September 11, 2001. I think the events of that day are useful to remember for a number of reasons, not least because they still offer us -- as Americans, as Christians -- an opportunity to learn

from them. We remember the remarkable self-sacrifice of the first responders, and also those who brought down Flight \_\_\_ over PA. But we also need to remember to ask what could possibly provoke people -- of any religious or ideological persuasion -- to plot and carry out such monstrous crimes against their fellow human beings? It strikes me that every anniversary of 9-11 gives us an opportunity -- as Americans, as Christians -- to rethink simplistic answers to that question, and so to become wiser, *viz.*, come to live in greater conformity to the purposes of God for the lives of all the peoples in our world.

"Wisdom cries out in the street..." Do you hear her? Are you willing to listen? Learn? Be changed?