
STREET WISE

PROVERBS 1:20-33

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2021, BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

“Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks...” Wisdom cries out.

And there were so many cries on the street or at the corner or on an airplane in our U.S. cities on September 11, 20 years ago yesterday. Cries rang out in Lower Manhattan at the World Trade Center towers in NYC. Cries rang out at the Pentagon in Arlington, VA. Cries rang out on an airplane in Shanksville, PA. How can we ever forget those cries? Some of you probably still hear those cries. You probably remember where you were and what you were doing when you began to hear about the crashes and the cries on 9/11.

I was at the church office on the street called Zeltweg in the city of Zurich, Switzerland, where I was serving as associate pastor at the International Protestant Church of Zurich. I was sitting at my desk with my laptop open. It was a quiet morning. A phone call came into the office from a congregation member who was working at Credit Suisse. That person called to tell us about the horrific crashes and the haunted cries. The church office volunteer then told the senior pastor who then told me that planes crashed into the World Trade Center towers in NYC and that he was going to a member’s home nearby to watch the news to see what was really going on. I remained in the office with one of the volunteer workers. But I called my wife, Gail, to see if she had heard and to tell her to turn on the television to find out what was going on. And what she found, and what many found and heard, were the images and cries from catastrophe, of horror, of anguish, of disbelief, so many cries in one of the busiest cities in the world where a public square became an ash heap.

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Twenty years later, the cries continue over the loss of life, the devastation, the ongoing human divides and suspicion, the loss of innocence. Twenty years later, still so many questions and concerns. Twenty years later, leaving the streets of Afghanistan while Afghan refugees cry out for help at the city gates of nations across the world, while others cry out in the squares wondering why we were even at war in Afghanistan. The cries continue.

The dust hasn’t settled, twenty years later, and perhaps it will never be because every piece of dust, human dust, matters. The ashes of our memory of 9/11 are human ashes, and we should never forget because every human life matters, every speck of dust from God matters. How can we forget those human cries from the street, from the square, from the busiest corner, from the entrance of the city gates, from the rubble of a collapsed building or fallen airplane in a field?

Wisdom cries out in the street from the ashes and dust, still to this day. And what does Wisdom cry? “Stop killing each other. Stop making each other the enemy. Honor human dust. Violence begets more violence. Hate cannot drive out hate. Don’t wait for a calamity to form community and support one another.”

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Wisdom in Proverbs is a feminine noun and is personified as a woman—Woman Wisdom who was there at the beginning of creation, even before the beginning of the earth. Through the womb of Wisdom, God gave birth to the world. This ancient Wisdom speaks and forms the bookends of Proverbs. She’s the beginning and the end. And she cries out unashamedly in public.

Theologian David Ford, in his book *Christian Wisdom*, entitles his first chapter—“Wisdom cries.” He writes, “The more I have searched for Christian wisdom the more I have been struck by its core connection with cries: the cries for wisdom and the cries by the personified biblical wisdom; cries within and outside scripture that arise from the intensities of life ... and cries of people for what they most desire ... Christian wisdom is discerned within earshot of such cries and is above all alert to the cries of Jesus.” Wisdom cries out.

“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 ...Hear..
Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold;
For wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire
cannot compare with her ...’” (Prov 8:1-4, 6, 10-11)

And the Wisdom that cries out is in plural form in Proverbs 9, suggesting the urgency and volume of her voice on the streets. One voice of wisdom isn’t enough to get through to our thick skulls, to gain our full attention. We need Woman wisdoms—every wise woman. We need multiple cries and sometimes not even nearly 3,000 9/11 cries are enough.

“Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks...”

Wisdom wants to be heard and she has no fear of what might happen in public view. She cries out full throttle. She raises her voice. She speaks in public at the busiest intersections on 15-501, at the city gates with traffic jams on I-40, coming and going. Wisdom is not hiding in the wood trails of western NC where there is lower density or hunkered down in the church pews. Wisdom is calling out in the streets, on the outside, not on the inside of denominational office headquarters. Wisdom works well and works wonders in the marketplace of life. She’s out there as a street prophet like John the Baptist. A voice crying out where the economic and juridical life of society takes place—in the streets of downtown, the squares, the busiest corners of the Research Triangle, at the entrance of the city gates, not necessarily where you think or where you most expect. We often get it wrong and think we gain wisdom from reading a book, but we gain wisdom by living in the world, through experience on the streets and listening.

It was quite a summer to remember. I was an undergraduate student at Stanford University and was serving as an Exploration of Ministry Fellow through Memorial Church, the university’s chapel. It was a fellowship that helped students explore ministry while working with a local nonprofit in East Palo Alto. I was paired with an organization that served those dealing with drug and substance abuse. My supervisor’s name was Prince. He was a former dope dealer but had recovered and was now crying out on the streets to help others not go down the same path he did. Prince was my father of the streets and when I was with him, I was safe, because everyone knew Prince and his peace and respected him. I just listened to his embodied wisdom. He could look at how someone walked and know if it was a dope fiend walk. [preacher’s walk]

One day, we were walking the neighborhood as was the custom and he wanted to visit a friend just to check in. This friend I learned was a crack addict and we were going to a crack house (my mother never heard about this until today if she’s watching!). We got to the door and those in the house greeted Prince and he introduced me. I stayed pretty close to him. We walked in and the living room had become a hospital room. His friend lay on a bed

in that room, thin as rails, emaciated, still smoking crack and dying. Prince just wanted to see him and say hello because he was his friend. There was no judgment, just love. It was too late to help him recover. But Prince treated him as a human being, as holy dust, and looked at him with human eyes. On the streets of East Palo Alto or East Durham, in the square, on the corner in a crack house, wisdom cries out, “Don’t judge, love.”

We may wonder, “Why is Wisdom outside, and not indoors, inside university classrooms and labs for instance?” As an article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review said, “Never mistake knowledge for wisdom. One helps you make a living, the other helps you make a life.” Wisdom is the latter. Just because you accumulate knowledge does not make you wise. Wisdom comes through experience, failing and succeeding, trial and error in practice over time during life on the streets and at the city gates, walking, watching, listening and learning. Historically, universities in the West with their Christian ethos were as one Pope put it “wisdom’s workshop” and involved in shaping the values of students. But in the mid-19th century, German universities developed the research-based academy we have today, and this influenced the approach of American and British universities to move away from a focus on the cultivation of wisdom to more of a supposed objective scientific inquiry that is less religious or even areligious, and less about the nurturing of values and character in general.

Nonetheless, Woman Wisdom calls out to us at Duke to get on the streets in our communities and to hear her cries and voice, to get outdoors where all the action is, for if we only remain locked away in our homes or dorm rooms or labs, we will not hear Wisdom’s cry. Do you want to make a living or make a life?

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Many years ago at the Church of the Holy Comforter in Atlanta, at their soup kitchen for homeless individuals, I met a man named ‘Clackston’ but I didn’t know that was his name at first. When I first approached him to introduce myself, and asked him his name, he responded or better, shouted, “Get out of here, get out of here!” He told me his name was ‘get out of here’ because that’s what everyone told him all the time—‘get out of here.’ Imagine what it would be like to have your first name be ‘get out’ and your last name be ‘of here’. Wisdom cries on the streets, “Welcome the stranger,” and speaks to reveal how those who are disenfranchised and disinherited can be excluded by others when they are actually holy dust. It happens in every city, on every street, on many busy corners of society from Durham to Delhi.

When Wisdom speaks, do we listen? Do we hear the voices of the Clackstons in our world? Maybe God is trying to tell us something through a cry.

A young man went to Socrates asking for wisdom. He walked up to the philosopher and said, "O great Socrates, I come to you for wisdom." Socrates led the young man through the streets, to the sea, and ultimately chest deep into the water. Then he asked the young man, "What do you want?" "Wisdom, O wise Socrates," said the young man with a smile. Socrates put his strong hands on the man's shoulders and pushed him under the water. 30 seconds later Socrates let him up. "What do you want?" he asked again. "Wisdom," the young man sputtered, "O great and wise Socrates." Socrates pushed him under again. 30 seconds passed, 35. 40. Socrates let him up and the man was gasping. "What do you want, young man?" Between heavy breaths the young man screamed, "Wisdom, O wise and wonderful..." Socrates pushed him under again. 40 seconds passed. 50. 1 minute. He felt the young man struggling and he pulled him up and asked again, "What do you want?" "Air!" the young man screamed. "I need air!" Socrates looked at the young man, smiled, and said, "When you want wisdom as you have just wanted air, then you will have wisdom."

To desire wisdom is a great thing but there is something else that is required according to the scriptures—that is, the posture of listening. Wisdom speaks and says, “those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.” Are we listening? Are we listening to the cries of wisdom on the streets? Are we becoming street wise? Wisdom cries and our call is to listen, to hear. At the core of Judaism is to hear—*shema*. That is the first task of any street prophet—to listen, to hear. There does come a time for us to cry out too, even for

those who can't cry out for themselves, yet Wisdom's voice is a primary guide and the critical cry in the public square, calling out to us to hear, reminding us that James says the tongue is a fire anyway. Wisdom cries out, so that we can listen, not speak.

Do you find yourself crying out all the time or being quick to speak and slow to listen? Or, are you listening to Wisdom's cries, even when they come from a cross?

Jesus, the Wisdom of God, cried out loud on a cross for the world to hear, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That cry is on city street corners everywhere. And it's a cry to hear, to heed, to remember, so that we never forget all of those who have gone down to death crying and whose voices still cry out from crosses, from the ground, the dust, the ashes, the streets, the square, the busiest corners, and the entrance of city gates.

"Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks..." It's about time we listen.