

Proverbs 9:1-6 (NRSV)

Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
from the highest places in the town,
"You that are simple, turn in here!"
To those without sense she says,
"Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

In a set of recent polls in the United Kingdom, people were asked to choose a new set of 10 commandments that were in tune with the way we live today. The results? The new 10 commandments were:

1. "Treat others as you would have them treat you,"
2. "Take responsibility for your actions,"
3. "Do not kill,"
4. "Be honest,"
5. "Do not steal,"
6. "Protect and nurture children,"
7. "Protect the environment,"
8. "Look after the vulnerable,"
9. "Never be violent," and
10. "Protect your family."

Now, in one way this is a very good list. These are all things that sensible, moral people might be concerned with. If everyone lived according to them, the world would be a better place. But, what's missing? Commandments? Anyone? Well, of course there are a few things missing about "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me," or "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." In fact, all of the commandments that deal with our relationship with God dropped out of the list. Apparently, our relationship with God is so good that it is not a problem in the modern world. Either that or our relationship with God is so difficult that we would rather not think about it.

For many people, religion, any religion, is a set of teachings, rules to live by, ways of getting along with one another. And, Lord knows we need those rules and we need to pay attention to them and to follow them. For those who are inclined to this sort of approach, the Book of Proverbs is a treasure trove of useful information on how to live.

Proverbs was written in what is called the "Inter-testamental period," probably in the 4th century before Christ, part of what is called the wisdom literature that includes the Song of Songs and the Wisdom of Solomon. The Book contains good advice on child rearing, on relationships with your spouse and your neighbors and friends, advice on how to stay on the right path, how much to sleep, how to choose friends, advice about everything. And yet, I don't recall ever hearing a sermon from the Book of Proverbs. And I wondered why.

One reason might be that the Book of Proverbs mentions God only very seldom. Beyond saying that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and saying that very often, there isn't very much about God in the Book of Proverbs. The sayings are so short and so pithy that it's generally hard to expand them to the ten or fifteen minutes that a sermon wants to be.

But this week's reading from Proverbs caught my interest. The reading is very different from what we expect in Proverbs – it is more like a parable. It begins, “Wisdom has built her house.” Wisdom is personified as a woman, and she has built a house with seven pillars. We don't really know what the seven pillars are or why the author mentions them. Maybe they are the foundation of a palace. I like to think that they are the foundations of the world. She is preparing a feast, she has killed the fatted calf, if you will, she has set the table, mixed the wine and sent out her servant-girls to invite everyone to her feast. You can see the allusions that are common to many of the parables in the Gospels – the feast, the invitations, the generosity and grace of the king or, in this case, the queen.

And all are invited, the rich from the highest places in the town, and also the simple, even those with no sense at all. All are invited to come, come and eat the bread, drink the wine, taste the meat. Take part in the feast, lay aside your childishness and live, walk in the way of insight.

This parable offers a picture of God weaving wisdom and grace and generosity and pleasure into the fabric of the world, a world that offers the wonder and beauty of a life with God, with God as host or hostess, God as the gracious and generous giver of all good things.

In this parable, wisdom is not a way of thinking, wisdom is a way of living. Wisdom is not simply a matter of judging among alternatives but rather of seeing and choosing an alternative way of being. Wisdom is not simply a matter of good choices, but rather of choosing good, and not just good, but choosing God, choosing the way of God rather than the way of the world.

We should be clear that the way of God is not easy or simple or without difficulties or costs. All ways of living will have complications, pains and problems. But the ways of wisdom have the advantage of being the ways that God hopes we will live, with God's blessings and God's support.

What are these ways of living? The way of God is the way of peace, not simply the absence of violence but the presence of wholeness, the way of shalom. God calls us to be peacemakers in things small and large. Peace is not simple and peacemakers must live close to violence so that peace can be made and violence ended. There are areas of the world where peace cannot be found, and those are the places where peacemakers *will* be found. There are areas of our lives and our relationships that are not at peace, and these are areas where we as peacemakers must go, if peace is to be made. What areas of your life are not at peace? How can peace be made in those places? To choose wisdom is to choose peace, not because peace is easy or comfortable, but because peace is God's will, peace is the way of God woven into the fabric of the world, right from the start, the peace we left in the Garden when we chose human wisdom instead of God's.

The way of God is the way of beauty, not the beauty of high fashion and fancy clothes and expensive makeup, but the beauty of life lived simply and honestly, the beauty of work, the beauty of things made with heart and courage and kindness. There is a beauty in simple honest things, honest words without artifice, honest love for people and for relationships of trust and mutuality. We don't usually think of wisdom as beautiful – in fact we sometimes think that we need to choose between beauty and wisdom – but when we think more deeply, we know that the people in our lives who are wise are those who are most beautiful. I'm recalling Bill and Jo At Lee who at the end of their lives were not cover models in any conventional sense, but who were so beautiful, so lovely and loving. Who are the truly beautiful people in your life? Do they know that you find them beautiful? To choose a life of wisdom is to choose to be beautiful, not because we want to look good but because we want to be part of the beauty that is at the heart of God's beautiful creation.

The way of God is the way of truth, not simply the absence of lies and deceit but cultivating a way of seeing and following God in all things. The "simple truth" we say, although truth is hardly ever

simple in a world that has become so very complicated and tangled and distant from God's truth. So many people are anxious to tell us the truth, the truth about who is trying to cheat us or kill us or steal our possessions. Those are the truths that are screeched at us from tabloid magazines and talk show hosts, but those aren't the truth of God. God's truth is a gentle and kindly truth woven into the fabric of life, a truth that what we need is available to us, freely given and available. Who are the people in your life that offer this kind of truth? These are the people you need to listen to, people who bear the truth of God in their lives. To choose a life of wisdom is to choose a life of truth, not because we want to be correct or accurate, but because relying on truth is relying on God.

Wisdom built her house and its foundation pillars include peace and beauty and truth. You could add more pillars if you think about it – hope, generosity, faith. These are the ways of God that are woven into the fabric of life. A life full of God is not a sparse life but a rich life, not a life that is ugly or small but a life that is beautiful and abundant. A life full of God is life in the house that Wisdom built.

Amen.