

There's Someone I'd Like You To Meet: Lady Wisdom

Proverbs 1:20-33

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The book of Proverbs. Have you ever read much of it? It's a collection of wise sayings, gathered together with an indiscernible pattern. Scholars like to say that this book is the loose cannon within the canon, the most inexplicable book in the Bible, a bunch of pithy lines that are easy to say and hard to forget, like these:

Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained with a righteous life.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without sense.

The eye that mocks the father and scorns to obey the mother will be pecked out by the ravens and eaten by the vultures.

Proverbs aren't limited to the Bible, though. Every culture, every people, every tradition has them. Surely you've heard these: *The grass is always greener on the other side. A watched pot never boils. The early bird catches the worm.* The thing about Proverbs is, wherever you find them, the wisdom they contain is all about being practical. They offer guidance for the ordinary moments of life. *The squeaky wheel gets the grease. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones. When your head is in the lion's mouth, treat the lion very gently.*

That last one came from a teacher of mine, the Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon. I have been thinking of Dr. Cannon a lot lately; the third anniversary of her death was earlier this month. She was the first black woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church. She was the first woman to earn a PhD from Union Theological Seminary in New York. She was one of the foundational voices in womanist theology. It is impossible to overstate the impact she had on

the church. She taught ethics at Union Presbyterian Seminary, teaching both me and Molly Spangler. Her classes were the most intimidating of them all, though it took me a long time to pinpoint why, exactly.

Rachel Held Evans, in her book *Inspired*, talks about her journey with the Bible, from growing up in a fundamentalist home and then growing into a faith that embraced radical acceptance. She says at an early age she was taught that the Bible was an owner's manual for life. She was taught to refer to it as her B.I.B.L.E., her Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. There's something appealing about this, isn't there? All of us want instruction. All of us long for some sort of how-to about life, don't we? How do you care for aging parents? How do you maintain civility in an increasingly uncivil time? How do you manage both expenses and generosity? How do you approach overworking or underemployment? How do you decide — homeschool or classroom, masked or unmasked? Some directions would be pretty nice.

But what Rachel Held Evans learned, and what I think we already know, is that life cannot abide with something as simple as an IKEA manual, where everything is spelled out step by step, with pictures. There is no single, easy answer for every one of life's questions.

Proverbs itself contains contradictory pieces of wisdom. One moment its wisdom seems to demean the poor: *A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.* This actually turns my stomach, because it pays no heed to systemic poverty, and looks only at laziness rather than class, race, generational iniquity, education, and, oh, I

don't know, a whole host of complex dynamics. In the next breath, though, Proverbs says, *Defend the rights of the poor; a righteous man knows the needs of the poor and extends generosity.*

Or here's another pair, one of my favorites: *Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.*

If we try to reduce the wisdom of Proverbs to simple questions and answers, we end up spinning in circles, dogs chasing our own tails, exerting all sorts of energy and potentially doing all kinds of damage, without actually getting anywhere.

But here's something interesting: if you were to take a crayon or a highlighter and read through the entire book of Proverbs, and made a mark every time the word "way" or "path" appeared, your Bible would end up looking like a Candy Land game board, where almost every square you can land on is brightly colored.

If I understand the text, wisdom is a path. It is not a static list of shoulds or a ream of rigid rules. It is a journey we take one step at a time. One situation at a time.

Bill Brown, professor of Old Testament at Columbia Seminary and a leading scholar on Proverbs, he says, "To live in Wisdom's world is to experience the delight of discernment, and to walk the communal path she forges, a path that is 'like the light of dawn, shining brighter and brighter until full day.' But the 'full day' that ushers in all knowledge and insight never arrives within any given lifetime," he says. "In Wisdom's eyes there really are no grownups. The quest for wisdom is ever ongoing, and progress along the way is only ever marked in baby steps."

Wisdom itself insists: not everything is measured and neat, cut and dry. There is always something new to learn.

My friend Meg is the parent of three young girls, including six year old twins who are, she says, the pickiest eaters on earth, who can moan and groan and argue about everything from broccoli to brownie batter.

Meg can recite this Proverb by heart: *Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.* She shared this at a recent meeting, in a full-fledged daydream of eating a dry piece of toast in a silent house, when someone interrupted her and said, "I bet a lot of people would choose the strife when they're sitting lonely at night." Better is a dry morsel with quiet, except when it's not.

Or another Proverb from this book: *Like vinegar on a wound is one who one who sings songs to a heavy heart.* When I am profoundly sad, I really don't want someone standing there singing *The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow.* That is the honest truth. Except when it's not. Because when I'm sad, sometimes singing is the only thing that will crack my heart open and allow healing to seep in.

Wisdom's way is situational. It depends, always, on circumstance. Real wisdom isn't just about knowing **what** is true, it's about knowing **when** it's true.

Thank goodness, then, that in this book we encounter wisdom personified. I haven't forgotten our sermon series, *There's Someone I'd Like You To Meet.* Over the weeks we've met the beloved disciples and Joseph of Arimathea, Tabitha and Euodia and Snytyche and James and a few others still besides. Today we encounter wisdom personified. Scripture calls her Lady Wisdom. She is the one who watches over us and issues these Proverbs to us.

When John read from Proverbs chapter 1 a few minutes ago, he told us how she goes about that task. "Wisdom cries out in the street," we read. "In the square she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks." Wisdom is not locked up in a tower somewhere or

hidden away behind lock and key or password and power. She's right in the mix of everyday living: driving down Devine Street, on the steps of the State House, in line at school drop off, waiting for a table at Lula Drake or picking up coffee across the street at Azalea. In the midst of our daily routines she cries out to everyone, no matter their age, faith, class, education, race, gender, expression, orientation, or political party. She is not particular about who hears her, because according to her, anyone willing to listen can learn.

It gets a bit rough from there, though, because the next thing Lady Wisdom says is, "How long will you love being simple? How long will you delight in your scoffing, how long will you hate knowledge?" She has some hard words for us to hear. But I've become convinced those harsh words come not from a place of detached anger, but from a place of deeply concerned, irreversibly invested love.

My teacher, Dr. Cannon, was not known for her easy classes. She was not known for giving high grades. And yet students from across the country at every level of theological education flocked to her, both because of what she taught and how she taught it. Students signed up for her classes knowing they would not be coddled. They would be challenged.

Not long before she died, she was asked in an interview, "Why do you nurture students the way you do?" And she said, "Before I began to mentor and nurture students, there were others who mentored me. There were teachers and especially my Grandma Rosie. She taught me to love reading. I was then and am now already reading and creating because what I want to do is take the best from the Black teachers that formed me and bring it to my teaching. Every Black teacher I had told me, 'I'm going to give you the best I have, and I want you to make it better.' That is how I approach nurturing and mentoring students. That is my ministry."

I think that is Lady Wisdom's ministry, too. Not to coddle, but to challenge, giving us the very best she has so that we can make it better. Lady Wisdom's deep desire is that human life flourish, which is why she occasionally speaks with such an edge. She's invested, in us and in the world. So, "Follow my way," she says, with an almost frightening degree of intensity. "Follow my way and you will find life."

Wisdom doesn't say follow me for it will be easy. She says follow me because the struggle is worth it.

Dr. Cannon's classes were hard because she walked the path of Wisdom and asked us to come along. Her lessons never allowed us to simply read and repeat, study and spout. It was not about learning facts and soaking of knowledge. We had to journey through it, because in Dr. Cannon's classes, it wasn't what you believed that you were evaluated on, but how you came to believe it. The process. The wrestling. There was no roadmap provided, and there were no correct answers to find. You could disagree with her completely so long as you could explain how you came to your position and stand behind it with faithfulness and integrity, and so long as you were willing to listen as others did the same.

Every year around this time, Dr. Cannon's students share memories of our teacher. We all have different stories and favorite anecdotes. We all learned a variety lessons, even while sitting in the same class. But every one of us remembers this: near the end of every semester, she would say, *We're coming in for a smooth landing. A nice, smooth landing.* Her habit was to push us throughout the entire semester, unrelenting in her desire that we learn as much as possible, but toward the end, as every other class was gearing up for a final exam or comprehensive paper, Dr. Cannon's classes were intentionally gearing down.

You've endured the struggle, she would say. You've done the work. You've found out

something ore of who you are, and why. You've discovered more about how you will move through the world in faithful measure. Class isn't over, she would say. But you can take a deep breath, because right now, *we're coming in for a smooth landing.*

That's what we all want, isn't it? That's what Proverbs and Lady Wisdom herself want so desperately for us. For ours to be a live so well lived, so thoughtfully considered, so intentionally faithful, that no matter what the circumstances around us, we can hold tight to God's ultimate promise, God's ultimate claim on our lives: in the ways that matter most, *we're coming in for a nice, smooth landing.*