



on wisdom

Robert Steiner

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 1:1-7

To frame the celebration of your confirmation today I have chosen the opening verses of the book of Proverbs. My choice was guided by the discovery that the approach and content of our confirmation class this year resonates with what our biblical tradition understands wisdom to be. And so to mark this important threshold and crossing, a moment of initiation, I would like to highlight a few aspects of biblical wisdom as far as they help to both illuminate our journey together this year and to appreciate the insights of the book of Proverbs. It is the kind of wisdom that knows about the tension between justice and mercy; that recognizes the need for building community in the spirit of Ubuntu; and finally, that knows itself held by the promise

that "God loves us not if we change, but God loves us so that we can change." (Richard Rohr)

The book of Proverbs reminds us that Israel's sages were convinced that the best way to learn wisdom was through sayings, aphorisms, riddles, and parables that were handed on from generation to generation and resembled the sedimented wisdom of a whole community. It was a wisdom that came with a punch line and stimulated dialogue and discussion. It is along those lines that I have chosen a visual riddle for you this morning. I hope that it will be able to energize and anchor my reflections on wisdom. It is a picture I have taken a few days ago. And it is about a boat that spoke immediately spoke to me, at many different levels.

Yes, this is a rather unusual boat. Who in their right mind would fill up a small little fishing boat with stones and rocks of different sizes and colours and textures? Enough material to make us curious! Scholars will tell us that humor is an important humanizing element of wisdom. And the experience of "defamiliarization" through paradox, exaggeration, and surprise is essential to learning wisdom. As I stood in front of this small fishing barque I had a visceral reaction, a sudden confirmation that so much of learning is about un-learning, so much of knowing is about un-knowing, and gaining wisdom is a lot about shedding unnecessary weight until our boat is able to float and travel lightly.

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But depending to whom I speak, I’m sure I would get very different responses or explanations for this rather bizarre sight. Those who own a fishing boat, especially South Africans, might tell me that this is done to make sure that the boat stays where it stays and doesn't start walking. But that would raise new questions for me and I might ask you see a psychologist. Others again, concerned about the environment and sustainability, might explain to me how this is a wonderful way of not just recycling, but up-cycling. Old fishing boats can be fantastic storage places or playgrounds. The investigative journalists of our congregation might suspect



some kind of plot to kill the local fishing industry. If only corruption would always be so visible and sort of in the face. The more philosophically or artistically minded would of course argue that this is a special kind of installation, inviting us to stop and reflect about life. And this is certainly how I would want you to see it this morning. A visual riddle or proverb to tease your mind.

What I am suggesting is, that this is a metaphor for life. So much of life is about dealing with the stones and rocks that others or we ourselves have placed into our little boat. Those stones carry many different names, come in different sizes, and describe the kind of experiences and encounters that weigh us down and that are difficult to shed. In fact I would even say that while the first part of life is often about being loaded and burdened with all kind of stuff imposed on us, the second part

of life is about unloading and unburdening ourselves, a process of emptying, of distancing ourselves from ideas, concepts, and people weighing on us and stymieing our development.

Some of those stones and rocks also concern our journey of faith. Remember, the boat is also a well-known symbol for the ecumenical church. And I would want to argue that the church as an institution also has to do a lot of clearing and

throwing out. Otherwise it runs the risk of sinking. And surely, Jesus is and will always be with us in the boat. But we should not put our hope in yet another miracle of calming the storm. We should rather do our best in getting rid of the deadening weight that threatens our passage across the sea.

Such clearing also played an important part in our confirmation class. I often find that those who are critical of Christianity, are rejecting an institution, but not God; they are resisting certain doctrines and dogmas, but not Christ; they are rejecting the church's claims to absolute power and authority, but not the Spirit; they are rejecting hypocrisy and arrogance, but not wisdom; they are rejecting conformity, but not community; they are rejecting discrimination in the name of God, but not God's unconditional love.

We called our confirmation class, "faith at work". Partly because a weekly engagement with religion is also hard work, demands attention and concentration, a willingness to wrestle with difficult questions to which there is not always a clear answer. But the name of the course was also based on the idea of inviting various members of our congregation to join us as special guests and to share some of their own experiences of faith in the light of their work and calling. This helped us to always keep our discussions of faith grounded, concrete, and personal. Each guest in some ways presented us with a riddle, a proverb, a parable which provoked reflection and discussion. There was among others a baker, a policewoman, a banker, a psychologist, a cook, a refugee, a transformer, a potter, a cartoonist, and a photographer. A proverb that would well describe the atmosphere of our sessions is the following:

Iron sharpens iron,
and one person sharpens
the wits of another.
(Proverbs 27:17)

What was wonderful is, that we didn't just talk about wisdom, but that we actually practiced wisdom as Proverbs suggests, through discussion and dialogue, through engagement with guests, who spoke to us as mentors and friends.

The psychologist Judith Glueck identified five aspects that characterize a wise person from

a psychological perspective. I would like to show how those aspects resonate not only with our experiences in class, but also with Proverb's understanding of wisdom. But I would also like to show how the introductory words to the book of Proverbs culminate in what is described as the beginning and end of all wisdom, and which is something psychology has started to discover and acknowledge only recently as an important element of transformative wisdom.

The first characteristic of a wise person is an openness to new perspectives. For our group this meant welcoming strangers as guests who come with unexpected gifts. Those gifts were sometimes very tangible, like for example when a well-known potter from Cape Town showed us a selection of porcelain bowls and explained the mysterious process of forming and firing those bowls. The fearless and adventurous combination of unusual elements and the conscious awareness of an element of randomness leads to the creation extraordinary beauty.



Such openness can also be seen in the way that the book of

Proverbs freely quotes whole passages from the teachings of the scribe Amenemope. The *Instructions of Amenemope* is a literary work composed in Ancient Egypt, most likely during the Ramesside Period (ca. 1300-1075 BCE), and considered a legacy of Amenemope for his son.



It is held in high esteem and regarded as a master piece of ancient near-western reflections on how to achieve happiness. The parallels between Proverbs and this Egyptian writing speak of a rich exchange of wisdom between Israel and other nations and cultures. Wisdom was seen to be something universal. And those scribes responsible of its compilation were not afraid to draw from other sources and traditions.

The second characteristic of a wise person is said to be the ability to show empathy. For our group this meant to be willing to engage with our whole being, mind and heart with the stories of our guest speakers. It was about trying to feel as best as we can, what it would mean to walk in their shoes.

One of them, a police woman, shared the challenges she faces when being called out into a situation of domestic violence. And we realized how tough it is to be a woman in a profession usually dominated by men. Proverbs is no stranger to such empathy and recognizes the specific contribution of women to Israel's wisdom. Proverbs pictures wisdom as a woman in the market place, calling out to the younger generation and inviting them to learn from her. The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokmah* and is feminine. In the standard Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint) which was used by the early Christians like the apostle Paul, wisdom is

called *sophia*, a noun with a feminine gender. And at times one doesn't quite know if *sophia* or if God is speaking in the book of Proverbs. In other words, there are moments when *sophia* promises the gift of life with the kind of authority and confidence only know of God. This is why some Christians pray and address God as *sophia*, and gives thanks to God for her wisdom and advice. But we also need to note that by personifying wisdom as woman, Israel's sages recognize two things: Firstly, the important influence of women's contribution to the moral and intellectual life of Israel; secondly, the tremendous value

of women's experiences as channels of divine revelation.

The third characteristic of a wise person is about the willingness to probe complex, ethical challenges and be respectful and non-judgemental when it comes to different points of views and perspectives. One of our guests, working in the field of transformation and mediation, reminded us that we are not only responsible for what we do to others, or for what others do to others. We are also responsible for what others do to us. It provoked an important discussion about around the various levels of responsibility and made some of us feel rather uncomfortable. But it pushed us hard to become more careful observers and analysts of ethical challenges and to recognize the role we play in some of the conflicts that affect our lives. Proverbs also probes reality and focuses on our responsibility by emphasizing the connection between certain deeds and its consequences. In other words, "we reap, what we sow." Such proverbial wisdom, based on human observations in daily life, gains the status of divine revelation and is given the same status as the law of Moses or the prophetic writings. This is how highly regarded and esteemed the capacity for human wisdom is. It is also a wonderful affirmation of the capacities of human reasoning.



The fourth characteristic of a wise person is to be emotionally intelligent, to not be afraid to make oneself vulnerable and to be in touch with one's inner world. The way our guest speakers spoke about both their work and faith experience opened up the space for a sharing where not only "iron sharpens iron", but also where heart warms heart. One of our guests found himself in South Africa as a refugee at a very young age. Having fled civil war in his home country, he keeps facing rejection and humiliation in what has become his second home. The reality in many parts of the world is that conflicts are resolved violently, and that all

and respond non-violently. One of the important topics regarding emotions is anger management. Interestingly, there are countries in Africa, like Jemen, where tribal conflicts are traditionally solved by the recitation of proverbial verses. (For the following observations see the article "Verses can solve conflict in Jemen", in: Sueddeutsche Zeitung, 10th July 2007, quoted by Klaus Berger in his book on wisdom in the Old and New Testament.) It reminds us of the power of traditional wisdom as expressed in poetic verses with a clear punch line. There are strict rules for a dispute resolved through poetic recitations, resonating with present day

poetry jams and hip-hop contestations: Verse and answer need to have the same metre and rhyme. The audience is unforgiving and will make the final judgement of who emerges as the winner. But the very fact that the conflict was resolved non-violently is a triumph for the whole community and in the end makes everyone a winner.

One of the anti-terror-poem from Jemen says: "Do not fall for madness on the way to extremes. / Your fundamentally false standpoint is no reason for

pride. / Those who destroys and sow terror, will be broken by it themselves." Interestingly, the book of Proverbs is attributed to king Salomon, whose name means "peace." We can therefore agree with Berger that the collections of wisdom sayings can be a treasure house for those who have to assert themselves peacefully and non-violently in public disputes. If only verses could replace guns in the gang-ridden parts of Cape Town.

The fifth characteristic of a wise person is to have confidence. How does one build up confidence? The humility and vulnerability with which our guests shared their expertise allowed our class to grow in confidence. For their approach did not call for perfection, but for compassion. And if this distinction informs the journey of faith, confidence can grow. For confidence always grows in the presence of love and respect. And such confidence will be able to resist the temptation to become cynical or indifferent. It is wonderful to see how also the book of Proverbs remains positive and confident about mastering life and bringing order to communities that threaten to fall apart. The book of Proverbs affirms the role every individual and his or her ability to make a meaningful contribution to society. Every good choice, every wise decision, no matter how small matters and is seen to be of tremendous value.



too often civilians suffer the brunt of the consequences of war. The book of Proverbs is very aware of the power of emotions and how they can jeopardize our ability to make wise decisions

There is a moral coherence that we need to respect and trust. It would be foolish to disregard the way we all are—deeply interconnected. Wisdom is to honor and respect those connections. And every proverb suggests a deeper order which is hidden from the eyes of the naive and untrained eye. This is clearly reflected in meaning of the Hebrew word for “proverb”: *Mashal*. It can be translated as “comparison” and is related to the verbal stem *msl*, which mean “to rule” or “to master.” In other words, every single proverb in the book of Proverbs is meant to compare two things, that one usually would not put side by side, and thereby enable us to live in greater harmony with God’s created order. Hand in hand with such confidence in mastering life goes what has been described as the “democratizing” effect of the Book of Proverbs. For Israel’s wisdom tradition boldly asserts that wisdom is no longer limited to the domain of kings, scribes, and priests. Everyone’s experience, at every level of society, matters and can potentially be a source of divine revelation.

The journey of wisdom is lined with all those characteristics. But there is one more, that stands out very prominently in the book of Proverbs and in many ways marks the very horizon of our pathway. What I am referring to is the “fear of the Lord”,



identified as beginning and end of all wisdom in the opening verses of the book of Proverbs. But again, when it comes to the idea of the “fear of Lord”, we need to do some unloading and unburdening. It is certainly one of the greatest challenges of our faith, not to be fear based, but to always source ourselves from what is able to overcome all fear, which is love. A better and less conflicted translation would therefore be “the reverence of the Lord” as the beginning and end of wisdom. Reverence evokes aspects of awe and wonder, points to faith as a great mystery, and invites us to be like children again. What is most fascinating is to notice how very often a deeper understanding of things in natural science does not take away from such awe and wonder, but only increases the mystery of our lives. And for the Book of Proverbs such reverence for life is always bound up with a growing reverence for the creator God, for *sophia*, the life-giving and transformative power of her wisdom. Claudia Wuestenhangen welcomes the discovery of “reverence” as a new area of research among

psychologists. Those moments, when we suddenly stand in the presence of something greater, which overwhelms us. It is as if suddenly there is a crack in the universe and we come face to

face with a mystery that

silences us from within and everything around us. Such reverence and humility is beautifully captured in the African-American spiritual “somebody bigger than you and I”:

*Who made the mountains,
Who made the trees,
Who made the rivers
flow to the sea,
Who hung the moon
in the starry sky,
Somebody bigger
than you and I.*

Are we surprised that later the Gospel writers would draw on the language and concept of Israel’s wisdom to describe both the humanity and divinity of Jesus? He was a wonderful wisdom teacher, a careful observer of daily life and nature, and a master of parables with a memorable punch line. And just as *sophia* spoke with an authority and power only known of God, Jesus’ ministry and very being was experienced as God’s very own presence, transformative and life-giving, the long-awaited coming of God’s reign and peaceful order, revealed in the baking of bread as much as in the sowing of seeds. Faith at work. Reverence at play. Amen.