

“The Wise Woman”

The Rev. Drew Willard
May 22nd, 2016
Trinity Sunday

Proverbs 8:1-4,22-31

John 16:1-15

² *On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads [Wisdom] takes her stand;*

³ *beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:*

⁴ *“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live...*

Proverbs 8:2

Let us pray... O God,

May we hear your call to us to listen for where there are real needs.

May we answer the call to hear your voice of Wisdom in the living of our lives.

May we always be grateful for the helpers you send to guide our way.

Amen

Last Sunday, we welcomed new members into our congregation
and part of our Order of Reception – in which we all join in,
is a simple affirmation of faith in God as a Trinity.

Now, the United Church of Christ is not creedal, but covenantal
and an explanation for what this means can be found on the UCC website:

*In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity,
in all things charity [love].*

*The unity that we seek requires neither an uncritical acceptance
of any point of view, nor rigid formulation of doctrine.*

*It does require mutual understanding and agreement
as to which aspects of the Christian faith and life are essential.*

<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/what-is-the-united-church-of>

We do have essentials such as the concept of ‘Trinity’ which is an ideological obstacle
for Jews and Muslims who hold to a strict, monotheistic understanding of God
as the one and only God.

God as “Three Persons” does not work for them;

And it’s very likely that many of you find this difficult to explain –including me.

The Holy Spirit seems like the most mysterious aspect of the Trinity,

but when you think about it, God as “Spirit” is the most likely the form that

Jew, Muslim, or anyone who does or doesn’t believe in God –
can imagine.

Referring to the Holy Spirit, Jesus promised his disciples that
the Paraclete would be sent to guide them.

Which reminds me about a youth minister who was trying to explain
this very concept to the Confirmation Class, when she says,

“Jesus promised the disciples that he would send the Paraclete to guide them.”

Then, little Johnny spoke up – which usually meant trouble, and he said,

“But didn’t the Holy Spirit land on Jesus like a dove at his baptism?”

And the youth minister said, “Yes...?”

Then Johnny said, “So, how come the disciples, only get a parakeet?

You’d think he’ would have sent a homing pigeon!”

Willard, p.2

Jesus did not send a parakeet, but the “Paraclete” which is translated as ‘Counselor’, ‘Comforter’, ‘Advocate’...

The prefix, “Para-” literally means “With” – but not simply that.

It is more like “mutual” or “side by side” –

as it is used in “parabola” or “parallel” or “parable”.

“Clete” can be translated as “one who calls forth”...

So, the Paraclete represents the One who mutually calls forth to us –
and to whom we can call, when in the midst of our ignorance or despair
and to whom we can respond with faith and love –
which is a model for what a healthy, loving relationship ought to be.
God calls to us even though our responses may be slim to none,
and even if we do not properly address our calls for help,
it is God who’s listening at the other end of any hotline.

That is what happened on Pentecost –

the Holy Spirit called to humanity through Jesus’ disciples
and those present responded by asking,

“What does this mean?”

The Apostle Peter answered them through the Holy Spirit

who helped Peter, by bringing to mind verses from the Prophet Joel.

That was the beginning for the Christian “church” to become
a congregation or gathering of like-minded people.

I am not always so sure about the ‘like-minded’ part, but –

in keeping with Martin Luther King’s concept of ‘beloved community’,
the Church is not an utopia,

but a dynamic place where people can bring their imagination
to serve God and others.

The UCC is not creedal, but covenantal as we agree on essentials
while appreciating our differences.

For us as the United Church of Christ here in The Villages-area,
that means being a progressive voice calling out
to our community in this time and this place.

The Holy Spirit spoke through those disciples –

almost like when you call the computer customer service

and the technician takes remote control of the desktop on your computer.

Now, that would not be a good situation if you couldn’t trust
the one doing the controlling on the other end;

But the Holy Spirit operates according to the Great Commandment –
the law of love, the law of rational loving-kindness.

Willard, p.3

That means who we are is not compromised when we are in service to God –
and to put it in the words of the Apostle Paul, to serve God through Christ.

The Holy Spirit of the Christian Scriptures corresponds
to Wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures which is characterized as a woman.
Wisdom even has a woman's name, a Greek name –
and that is, Sophia.

I like the idea of women being acknowledged as part of the Trinity –
as Holy Wisdom equated with the Holy Spirit.

Otherwise, it seems not only unjust,
but an incomplete understanding of who God is.

In Catholic and Orthodox doctrine, the role of Mary the mother of Jesus was elevated
to become a deified human being – but still as a human being.

It so happens there's more written about Mary in the Qur'an than in the Gospels,
yet what we do have in our scriptures about her was very important
in the shaping of our faith from the beginning and even now.

At the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel tells Mary that she is to give birth
to the Son of God.

Traditional Orthodox Christianity teaches that she was invited to this role
and that Mary chose to accept.

Then, Mary sings a song of joy – not only for the good news of having a baby,
but that this will be a triumph on behalf of oppressed people.

The events of Jesus' birth that included angels, shepherds, and Persian pilgrims,
the encounter with wise elders when he was circumcised at the Temple,
and when he was a child, finding him in discussion with senior rabbis,
all were occasions Mary treasured in her heart about this special child of hers.

Mary was there for Jesus to urge him to demonstrate his powers at a wedding,
and she tried to protect him when confronted by the contempt of extremists
and she stood before him amidst those who finally crucified him;
And she was there to bear witness to his empty tomb.

According to Jewish tradition, it is said that the Hebrew scriptures are written
in *black fire and white fire* – 'black fire' meaning the ink of written verses
and 'white fire' as the space between those verses.

Reading between the lines – often, that's where we find
the significance of Bible stories about women –
Miriam the sister of Moses is an example.

During the Exodus as the Hebrew people caravanned through the wilderness
of the Sinai Desert, Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses,
and Miriam became ill with a skin disease – as a judgment from God.

Moses had her sent out of the camp according to their law,
but the people defied Moses, refusing to move on
until Miriam could go with them.

Willard, p. 4

We have to read between the lines to see that – though God had judged her and not Aaron as well, perhaps God was really with the people on Miriam's behalf, rather than insisting on a strict reading of the scripture itself...

The role of women in the Bible – as well as the role of women in our society and cultures throughout the world, is continually being re-examined to bring injustice to light and celebrate our human diversity.

Mary Magdalene has played a significant role in popular media in recent years thanks to legendary traditions and more recently, to The DaVinci Code thriller; She is celebrated as a saint who was a strong and wise woman.

Though her role in the early Church is still shrouded in mystery, there continues to be speculation she may have had more influence than Church tradition tells us.

We have only to look at our own lives to find examples of women who have been both strong and wise who could handle any situation.

I was asked recently about how I felt about current discussion of whether or not women should be in a combat role in our military.

Most women would not be physically on the same level of strength and endurance as a Rambo-type warrior – but then, most men I knew in the service wouldn't be either!

The Pope of the Roman Catholic Church recently said he would consider women being authorized to serve as deacons.

That is an ordained role in the Catholic Church that carries some authority, so Pope Francis' statement is a remarkable step forward and opportunity for significant change in the Catholic Church.

<http://religionnews.com/2016/05/12/pope-francis-lets-study-idea-of-ordaining-women-as-deacons/>

Issues of gender continue to make the news – not just issues about women, though the Divine Feminine is at the heart of it.

Who would have thought restrooms would be the arena for national dialogue that in a roundabout way involves women's rights.

Transgender people have rarely been acknowledged in the media let alone polite conversation up until just weeks ago.

This has set religious and political conservatives into a tizzy fomenting into a crisis mode, calling for defiance against federal mandates.

What is really at stake is the Spirit in which we will take our guidance – will it be by a narrow reading of scripture and the law of 'We've always done it this way', or will it be to change our laws and how we interpret scripture to conform to the law of love written into the human heart –

the Golden Rule of 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'?

Willard, p.5

We have that aspect of God's Holy Spirit called Sophia from the Hebrew tradition and the Logos – the Word, from the Christian tradition, both described as being part of the process of Creation.

The Divine Feminine represented as goddesses in ancient cultural myths, was acknowledged and woven into the language of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Our God is a unified blend that transcends gender, while here on Earth it is a messy business of human sexual identity that does not conform easily to fitting in one category or another.

The Trinity remains a mystery while slowly but surely we are called to recognize a new normal about what it means to be human – in all our wild diversity.

Our only hope in the midst of the continuing watery chaos of Creation, is that love prevails, that love for our Human-form prevails by a God who created us in God's own image.

Perhaps the simplest way of saying this is to remember the name of God spoken to Moses was: I Am... I Am That I Am...

Perhaps that means that God is saying to us:
"I Am that 'I am' that you are, too."

We exist and have integrity, such that neither fire nor water, height nor depth, nor the rending of body and soul by dying in this life, can separate us from who we are as children of God, who is Father, Son, & Mother, too.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 speaks of wisdom
in terms of a woman.*

*Wisdom herself speaks, and she is very much like the Logos
described in the first chapter of John, present at creation...*

¹Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?

²On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;

³beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

⁴“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.

²²The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.

²³Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—

²⁶when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil.

²⁷When he established the heavens, I was there,

when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

²⁸when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,

²⁹when he assigned to the sea its limit,

so that the waters might not transgress his command,

when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker;

and I was daily his^[a] delight, rejoicing before him always,

³¹rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 16:1-15

[Jesus said,]

¹I have said all this to you to keep you from falling away.

²They will put you out of the synagogues;
indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you
will think [they are] offering service to God.

³And they will do this because they have not known
the [Abba]Father, nor me.

⁴But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes
you may remember that I told you of them.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning,
because I was with you.

⁵But now I am going to [the one] who sent me; yet none of you asks me,
‘Where are you going?’

⁶But because I have said these things to you,
sorrow has filled your hearts.

⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth:

it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away,
[the Paraclete or] the Counselor will not come to you;
but if I go, I will send [her] to you.

⁸And when [she] comes,

[she] will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:

⁹concerning sin,

because they do not believe in me;

¹⁰concerning righteousness,

because I go to the [Abba]Father, and you will see me no more;

¹¹concerning judgment,

because the ruler of this world is judged.

¹²“I have yet many things to say to you,

but you cannot bear them now.

¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, [she] will guide you into all the truth;

for [she] will not speak on his own authority,

but whatever [she] hears [she] will speak,

and [she] will declare to you the things that are to come.

¹⁴[She] will glorify me,

for [she] will take what is mine and declare it to you.

¹⁵All that the [Abba] Father has is mine;

therefore I said that [she] will take what is mine and declare it to you.

