

God As Wisdom

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
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Ancient Witness: Proverbs 3:13-20

The Jesus way—Christianity—is a God-centered tradition. It is true that to be a Christian entails that we work for justice and compassion in this world. We are to love our neighbor and help the least of those in this world—the widow, the orphan and the immigrant. There is a strong moral and ethical dimension to Christianity that has become severely disconnected from American Christianity today. On this Mother’s Day it’s appropriate to keep in mind that in the United States, nearly 43% of women, and nearly half of all children, are poor and low-income. (Institute for Policy Studies) Yet, the Republican-controlled congress, the President and their billionaire donors plan to cut basic social services, from healthcare to food, This is a violent attack on mothers and their children.

So yes, the Jesus way is an ethical path, but it is also more than that. The greatest commandment, according to Jesus, was that “you shall love *the Lord*, your God, with all your heart, soul and mind.” And in the 10 commandments, the very first one is: “You shall have *no other gods* before me.” But what do we mean by the word, “God?” What does it mean for us in the 21st Century to love God with everything we have?

Well, first it’s helpful to understand that everyone has a god that they love, religious and nonreligious people alike. Think of it like this: our God is whatever we love the most. If earning money is the most important thing in your life, then that is your god. If political power is the most important thing, that is your god. If having lots of friends is the most important thing, then that is your god. The Great Commandment wasn’t referring to a god in general. It says, you shall love *the Lord*. This is referring to the God that the Hebrew people worshiped, that Jesus worshiped. This was the God who created the universe, who liberated the Israelites from slavery, who challenged the nation and kings to establish justice and fairness among the people, the God who is love, and who brings peace and serenity to our souls at every moment. The Great Commandment was saying that we make *the Lord* our God, our top priority, that we love this God with everything we have.

And this God of Jesus goes by many names and is thought of using many images. He referred to this God with two traditionally male images: Lord, a sovereign who rules over others, and Abba, a father. I know many people who have a difficult time with these images. Male dominance and patriarchy has been responsible for so much suffering and destruction through the generations, so it is understandable to recoil from these images as God. And in an age that is so literal, it’s important to remember that any image for God is metaphorical—imprecise and inadequate. It is always poetic, language of comparison. There are many other names that might resonate with your soul: God as spirit or wind, God as unnameable mystery, God as presence within, God the almighty and magnificent, God as love, God as oneness. And today I want to look at God as wisdom.

It was the mystic, Julian of Norwich, who said, “God Almighty is our natural Father; God All-wisdom is our natural Mother.” This overlooked and forgotten image of God as wisdom can help us follow Jesus’ Great Commandment, giving us new perspective on what it means to trust in the God of Jesus.

What is wisdom? It is not simply knowledge. Knowledge is the accumulation of facts and information. Wisdom is the synthesis of knowledge into insights that deepen one’s understanding of the meaning of life. Someone once said that knowledge is a tool, and wisdom is the craft in which the tool is used. In this age of the internet, we are quite literally awash in a sea of information. And yet we are creating a planet inhabitable for future generations, we face war and violence across the globe, we see societies crumble under the inequality and separation of the rich and the poor. We are at the edge of an existential threat to the human species, and information, facts and knowledge has been used to get us there. One of the five-star Generals from World War II, Omar Bradley, summed up our situation:

We have men of science, too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.

He was talking about the limitations of intelligence alone and the lack of wisdom. The problems of our age are not primarily scientific. They have to do with greed, fear and the lust for power. As Einstein famously said, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” What is lacking in our age is not information, but knowing how to use it. We had the knowledge to develop a COVID vaccine but wisdom called us to use it not just to protect ourselves but to care for and protect others. We have ability to produce so much, but wisdom tells us that prosperity needs to be shared, that we do better when everyone does better.

Wisdom is the ability to recognize patterns, both good and bad, and to weave knowledge into a fabric. Patterns such as systemic racism and the systemic domination of extreme wealth, but also patterns of love and the hidden wholeness of life. Wisdom is more of a felt sense that something is right or wrong. Whereas intelligence is about the head; wisdom is about the heart. Paul wrote the the church at Corinth that “knowledge puffs up but love or wisdom builds up.”

At the beginning of the Second World War, the poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, famously wrote:

*Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts . . . they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric*

We live in an age—a dark hour—of unquestioned and uncombined facts. And we pay little attention to wisdom can can save us, leech us from our ill. There is no loom that can pull that needed wisdom together into fabric.

In the Letter of James it talks about two kinds of wisdom (James 3:13-18). The wisdom of mere human effort that often masks our selfish ambition. We attempt to see patterns and find meaning

on our own, under our own power, from our own limited perspectives. “But the wisdom from above,” wrote James, “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.” This divine wisdom is true wisdom. It comes from the heart of God, with a breadth and depth of experience that is boundless.

In the scriptures, Wisdom—the word is “Sophia” in the Greek—is a feminine face of God. In our text from Proverbs, it says that “She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her... all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast as called truly happy.”

God as Wisdom is always present to us, weaving the facts of the past into a fabric of possibilities of love and harmony, guiding us into the future. No matter what wrong choices we have made, no matter how bleak, God’s Wisdom leads us to greater love, mercy and peace. It invites us into a future that we must create in response to God. And because we can rely on this Wisdom to weave us a fabric in every circumstance, we can replace fear with trust.

We usually associate human wisdom with the elders, the results of years of experience can make one wise. But Divine Wisdom of the eternal God, the true wisdom, is not earned by our own life experience, which we then weave together. Rather it is simply given to us as a gift, through our experience of God. We become wise through our relationship with God. God’s grace can make even children deeply wise. Those such as the young Greta Thunberg who teaches us that our short-term profits are going to destroy the planet. Try as we might, we cannot weave this fabric ourselves. We can find true wisdom only with an encounter with God.

This reminds me of a cartoon of someone who is at the Pearly Gates, and they see a sign. On one side there is an arrow and underneath it says, “Heaven.” On the other side, there’s an arrow pointing in a different direction that is labeled, “Lecture on Heaven.” It’s not that lectures and teaching are unimportant, but we cannot stop there. The whole goal of the stories and tradition is to experience heaven for ourselves.

Marcus Borg once wrote about the difference between firsthand and secondhand religion:

The way of Jesus invites us to move from “secondhand religion” to firsthand religion. Secondhand religion is a way of being religious based on believing what one has heard from others. It consists of thinking that the Christian life is about believing what the Bible says or what the doctrines of the church say. Firsthand religion, on the other hand, consists of a relationship to that to which the Bible and teaching of the church point—namely the reality that we call God.

True wisdom comes from a firsthand experience of God. True wisdom is to become aware that God is speaking at the deepest recesses of the heart. And we access this wisdom not through our own effort or thoughts, but through silence, openness and listening for that still, small voice.

This is something that Jesus did. He took that inward journey, and he emptied himself of his own thoughts of right and wrong. He said, not my will but thy will be done. He pointed to the importance of experiencing God, saying, “Don’t call me good. Only God is good.” For it is deep within us all that God as wisdom is to be found. The wisdom of your own goodness and

preciousness. The wisdom of the goodness and preciousness of all people. The wisdom of the goodness and preciousness of the earth.

Thanks be to God All-wisdom our natural Mother. Thanks be to Sophia.
Amen.