

**Having a Life Well Lived**  
Proverbs 1:20-33; Matthew 5:13-16

May 18, 2008

Graduate Recognition Sunday  
By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

If we listen carefully today, we will hear the matriarchal voices of the Hebrew Bible calling to our graduates. Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel lift their voices before us all. Deborah, Bathsheba, Naomi, Ruth, and Esther: they are calling particularly for our graduates, and our graduates would do well to listen carefully to what they say.

Isn't it interesting that the book of Proverbs, which arose out of a highly patriarchal culture, presents wisdom as a woman? The text I read from chapter one is the first of several speeches where wisdom is personified in feminine form.

*Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice.  
At the busiest corner she cries  
out;  
at the entrance of the city gates  
she speaks.*

The word "Wisdom" in that verse is her name. Or perhaps I should say *their* name. In the Hebrew language, it is in the plural form. She embodies the collective wisdom of their culture, and she is wanting to impart that wisdom to youth on the verge of adulthood.

The ancient people of Israel were deliberate about instructing their youth in the ways of wisdom. The book of Proverbs is actually an instruction manual. It taught their youth not to play with fire or visit harlots. It taught them how to deal with corrupt men and a righteous God. It taught them how to be wise, how to grow up, and, in the process, how to have a life well lived. A life well lived, they believed, is possible only when we embrace woman wisdom.

So what is it? What exactly is wisdom in the Hebrew tradition? Ah, that's the key to understanding this book. And it is the key, they rightly believed, to having the life well lived. Wisdom in the Hebrew tradition has three dimensions. It is living well with creation. Fire really does burn; that's the way creation is. It is living well with others. Visiting harlots can produce great pain. And it is living well with God, our Creator.

The life of wisdom is built upon those three pillars: living well with creation, others, and God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, they taught. It starts with humble acknowledgment that God is God and we're not. God created this world with laws and patterns that are consistent generation after generation. The "way of the wicked," which led to trouble fifteen generations ago, leads there still. So the Hebrew youth were warned. They could ignore wisdom, if they chose. And some did. They were called fools.

We have seven of our youth graduating from high school this year. They are on the cusp of adulthood. They are bright and talented, and we all wish them well. Anna, Ben, Danielle, Stephan, Johnny, Jill, and Kim, you're loved dearly by this community of faith. We have taught you. We have listened to you. We have played with you, shaped you, and today we bless you. May the gifts this church has given you—things like faith, integrity, respect, love, and service—be planted deeply within your heart. May they be the stepping stones by which you go from us to college, new places and people and ideas. May they be the bedrock that enables you to have a life well lived. Today I invite you to listen carefully to the voice of Woman Wisdom. She tells you three things.

**The first is this: the call of wisdom is inescapable.** The text says that she is calling to you from every corner of life. She "cries aloud in the street." She raises her voice in the square. At the busiest corner, she cries out. At the entrance of the city gates, she speaks. The call of wisdom, to live well with creation, others, and God, is inescapable. You've heard her instruction from your parents, grandparents, and other family members. You've heard her from our church and teachers at school. The people who love you the most have been the mouthpiece for Woman Wisdom.

This is what I want you to know. While it is true that the call of wisdom is inescapable, it is also true that the call of wisdom is not

mandatory. You don't have to obey. You don't have to be wise. She gives you permission to be a fool.

You will be confronted with situations where it will be hard to know what to do. One part of you will say, "Yes, I want to do this!" and another part of you will say, "But maybe I shouldn't!" I want to but it may lead to trouble. Now how will you decide what to do in those situations? Here is a tool to help you decide in situations like this. Ask yourself this question: "Is this wise in relation to creation, to others, and to God?" If you can honestly, truly say "Yes" then go for it. Go and enjoy. Life is meant to enjoy. However, if you cannot honestly and truly say "Yes" then back away.

Let wisdom be your guide. Her call is inescapable, but it is not mandatory.

**Second, the challenge of wisdom is to grow up.** "How long will you love being simple?" she asks in our text. "How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?"

There comes a time for all of us when we can no longer excuse ourselves because we're young. Our graduates are being invited to participate in an adult world, and you should know that the needs here are great. We need you to be wise. In fact, we need you to be wiser than we've been. Let me tell you ten things that we need in the adult world, and we're hoping that you can step up and fill some of these. You will not be able to fill every one of them, but listen for the one or two that you can. Some of these are framed by one of my favorite writers today, Anthony Campolo (*Following Jesus without Embarrassing God*).

1. We need young men and women who know how to follow Jesus without embarrassing God. We have enough adults who claim to be following Jesus who are doing things that must be an absolute embarrassment to God.
2. We need young men and women who know how to embrace many faith traditions without abandoning their own. You must do a better job of building bridges between the world's religions than we've done. That may be the most important thing your generation will be called upon to do.

3. We need young men and women who know how to live a Christian lifestyle without moving into a commune. We need you to make a difference in the community, not the commune.
4. We need young men and women who know how to pray without saying things that make God the bad guy. God doesn't send cyclones and earthquakes. Put all your talk about prayer through this filter: God is always the good guy.
5. We need young men and women who know how to be committed to the church without letting it consume their life. It can and if it does, you will lose your effectiveness.
6. We need young men and women who know how to be physically attractive without being obscene. Respect yourself.
7. We need young men and women who know how to be politically active without losing their soul. Politics is not inherently bad. Involve yourself in the important issues of our time, but hold tightly to your soul.
8. We need young men and women who know who know how to discern the will of God without hearing voices from heaven. You've got major decision to make. Seek God's will.
9. We need young men and women who know how to be environmentally aware without being a tree-hugger. My generation needs your generation to be a better steward of our earth than we have been.
10. We need young men and women who know how to be positive about women and minorities without being negative about men and the majority. Your generation will finally turn the corner on gender equality—I hope. Build a society of equals.

That's what we need in the adult world. Which of these will you embrace? Hear the challenge to grow up to be a wise adult.

There is one final thing you must hear from Woman Wisdom. **It is the consequence of ignoring her call.** Let me say this first. This is not describing God. This is describing the personification of wisdom. If you ignore her call, the text says that she will laugh when calamity strikes you like a whirlwind. When panic overcomes you, she will mock you. You will call out to wisdom then, the text says, and she will not answer. She says that you will eat the fruit of your way and be filled with your own choices. That is the consequence of ignoring her.

If I could add one thing to this instruction manual, it would be this. I would tell the youth that one day a preacher or someone else will stand before the community to say something about their life. It's hard to imagine when you're young, but that day will come. One of the greatest compliments that can be said on that day is this: his or hers was a life well lived. You know how to get there now. Settle for nothing less.

### Closing Prayer

Help us all, Lord, to listen carefully to Woman Wisdom that we all may have a life well lived. Amen.