

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Wooed by Lady Wisdom

Proverbs 9:1-6

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

*1Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
2She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
3She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
from the highest places in the town,
4“You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
5“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
6Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”*

Author’s Note: Today’s Old Testament text is a slice of early Israel’s wisdom tradition. (Interesting is how that tradition is also reflected in the epistle reading for today, Ephesians 5:15-20.) It is important to know that Israel’s wisdom tradition is very different from that of the Greeks’ self-knowledge tradition or our own self-help traditions (see 3:1-8). The beginning of wisdom or insight is not primarily about the mindful contemplation of ourselves in the universe, but the “fear of the Lord” and “knowledge of the Holy One” (9:10) who created me together with all that exists. The opposite of wisdom is not primarily information deficiency but idolatry. Foolishness consists in such things as the lack of

fear, love and trust in God, scoffing (2:20-22) at the voice of God, and listening uncritically and self-flatteringly to other voices in its place, including our own. The book of Proverbs presents the world as a battle ground of two competing voices each calling to us, personified as "Lady Wisdom," the Word of God, and "Madam Folly," the word of deception. As I researched on this text, I came across two helpful sources: 1) a sermon by The Rev. Dr. David von Schlichten, pastor of St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church in Youngstown, PA since 1997 (http://day1.org/1404-the_woman_less_listened_to) and 2) an exegetical piece by Steven M. Baum written for Kerux: The Online Journal of Biblical Theology (<http://www.kerux.com/doc/0301A4.asp>). Although the Crossings Matrix helped me to think about and fill in elements of the message of Proverbs not covered by these sources, I, nevertheless, appreciated their insight very much.

DIAGNOSIS: Fooled by Madam Folly (Proverbs 9:13-18)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Distracted by Loud Mouthed Madam Folly (the foolish woman is loud, v. 13)*

According to Proverbs, as people wend their way through life, they tend to think of themselves as "going straight on their way" (v. 15). That is, they think they know who they are, what they are to do, and have their minds set on doing it. But do they—really? The test, of course, is how they respond to the distractions that are all around them: distractions that would also seek to tell them "who they are," "what they are to do," and "where to set their minds." Proverbs calls those distractions "Madam Folly" (v. 13). While she is "ignorant and knows nothing" (v. 13), she nevertheless masks that fact by the "loudness" (v. 13) with which she speaks and the way she positions herself "on a seat at the high places of the town"

(v.14). Remember, “high places” is code language for that which is “sacred,” the place where God (of Israel) or the gods (of other religions) sit. Whatever Madam Folly says, she presents it as though it has sacred status for the culture, whether it be in the guise of “political correctness” or “traditional values.” Have you heard her as you’ve wended your way through life?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Seduced by Loud-Mouthed Madam Folly (You who are simple, turn in here!, v. 16)*

Proverbs favorite words for describing humanity are “simple” (vv. 4 and 16), “senseless” (vv. 4 and 16) and “immature” (v. 6). Anything but flattering. That’s because, as immature, senseless, simpletons we are easily fooled by the contorted arguments and enticing promises delivered with rhetorical skill by Madam Folly. (Shades of serpent versus Adam and Eve in the garden, Genesis 3.) Indeed, with her rhetorical flair, she deftly “turns” our hearts and minds off the “straight way” (away from Lady Wisdom) into her snare of folly. To be sure, on first hearing, what she says sounds very pleasing: “Stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (v. 17). Of course, this line is Hebrew poetry for all those dark things we foolishly think we can get away with. “Sweet,” we say, as we steal the water that is not ours to take, thinking we have gotten away with it. “Pleasant,” we say, is the forbidden bread we indulge in secretly and presumably safely, thinking no one will ever know. What is this but hearts and minds turned in on themselves easily exploited by the seduction of Madam Folly? It would seem, then, that when Madam Folly is described as “ignorant and knows nothing” (v. 13), it is speaking more of what she makes of us than what she sees in herself. Madam Folly herself is quite deceptive and cleaver, knowing exactly what she is doing.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Fooled by Loud*

Mouthed Madam Folly (but they do not know that the dead are there, v. 19)

What Madam Folly is really doing is turning us over to death (v. 19), handing us over to God's condemnation (12:2, 19:29). Indeed, she delights in that kind of bait and switch practice: enticing us to turn to things that seem sweet and pleasant but which only lead to death. To be sure, she will never tell you this. She will never tell you things Lady Wisdom knows, like "the perverse are an abomination to the Lord" (3:32) or "the Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked" (3:33). Madam Folly's goal is ultimately to set us up against Lady Wisdom, the Word of God, the essence of all truth and wisdom and the source of all life.

PROGNOSIS: Wooed by Lady Wisdom

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Surprised by Lady Wisdom (Wisdom has built her house, v. 1)*

The good news, as Proverbs presents it, is that Lady Wisdom is more tenacious than Madam Folly in winning (wooing) us back to herself. To us who are simple and senseless and immature, Lady Wisdom has "built her house" (v. 1), "set her table" (v. 2), "sent out her servant-girls" (v. 3) and "calls from the *highest* places in the town" (v. 3). And where do we see Lady Wisdom doing this but in the good news of Jesus Christ. In his incarnation, death and resurrection, Christ, the power of God and the Wisdom of God, has established in himself, in his body, a "house" (v. 1) that can withstand the fury of God's condemnation, ride out the sentence of death, transforming the spoils of folly into the fruit of wisdom. In his house, Jesus "sets a table" (v. 3) from which he continually feeds immature, senseless, simpletons with wisdom marked as forgiveness and grace. From that house he "sends out his servant-girls" (v. 3)

inviting all to “come” (v. 5) and to eat and drink, not “stolen water” or forbidden “bread” (v. 17), but what Lady Wisdom calls “my wine” and “my bread,” the very body and blood of Christ, purchased legitimately through his death and given freely as his gift. All this that Jesus does in his incarnation, death and resurrection is rightly called the wisdom of God because it is issued from the “*highest* places in the town” (v. 3), from the throne of God himself.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Wooed by Lady Wisdom (You who are simple, turn in here!, v. 4)*

Of course, in order to have the benefits of the house that Lady Wisdom built one must “turn” or enter into that house. For that reason an essential part of Lady Wisdom’s work includes wooing us into her house—all of which is a metaphor for coming to faith in Christ. A central feature of Proverbs’ presentation of the contest between Lady Wisdom and Madam Folly is the way Madam Folly parrots, but always with a deceptive twist, the invitation of Lady Wisdom. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the way each appeals to the human heart or mind. Note: the appeal of Madam Folly is literally identical to Lady Wisdom: “Turn in here!” (see vv. 4 and 16). Therefore, what is important to note is the nature of their respective appeals. Madam Folly appeals to the way of self-interest, urging us to trust ourselves to know what is best for us. Lady Wisdom, by contrast, appeals to “the way of insight” (v. 6), as Proverbs calls it, which would call us to deny ourselves and trust wholly in Wisdom or the Word of God. It is easy for us to see how Madam Folly’s appeal works. She appeals to us as we are: self-interested, turned in on self. Lady Wisdom appeals to us as she alone is able to re-create us to be, namely, “insightful,” which means, turned out to God, specifically, the Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ. We, therefore, turn into Wisdom’s house not by our own reason or strength but by the power of Holy Spirit who works in

us the way of insight (cf. v. 10).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Focused on Lady Wisdom (Going straight on their way [of insight], v. 15).*

Those who belong by faith to the house that Lady Wisdom built still live in a world where Loud-Mouthed Madam Folly does her distracting, seducing and foolish antics. The wise are never naïve about that fact. And so they strive every day to go “straight on their way” (v. 15), struggling to avoid distraction, to resist seduction, and to refrain from stepping into her snare. Still, they know the perils of life in this world. Finding themselves confronted by one of Madam Folly’s clients, they know they may need to “correct a scoffer” only to be “abused” or “rebuke the wicked” only to “get hurt” (v. 7). But that does not discourage them. For they know that “if you are wise, you are wise for yourself” (v 12), not for the sake of human approval or self-pleasure. Finally, the wise also know that there may be times, unfortunately, when they themselves will lapse into foolishness and need correction. But what characterizes them still as “wise” is that they love those who rebuke them (v. 8). For they live in the “fear of the Lord” and relish in the “knowledge of the Holy” that “the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights” (3:12).