

Last week, at this same time and channel, you may recall that we heard the story of a brash Syro-Phoenician woman accosting Jesus. We talked about that Gospel in light of the recent aphorism, "Well behaved women rarely making history." We noted that this statement was especially true in Biblical history. We talked about how the role of women in our religious tradition has been buried because; 1) women were taught to be invisible, and 2) even when women broke that rule, male authors tended to write them out of the story whenever possible.

In today's first two lessons, we experience the most fascinating example of this in all of the Bible. Each reading introduces us to the Wisdom Woman, Sophia in Greek. In our first lesson from Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a female and she is described as a prophet, in this case, a street preacher. We learn that many people refused to listen to her, just as they did not respond to the pleas of many prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Knowing that well behaved women rarely make history, (after all, she is the wisdom woman), she resorts to something females never did in that culture, namely talk back. She sarcastically suggests to those who continue to ignore her council, that maybe she just won't be around to offer her wisdom later.

The second reading from the Wisdom of Solomon offers us a wider glimpse of this mysterious woman. "She is a reflection," we hear, "of eternal light, a ...mirror of the working of God." Then we learn this amazing thing about her; "Although she is but one, she can do *all* things, and while remaining in herself, she renews *all* things." Wow. A

woman who can do all things and mirrors God's works? Beyond today's texts, there are a few more descriptions of her, none more extraordinary as Proverbs 8 when the wisdom woman speaks in the first person. "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago, I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth...Before the mountains had been shaped,...When God established the heavens, I was there...when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like his master workman; and I was daily his delight."

Being older than the oldest thing we know, and apparently taking part in Creation with God, the wisdom woman seems as close to God as anything or anyone we know. Is she perhaps divine herself? The final lines of this chapter of Proverbs 8 takes this even further. "Wisdom woman rejoices in God's inhabited world and delights in the children of humans." Wisdom women's primary concern is us and she is connected to us, offering us her love and her vast knowledge.

Sophia comes and goes in the Hebrew bible, and is also very prominent in the Deuterocanonical books written between the time of the Hebrew and Christian texts. She is an astonishing feminine presence in a very patriarchal book. But by the time we get to the Christian testament, she all but disappears. Where did she go? How do we explain the loss of a figure of this magnitude in the text? Not only does she disappear from the text, but we find little discussion of her by theologians. At least that is what it appears from our vantage point in Western or Roman based Christianity. But in Eastern Christianity, Sophia did not disappear. In fact, the largest church in Constantinople was named for her, Hagia Sophia. Nothing remains of that initial

structure that Constantine had built, but it was rebuilt beginning in 532 and still has the same name in honor of Sophia.

The front of your bulletin is another reminder that in Eastern Christianity, Lady Wisdom or Sophia has never been forgotten. This is a modern icon by Mary Plaster from 2003 entitled “Divine Sophia.” There are many more icons of her found in Orthodox churches throughout the world, as well as mosaics and other art.

So what did we in the West do with Sophia? History suggests that the Roman church redirected the language that was used for Sophia in the Hebrew text and began using it for Mary. But it seems to me that some early theologians, including the Gospel evangelists, did something else with her. Listen to how Luke introduces Jesus in chapter 11 of his Gospel. “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they kill and persecute.” Luke calls Jesus by the title, the Wisdom of God. Matthew actually quotes Jesus referring to himself using this terminology in his Chapter 11. “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners! Yet Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

But it is in the prologue to the Gospel of John where the comparison between Jesus and Lady Wisdom is most dramatic. “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him...and the word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth.” It sounds nearly identical to the description of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8. By substituting Word (logos) for wisdom (Sophia), John actually gives Christ the same job description as Lady Wisdom. Jesus becomes

Sophia.

It seems to me that this is in part what is going on in today's Gospel, only we have missed it because we hear Jesus's question so differently than people would have in the first century Mediterranean. When we hear Jesus ask, "Who do you say that I am?", we think he has put the disciples on a game show. Can you figure out the true identity of the mystery man behind the curtain? And when we hear Peter say, "You are the Messiah.", we all think, Ding, Ding, ding, Peter got it right. He wins the trip to Cecily. What we forget is that in antiquity, there was no such thing as individual identity. Everyone had only a group identity, much like in Navajo culture today. You were who you were only through your family, your clan and your social class. This means that you really were, in effect, who people said you were. That is why Jesus begins today by asking the question, "Who do people say that I am?", and then "Who do you say that I am?" He is not quizzing them, he really wants to know who he is, because he is who people say he is. Peter's answer is that Jesus is Messiah, but the other answers given that Jesus is one of the prophets are just as valid and just as simultaneously possible. Thus Jesus is understood by others to be the Messiah, the love of God, a son of God and the wisdom or Sophia of God, among many other things. This is a strange concept for those of us stuck in our individual personality mindset, but it is very normal in a group oriented culture. Perhaps that is why those of you who are Navajo naturally understand Jesus better than I do.

So where did Anglos lose our concept of group identity? It seems to me that the death blow came after the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was instrumental in

pointing out the many abuses going on within the church, including the strangle hold the church suggested it had on saving everyone's soul from eternal damnation. But there was an unintended consequence when Luther insisted that we did not need a church to mediate between us and God. Telling us that we were responsible for our own souls, suddenly people became focused on individual salvation and what they needed to do on their own to be saved. This continues to be born out today on city street corners across America, where self-taught preachers tell us to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ so that we may be saved. It is handed out in tracts everywhere and it is blasted in 24 point type in RED on websites across the internet, like the one posted by The New Pentecostal United Holy Church of America (whatever that may happen to be) that begins with this sentence, *"If you don't know Jesus Christ as your Lord and personal Savior you are Hell Bound!"*

This individualist approach to religion becomes even more pronounced when European colonists came to a new land. America became the hotbed of individualist thinking because when Europeans first came to America, it was initially the most radical of those sects that settled here. Moderate Europeans found people like the Puritans impossible to live with, so they came here to escape religious persecution, bringing with them a much more severe form of Luther's original concepts. Thus rugged individualism became the hallmark ethic of the new land. Religious icons were verboten in these new austere American churches, but cultural icons did begin to surface, always highlighting individualism as the first commandment of American life. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, John Wayne was that icon, representing our greatest ideals and

our deepest morals. By playing a character who didn't need no stinkin' help from anyone, his movies taught us that if we wanted to be real men, we must pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and take on the world by ourselves.

Individualism is now so prevalent in our worldview, that we have forgotten all about the concept of group identity. We are so wrapped up in individual identity that we have come to believe, especially in this country, that the overarching purpose of religion is to save individual souls. From a cultural standpoint, individualism permeates everything we do and has created entire new fields of study like psychology and entire new literary genres like self help.

This concentration on our individual character has led to great discoveries about the mind and leaps of understanding about personal growth and health. But it has also led us to a new level of incivility with each other and, as we all know, it has had a catastrophic effect on our natural environment.

That is why it is so difficult for us to hear Jesus say in today's Gospel that he is calling us to deny ourselves. He is not talking about giving up chocolate. He's talking about letting go of our individualism so that we may embrace the other. When he says that he is calling us to lose our life for the sake of the Gospel, he is talking about getting out of ourselves, so that we can be in relationship with each other.

The difficulty of hearing this message was born out on the first day of our church's General Convention in Anaheim. The theme of Convention was exactly this concept that has slipped away from Westerners, especially Americans. In fact, we had to go to the language of an indigenous culture to get it back. We used ubuntu, the

African word that means, “I in you and you in me.

Speaking of the crisis in the church and in the world now, as well as the significant challenges that laid ahead for us, our own wisdom woman, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said this during that first sermon at General Convention. “The crisis of this moment has several parts, and like Episcopalians...they’re all related. The overarching connection in all of these crises has to do with the great Western heresy - that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us *alone* can be in right relationship with God. It’s caricatured in some quarters by insisting that salvation depends on reciting a specific verbal formula about Jesus. The individualist focus is a form of idolatry,” she said, “for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of being. That heresy is one reason for the theme of this Convention.

Ubuntu doesn’t have any “I’s” in it. The I only emerges as we connect - and that is really what the word means: I am because we are, and I can only become a whole person in relationship with others. There is no “I” without “you”, and in our context, you and I are known only as we reflect the image of the one who created us.”

I have to tell you, when I heard the Presiding Bishop of our church preach the same message that we have proclaimed here at St. David’s for a number of years, I was overwhelmed with emotion.

That however, was not the reaction of others outside the hall. I thought no one out there was listening. But when portions of those sentences came off the Associated Press wire, there was a firestorm. Bishop Katharine was called all kinds of names in

the press including Jezebel. When Linda Watt, the Bishop's right hand person was here week before last, she told Jean and I that the name calling went on for weeks and weeks after they returned and it was some of the most vicious stuff she has ever heard. Through it all, she described Bishop Katharine as "Spirit filled" and tranquil.

It is no wonder that Bishop Katharine was attacked so violently. Her prophetic words strike at the very heart of what it means to be American. In addition, her words run a stake through what Christianity has become since the Protestant Reformation. But they are the same prophetic words that Jesus speaks to us in today's Gospel. Individual salvation, beloved, is an oxymoron.

The time has come for a giant corrective in our church and in our culture. Individualism played its part in our evolutionary process. But the significance of religion goes far beyond individual soul saving. And a continuation of an individual approach to life can do nothing less than destroy the world around us and each other. The time has come for we Anglos to retrieve what our Navajo sisters and brothers here have never lost. The time has come to live again in the spirit of ubuntu. It is time for us to retrieve the relational nature of Jesus, who could be Messiah, the love of God and the Wisdom of God all at once. It is time for us to remember that no matter how hard we try, none of us can be the Body of Christ, except with each other. It is time to retrieve the true concept of the Trinity, that not even God is an individual, that even God only exists by being in relationship with God.

This is our calling in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. It is time for a new Reformation, a Reformation that holds on to what we have learned through individualism, but utilizes

the wisdom of Sophia to reconnect us with each other. It is time to end the age of it's all about me and begin a new world that is all about we. Amen.