

**Wisdom from the Deep**

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5

May 30, 2010

Trinity Sunday

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First Church in Windsor, CT

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Please join with me in the Spirit of Prayer: Loving Spirit, grant us presence,  
pure hearts and loving purpose in all we say and hear, knowing You are  
with us and that You speak to us in all ways. Amen.  
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There's a story about a proud young man who came to Socrates asking for knowledge. He walked up to the muscular philosopher and said, "O great Socrates, I come to you for knowledge."

Socrates recognized a pompous numbskull when he saw one. He led the young man through the streets, to the sea, and chest deep into the water. Then he asked, "What do you want?"

"Knowledge, O wise Socrates," said the young man with a charming smile.

Socrates put his strong hands on the man's shoulders and pushed him under the water. Thirty seconds later Socrates let him up. "What do you want?" he asked again.

"Wisdom," the young man sputtered, "O great and wise Socrates."

Socrates crunched him under again. Thirty seconds passed, thirty-five. Forty. Socrates let him up. The man was gasping. "What do you want, young man?"

Between heavy, heaving breaths the fellow wheezed, "Knowledge, O wise and wonderful..."

Socrates jammed him under again. Forty seconds passed. Fifty. "What do you want?"

"Air!" the young man screeched. "I need air!"

"When you want knowledge as you have just wanted air, then you will have knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Littleton, *Moody Monthly*, June 1989, p. 29; found May 27, 2010 at website: <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/w/wisdom.htm>

On Wednesday I remembered this story while I was sitting and talking with a friend on the beach at Meigs Point, one of my favorite shoreline spots at Hammonasset Beach State Park. Earlier, Sara and I had been driving south on Route 9, giggling about how we felt like teens playing hooky because we'd arranged for a day in the middle of the week to go to the beach. And what perfect beach weather we had! It was that 98-degree sky-blue day when the only place anybody wanted to be was at the beach. We were feeling quite blessed – and lucky! - and when we finally arrived at Hammonasset, things only got better, because we didn't even have to pay for parking! Although the gates were open and the park rangers were all about, the state parks in CT didn't officially open until yesterday, so on Wednesday we were able to avoid the state's new outrageous \$9 parking fee!

So, we were happily soaking up the sun and had just come back from a pretty long walk along the beach and settled into our chairs when our conversation made the inevitable turn. I can't remember who, but one of us remarked how fortunate we were to be enjoying our shoreline when so many people were trying to rescue the shorelines of Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana and Florida and other coastal shores because of the current ecological disaster in the gulf resulting from the BP oil spill. Together we lamented about the sea life and marshlands, the water contamination and the many fishermen and families who were losing their livelihoods. I admitted to Sara that although I'd been keeping up with the information in the news it wasn't until this week that I was able to bring myself to look at pictures of the disaster. She shared that her feelings of helplessness made her feel angry and depressed every time the news came on too.

Our conversation trailed off and we sat there for a few minutes, sulking in our pain and angst about it. As I I wondered to myself how long this catastrophe was going to go on and who had the knowledge NOW to stop this oil leak that is a mile deep down in the sea, I remembered this story about Socrates and the student. I thought about how we are a lot like that young man, smug in what we want, drowning in our desires and oblivious to what we truly need until all creation is gasping. Was there anyone out there who wanted to know as much as they wanted air? Where will such wisdom come from? Who will know it when they hear it?

Do you remember walking along the shore and spotting a shell or even coming across a collection of shells on a shelf somewhere and holding one up to your ear, so you could listen to what it had to tell you? It's almost like a reflex, you know? Picking a shell up and putting it to your ear. I wonder if it is a universal impulse, to pick up a shell and listen for what it has to tell us, hoping it will depart to us some wisdom from the deep. When I worked at the Windsor Public Library a few years ago, I led a book and activity program in the children's department for two-year olds and their parents once a week, and even there we taught them children's rhymes and hand motions that sang about listening to deep sea secrets through seashells. You should all have a seashell by now if you chose to pick one out. So here, real quick, if you have a shell, I'll teach you one of the rhymes I remember – repeat after me (with hand motions):

**One day, a little shell washed up  
Out of the waves at sea.  
I held the shell up to my ear,  
And I heard it sing to me.  
Sh -- sh -- sh -- sh!  
A little shell washed up one day,  
And lay upon the sand.  
It sang a song about the sea,  
As I held it in my hand.  
Sh -- sh -- sh -- sh!**

OK, well, just one more!

**Holding up a seashell**  
(hold fist to ear)  
**Tightly to my ear.**  
**Shh! It's telling me a secret**  
(Other hand holds finger to lips),  
**That only I can hear!**

Doesn't it make you wonder what the big secret is? I mean, what does Wisdom have to say from the deep?

I think Proverbs 8 can help us to better understand that. Listen:

Does not wisdom call,  
and does not understanding raise her voice?  
<sup>2</sup>On the heights, beside the way,  
at the crossroads she takes her stand;  
<sup>3</sup>beside the gates in front of the town,  
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:  
<sup>4</sup>"To you, O people, I call,  
and my cry is to all that live.  
<sup>5</sup>O simple ones, learn prudence;  
acquire intelligence, you who lack it.  
<sup>6</sup>Hear, for I will speak noble things,  
and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truth...

<sup>32</sup>"And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.  
<sup>33</sup>Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.  
<sup>34</sup>Happy is the one who listens to me,  
watching daily at my gates,  
waiting beside my doors.  
<sup>35</sup>For whoever finds me finds life  
and obtains favor from the Lord;

In this morning's text, we hear a universal message, one where Wisdom speaks not to insiders or just one person, but "to all that live." This reading is actually part of a larger poem where the listener's from every age are encouraged to learn the wise way to live so that good things will follow: prosperity, success, security and even fairness.

The voice of this poem is Woman Wisdom, or some think of her as the Holy Spirit, and

she is standing in the most public of places – at the crossroads, at the city gate, in the doorways.

Unlike our simple seashell rhymes where secrets from the deep are shared with only those who dare to put a shell to their ear, Wisdom is poetically and publicly lifting her voice and calling to us. Her teaching is clearly for everyone. Eugene Peterson, who wrote the contemporary Message version of the Bible suggests it's as if "she has taken her stand at First and Main, at the busiest intersection, right in the city square where the traffic is thickest and shouts, 'You – I'm talking to all of you, everyone out here on the streets!'"<sup>2</sup> She desires to tell us noble things and to speak words of truth. She wants to share things of great value, and possessing prudence, knowledge and discretion, Wisdom offers to us counsel, understanding and strength. The question for us then becomes will we listen?

As we move to verses 22 – 31, Wisdom proceeds to tell us of her presence at and participation in creation and her intimate relationship with God. She explains God created her even before the beginning of the Earth and then, very playfully, Wisdom tells us the story of how, from the very depths and heights of creation, she co-created the universe with God:

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

<sup>25</sup>Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth—

<sup>26</sup>when he had not yet made earth and fields,  
or the world's first bits of soil.

<sup>27</sup>When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

<sup>28</sup>when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,

<sup>29</sup>when he assigned to the sea its limit,

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, the Message, Proverbs 8:1-4.

so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,<sup>30</sup> then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily God's delight.

The Wisdom that co-created with God the heaven's and the earth is the voice crying out for us to hear, even still in 2010, as we are groping for answers and just beginning to cope with the dire consequences of the worst oil spill we can remember! As the oil from the sea bed continues to pour up and out, covering now over 29,000 square miles and threatening life and eco-systems to such an extent that we can't even begin to fathom the outcome, it is hard to admit that all of our lifestyles have contributed to this disaster. There are hundreds of these oil platforms in our seas. Our dependency on oil has created this awful mess and as I look at my daughter and all of our children, I'm reminded that the impact will not only be upon this generation, but future generations to come.

Are you as frustrated as I am about this whole mess? Are you feeling as helpless as I am? Maybe we can do something. Maybe this morning we will hear Wisdom and in faith respond to the Gulf oil by embracing a spiritual practice that is much neglected in our frantic, overly-electronic, preoccupied world: the practice of paying attention to creation in order to deepen our relationship with God. Quiet time. Listening. Being observant. Being. No, not "being" on our cell phones or at our computers but simply "being." Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, "An Altar in the World" tells us that:

"Wisdom is not gained by knowing what is right. Wisdom is gained by practicing what is right, and noticing what happens when that practice succeeds and when it fails.

Wise people do not have to be certain what they believe before they act. They are free to act, trusting that the practice itself will teach them what they need to know.”

And yet Taylor doesn't expect us to take her literally; that is, she suggests that an excellent form of practice is attentive inaction: “The easiest practice of reverence I know,” she writes, “is simply to sit down somewhere outside, preferably near a body of water, and pay attention for at least twenty minutes. It is not necessary to take on the whole world at first. Just take the three square feet of earth on which you are sitting, paying close attention to everything that lives within that small estate.”

It was Theodore Levitt, from Harvard Business School who once said that “experience comes from what we have done. Wisdom comes from what we have done badly.” This current ecological disaster in the Gulf reminds us of our own fragile relationship with God's beautiful creation. We are invited to reflect on the wisdom, or lack of wisdom, that we have shown by our dependency on oil and the human knowledge we have engaged in our hunger for more and more resources from this good earth. We have been given a clear opportunity to examine our lives and from the deep, Wisdom offers us counsel, understanding and the strength we need to be better stewards of creation, if only we will listen.

With God's help, may we seek Truth as if it were the air we need to breathe. May we sit still long enough, on whatever small estate we are blessed enough to find ourselves, to simply Be, to sense God's presence in all of creation, to ponder God's love that is still alive and living among us, and to give thanks for God's Spirit that creates and sustains life. And may the wisdom we gain by practicing what is right lead us to a freedom of action that reveals our true relationship with God and creation, and demonstrates our deep desire to be the good stewards God calls us to be.

Holding onto our shells as a symbol of the Wisdom that calls to all who live, I offer the words of a hymn titled “*O God, the Great, Wide Seas are Yours*, that was written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette as a response to the ongoing oil spill from the Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling rig that started on April 20<sup>th</sup>:

### **O God, the Great, Wide Seas are Yours**

MELITA 8.8.8.8.8 (“Eternal Father, Strong to Save”)

O God, the great, wide seas are yours!  
You carved the oceans’ rugged floors.  
You set the waters in their place  
And made all sea life by your grace.  
You also made humanity  
To care for earth and sky and sea.

Forgive us when we disobey  
And fail to care for what you’ve made.  
Consuming more than what we should,  
We harm the waters you call good.  
Forgive us when we fail to be  
Good stewards of your wondrous sea.

We pray for those who seek to care  
For troubled waters everywhere—  
For those who work to stop the spill  
Of all that would destroy and kill,  
For those who work with loving hands  
To tend your marshes, shores and sands.

God, may we hear your call anew  
To care for all these gifts from you.  
May we protect the sea and shore  
By using less, conserving more,  
And humbly learning how to live  
As stewards of this world you give.

Biblical references: Genesis 1-2:4

Tune: John B. Dykes, in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 1861.  
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