

What's Love Got to Do with It?

Stephanie Ford

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A woman traveling in the mountains finds a precious gem in a stream. The next day she meets another traveler who is hungry, and she shares some food with him. When she opens her bag, the hungry traveler notices the stone sparkling. "Can I see your stone?" Holding it in his hand, he feels desire growing. "May I keep it"? he asks. "Yes," she says without hesitating. Off the traveler goes, happy at the thought that the newly acquired gem will bring him a lot of money. But a few days later, he returns looking for her. "I've been thinking," giving the stone back to the woman. "This gem is very valuable, but I want something even more precious. Please give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone."

Such is the way of wisdom, elusive, "pure and altogether subtle" says the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon, "singular and manifold, clear and penetrating." For while the word "wisdom" has a practical ring to it, wisdom often deals in paradox and is revealed by dilemma. Remember the story from the Gospel of John. A woman is about to be stoned for adultery with the approval of law-respecting religious leaders. Jesus leans down and writes something on the ground, then stands up and says, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And slowly, they all walk away. Wisdom, we find, is not only the sum of intelligence and insight. And no, it can never be completely codified. It requires something more.

That something more, Proverbs 8 tells us, is to be found in the face of God, a face perhaps unfamiliar to us in traditional rhetoric. "Wisdom" in Hebrew is gendered in the feminine, and the female persona that grew up in the prayerful imagination of Scripture is compelling. In the Greek translation of Proverbs, She is *Sophia*. She is a street preacher, life-giver,

agent of justice, and the architect of creation. And Sophia-Wisdom is no shrinking violet!

Sophia was there at the beginning, before there were oceans and mountains, before the first handful of dirt was ever lifted from the earth. Sophia was co-creating with God, designing, crafting the order of creation that was emerging from the chaos, and finally smiling with love at the human species coming to birth. We may be a bit surprised. *Is this feminine image of God in Proverbs and in the Wisdom of Solomon revisionist history?* No, contends theologian Elizabeth Johnson. Sophia-Wisdom was long understood in the developing Old Testament literature as God incarnate, the *Torah* of old, "the intimate of God, pitching her tent and dwelling among the people." She was not separate from God, but the face of "God's nearness, activity, summons." For a host of reasons, but perhaps one being the sheer fact of Jesus's gender—a child, born a son and not a daughter--the nearness, the incarnation of God took a new name in John's Gospel, "logos," a masculine naming for Divine Wisdom, now Word, dwelling among us.

But lest we become too distracted parsing gender, wisdom asks a deeper question. Are we paying attention to the pure and altogether subtle Divine voice within, calling us to discern what is true, and right, and enduring? Are we acting with compassion or are we preoccupied with our own welfare? Are we taking reverence and delight in the created order we've been given as humankind--or are we using it only for our own ends? Quakers name this spiritual attention to holy wisdom as waiting upon the Inner Light -- that is, listening to God within. Daily, we sift through so much data, wade through countless voices telling us what we should do, or telling that we need this or that added to our lives in order to be adequate. The Divine voice speaks more quietly, or at least, must be approached with greater intention.

The Quakers say it takes time to learn this habit of attention. They are right; we grow toward this mystery of wisdom with daily practice. We will be imperfect at it; and minute-by-minute, we will need forgiveness. And we will need teachers. Just as a trained ear can hear the patterns of a particular composer in the movements of a piece of music, a trained eye

can see evidence of a certain architect in the design of a building--so a trained heart is a repository of what it has learned, and thus gives evidence to the wisdom of its teacher. Indeed our physical hearts echo the rhythm of our Creator's voice, the heavens tell a story of the Divine architect; and despite the failings of the Church, we see enduring signs of our Teacher, Healer, and Redeemer in the souls around us-- God incarnate, the *Sophia*, *Logos* revealed to us in the person and the way in Jesus.

Today, we honor teachers, facilitators, partners in our journey to know God better and to love our neighbor more skillfully at Binkley. We teachers come in different ages and genders; we come with unique stories, convictions, and shortcomings; and we each bring a host of colorful personalities to bear. And isn't that how wisdom works? If wisdom could be revealed on a power point, we could go home and stare at our computers! It is Divine wisdom incarnated in each one of us uniquely that we need to hear.

Among the many good teachers that I have had--a third grade teacher who made learning new things a lifetime joy for me, a seventh grade teacher who gave me confidence in mathematics--I'll never forget Dr. Pixton, chewing on his cigar, there in that stuffy classroom on the second floor of Morrill Hall in late August. I was among a bunch of new grad students in English at Oklahoma State University assigned to him for the required course in advanced composition and grammar. He had a gruff exterior: no one in the class made better than a C- on our first composition, and he seemed to enjoy pointing that fact out to us! Dr. Pixton woke me up to the power of good punctuation--and sentence structure--in the craft of rhetoric. I still annoy my colleagues at Binkley with my love for good comma usage!

Fast forward ahead to the last week of that fall term. Most of us were also graduate assistants, teaching two classes of freshman composition for the first time on top of our own course loads--so by the end of the semester, we were whipped. And there was yet one more paper for Dr. Pixton, a long essay that was to apply the key concepts of the course in a creative way. My friend Paige and I were exhausted, staying up until 2 or 3:00 am in the

morning grading papers. I can still remember her drinking coffee chaulky with creamers, and the bag of peppermints she carried to keep us awake.

There in our sleep-deprived state calculating final grades for the freshmen we taught, we hatched a plan. We would go to Dr. Pixton together and ask for an incomplete, and finish our last paper for him over the Christmas break. My friend Paige, a native of Delight, Arkansas, was the perfect one to speak on our behalf, poised with her fine Southern charm and diction. Trembling a little, we knocked at the door to his office. Looking up from a deskful of papers, Dr. Pixton seemed weary as well (which gave me hope). Paige told our tale of woe, and our desire to do the best job possible on this final composition for him. We needed rest and time, and we each would complete our papers before the new year.

Today, it is doubtful that our professor could get away with what he said to us next, but I will never forget it. To our shock and dismay, he simply said, "You two cannot leave town until you turn in those papers." No explanation. No obvious care for our exhausted state. We left his office, numb and angry. How dare he tell two grown adults what to do with our lives?!

I barely remember finishing the paper, but as the dorm emptied out around us--we each completed the work, encouraging each other--the outrage at our task fueling us more than just a little.

Looking back, I smile at the compassion behind Dr. Pixton's wise directive. I went home for Christmas and had a true break, napping to Christmas carols on the stereo and regaining my equilibrium. I know now that the weight of having another paper to write--as my family and friends celebrated--would have been agonizing, and I would not have had my dear companion, Paige, across the room to cheer me on. I learned the value of pressing on, of perseverance through weakness. I found that hidden vial of strength that we all have. Sometimes, wisdom comes disguised in ways we least expect or want—for me, it was a professor, whose echoes are felt in my own writing.

In the end, **it is** all about love. Sophia's delight is in triumph of goodness. There is not rule that means more than the person in front of us. There is no sin too great to be forgiven. And if we pay attention, Divine Wisdom may be revealed in a word, image, or song that comes to us—or even and perhaps especially through the person sitting beside us. A-men.