

The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

Theology of Delight **The Book of Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31¹**

Trinity Sunday²

May 30, 2010

Today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost. It was Thomas Becket, the martyred Archbishop of Canterbury, whose first act on the day of his consecration as bishop was to announce a new festival in honor of the Holy Trinity. That was in 1162 and since that day the Church of Jesus Christ has wondered how to celebrate the Holy Trinity.

The German theologian Hans Küng tells of a preacher in a small Bavarian village who climbed into the pulpit and announced to his congregation: “The Trinity is a very great mystery.” And then he sat down.

The Trinity is a mystery; the Trinity is incomprehensible and unimaginable. The Trinity is unspeakable—but that does not allow us the luxury of saying nothing. Something must be said. People glibly poke fun at the doctrine of the Trinity and a response is necessary. Too many people have spent too many words and spilled too much ink probing the abundant treasures of the Trinity for us to pretend there is nothing to say.

To speak of the Trinity, however, we cannot use ordinary words in ordinary ways. The mystery requires the extraordinary; the unspeakable insists on a surprising speech. Our mathematics staggers before the equation of the three who are one and the one who is three. That does not add up, that will never add up. It’s the truth, but a truth our mathematics cannot reveal.

If we are to glimpse the slightest bit of the Trinity we must put aside our mathematics and metaphysics and seek the help of metaphors. The deep things of God cannot be expressed in elegant formulas spread over blackboards or charted on graphs or tallied on ledgers. They are available only in imaginative pictures and fabulous stories. “You want to know about God?” says the poet of the Scriptures, “let me draw you a picture.” Working at the doctrine of the Trinity—“working” will never work; we must play. Christian theology has spoken of relations within the trinity as a Perichoresis, borrowing the same root word as “choreography”: it’s a dance! To approach the Trinitarian God we dance, we cannot get near flatfooted. We play, we imagine!

One of the most imaginative portraits of God in all the Scriptures we discover in this 8th chapter of the Book of Proverbs which the Church assigns for Trinity Sunday. Like nothing else in the Bible Proverbs 8 speaks of God’s inner life; it talks about God

¹ Except where noted the preacher employs a variation of the translation by Michael V. Fox, **Proverbs 1-9**, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 263-289.

² Many thanks to Carla Pratt Keyes for her Trinity Sunday paper at The Moveable Feast, January 2010.

before God became famous (as Creator of heaven and earth); it reveals the secrets of God's life at home.

The Book of Proverbs is one of the most conservative books in the Old Testament. The prophets announced new things were happening and changes going on, but Proverbs simply passes on the wisdom that was passed on before and that traditional wisdom does not change. The lessons of Proverbs are timeless:

Whoever walks in integrity walks securely,
but whoever follows perverse ways will be found out. (10:9)

Isn't it so? Proverbs has no illusions:

"Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes,
so are the lazy to their employers. (10:26)

That's true every day and it was true five centuries before the birth of Jesus. Proverbs warns men that chasing after the "foreign woman" will cause them to lose their house and wealth, and we open our newspapers to read about the escapades of the governor of South Carolina, and it's the same old story. The Book of Proverbs is at once timeless wisdom and wisdom startlingly contemporary. This is Wisdom is passed from generation to generation:

Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray. (22:6)

And the Book of Proverbs is confident it knows "the right way." Proverbs is so predictable, so traditional, so matter of fact that the 8th chapter comes as a startling surprise.

From the beginning of the Book of Proverbs Wisdom has been personified as a woman, a beautiful, wise and generous woman. Now in the 8th chapter she summons everyone: "To you, O people, I call, my voice is to all humanity." Wisdom calls to people because of her unique relationship to God.

And how unique is her relationship to God? Let me work from the translation in your pew bible which reads, "The LORD **created me** at the beginning of his work." In English that doesn't surprise us much but the Hebrew word translated here as "create" would more commonly be translated "gave birth." When Wisdom says "I was **set up** at the first" she uses the same verb that the 139th psalm employs to describe a mother's body "crafting an embryo by interweaving bones and sinews." "There were no depths I was **brought forth**," Wisdom announces, and the verb translated "brought forth" most often used in Hebrew for labor pains.³ The Jewish biblical scholar Michael V. Fox states the obvious: "it appears that God is being given a female role;"⁴ God is a mother. Conservative evangelical biblical scholar Bruce K. Waltke tells us what we have is nothing less than "an image of God giving birth, just an image, not a mythological representation, but what an image!"⁵

This startles us and makes us think and perhaps rethink and rearrange the furniture of our minds, but the Wisdom poet has more to say and goes on.

³ I am grateful for thoughtful analysis of the Hebrew provided by Christine Roy Yoder, Proverbs, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 94-98.

⁴ Fox, 282.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, **The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1-15** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 408-9,

In the book of Proverbs Wisdom is usually pictured as a mature woman, but in these verses she is growing up before God, growing up as the creation comes to life, growing up in God's workshop or his studio.

Wisdom declares,

“I was beside him, growing up,
and I was his delight day by day.”

Wisdom is growing up like a little girl at her father's knee. Michael V. Fox tells us that in most of the Book of Proverbs Wisdom “moves in the most esteemed circles, among the rich and powerful, for whom she is a majestic patron and benefactor... For [God], however, she is a darling little girl.”⁶

Hold that image in your imagination: a little girl alongside her father in his workshop. Hold that picture. If you ponder it for a while you may also recognize the boy Jesus alongside his father Joseph in his carpenter's workshop, and if you're very insightful you may think of the 12 year old Jesus in the temple, telling his parents that he must be about his “father's business.” Right now, however, hold this one image in your mind: a little girl alongside her father in his workshop.

“I was beside him, growing up,” she says, “and I was his delight day by day.” Day by day God was planning the creation and drawing the sketches. There wasn't anything else, not so much as a lump of dirt, just the two of them and their workshop, and the delight they shared. Together they delighted in digging springs and erecting mountains and making planets

God throws a handful of stars into the sky and she dances with delight and giggles and says, “Do it again!” Another handful of stars, and she squeals with happiness: “Do it again!” Have you ever wondered why there are so many stars in the sky? Now you know: for delight's sake.

“I was his delight day by day, frolicking before him at all times.” Wisdom dances in delight before God, she celebrates what God has accomplished, and this little girl bounces up and down, clapping her hands. The translation in our pew bibles is pitifully pious: “rejoicing before God.” That sounds nice in church, but no: she is “frolicking before God,” she is playing, cavorting, amusing herself, joking, delighting!⁷

And I was his delight day by day,
frolicking before him at all times,
frolicking in his habitable world.

And my delight is in humanity.

Wisdom frolics before God and Wisdom frolics in our world and Wisdom means for us to join the fun and frolic, this dance of delight. Now we're getting a Trinitarian theology with some feet!

All the cosmos God has fashioned—stars, worlds, mountains, oceans, springs, dinosaurs, and puppy dogs—what's the point of it? In his book **The Meaning of Life** Terry Eagleton offers the classic explanation: “God is not a celestial engineer who created the world with some celestially created goal in mind. He is an artist who created it simply for his own self-delight, and for the self-delight of the creation itself.” Eagleton

⁶ Fox, 278-9.

⁷ Waltke 421.

looks at what he has written and adds: “It is understandable, then, why [God] is regarded to have something of a twisted sense of humor.”⁸

If we human creatures are meant to enter into God’s creation with delight, then it follows that the great sin is to refuse delight, to avoid enjoyment and to decline to praise. That, by the way, is how the Apostle Paul considers our “original sin.” All that business about the snake and the apple in the garden was only the smallest part of it. Our sin is that we walk around in this astonishing world and become blasé. We take it for granted. We do not say “Wow!” We do not say “Do it again!” We do not dance with delight; we do not giggle with amazement; we refuse to praise or give thanks.⁹ That is sin, and what a sad and sorry sin it is.

What can you do with people who won’t enjoy? Who won’t delight? Who won’t rejoice? You might as well give up on them. They’re hopeless. What can you do? What Wisdom does is to keep calling: “Listen! Isn’t it Wisdom calling?” “To you, O people, I call.” Wisdom so delights in human life that she keeps calling whether people listen or not. She’s everywhere, calling “Atop the heights near the road, at the crossroads.... near the gates at the city entrance,” in all those ordinary places where we walk and go day to day. Wisdom keeps calling and sending people like the Apostle Paul who speaks of “Christ the power of God and **the wisdom of God**. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Cor 1:24-5).

God’s foolishness, God’s joke, God’s play in the world: it can sound so frivolous. Is this appropriate in church? It’s Memorial Day weekend, how can we talk of delight in a world at war? How dare we speak of frolicking when some children starve and others waddle around in chronic obesity? How dare we chatter about something so frivolous as delight? Again the poets show things our logic cannot calculate. Delight acts as a barricade against despair. The poet Jack Gilbert wrote:

Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies
are not starving someplace, they are starving
somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils.
But we enjoy our lives because that’s what God wants.
Otherwise the mornings before summer dawn would not
be made so fine. The Bengal tiger would not
be fashioned so miraculously well. The poor women
at the fountain are laughing together between
the suffering they have known and the awfulness
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody
in the village is very sick. There is laughter
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless

⁸ Terry Eagleton, **The Meaning of Life**, (London: Oxford University Press, 2008) 3.

⁹ I am indebted to Beverly Roberts Gaventa’s reading of Romans 1:19-22 in unpublished manuscripts.

furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.¹⁰

We are meant to praise God. We are born to delight; we are created to delight; the whole creation was fashioned out of delight for the purpose of our delight and to the end that we might rejoice in it. No less than John Calvin tells us “There is not one blade of grass and there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice.”¹¹

We Presbyterians are serious people with serious theology and serious things on our mind, and all of this may sound very strange and very frivolous and a frolic. When we seriously come to church and seriously read our Scriptures however, the Book of Proverbs, chapter 8, causes us to remember what it’s all about, what we’re here for. It takes us back the beginning, to basics, to the first question.

Question. 1. What is the chief end of man?

Answer. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.¹²

What is it all about, this creation? What we are doing here and for what purpose? What does it all mean?

It’s about glorifying God and enjoying God and delight in God—forevermore.

Patrick J. Willson
Williamsburg Presbyterian Church
Williamsburg, Virginia

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¹⁰ Jack Gilbert, “A Brief for the Defense” in **Refusing Heaven** (Knopf, 2007), 3.

¹¹ Quoted in Waltke, 422.

¹² The Westminster Shorter Catechism, the first question.