

**Text: “Wisdom has built her house.”**

In the Book of Proverbs we read:

Wisdom has built her house. She has set her table. She calls from the highest places in the town, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of my wine.” (Proverbs 9: 1-6)

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My wife and I have a wonderful neighbor. She lives in the house across the street.

It is a beautiful house in Princeton. It has yellow painted walls and wooden shutters on the windows. Our neighbor’s grandfather built the house for his bride. He had little heart shapes carved into the shutters as tokens of his love for her.

It is a warm and welcoming house. Our neighbor often stands on her doorstep and invites us into her home. There she prepares delicious food for us, pours wine for us, and tells us stories about her life: some heartbreaking, some hilarious, some mundane, all of them insightful about how to live in the face of all that life brings.

When she was a little girl, living on that same street, she went with a school friend to knock on a neighbor’s door. They wanted to ask if he would help them with their homework. It was not just any neighbor. It was Albert Einstein. The great scientist and genius invited the two little schoolgirls into his home, looked at the mathematical problems the girls’ teacher had set for homework, shook his massive head of hair, and said, “This is too difficult for me!”

Our neighbor in the house across the street did not stop being that curious little girl who was not afraid to knock on Einstein’s door to ask for help with her homework. When she grew up, she founded a school in Princeton. She built every aspect of it - the curriculum, the teaching staff, the facilities - on her own childhood insight that we learn best when our playful delight in the world, and sense of wonder at its mysteries, leads us into asking questions and making discoveries for ourselves. It is not surprising that the book she wrote about her school is called, “Wisdom at Play.”

Our neighbor is a wise woman, full of insights into how to live life well, as a child, as young person, as an adult, and now in later years. We love it when she welcomes us into her house to share her wisdom on life over bread and wine.

**This is exactly how the Book of Proverbs pictures wisdom.**

She is a Wise Woman inviting us into her home to share the meal she has prepared. What is this wisdom that she invites us to enjoy in her house? It is a feast of mature insights into how to live well in all the seasons of ordinary life.

## **1. First, the Wise Woman invites us to live well as ordinary people.**

The Book of Proverbs celebrates God as the Creator of all things.

Proverbs is not the story of how God saves a chosen people from bondage, like the story of Exodus. It is a collection of ancient sayings on how all people should seek to live wisely and well within the limits of this mortal life and the horizon of the human condition.

Proverbs is ascribed to the wise King Solomon, so that it can claim the authority of a great figure in the history of Israel and a place in the Hebrew Bible. But the wisdom that the Wise Woman offers in her house is for everyone, even gentiles, and seen everywhere, even among the ants.

To have wisdom means to be able to use all that we know and understand, including our doubts and questions, to make decisions and take actions that don't cause us harm but help us to flourish.

We need this wisdom as institutions as well as individuals.

I direct the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton in the United States. It is a research centre where visiting scholars come from different disciplines, religious traditions and parts of the world to think together on common problems.

I am in Dunedin this week with one of the law professors who was in residence with us last year. He will be giving a lecture at the university to share what he learned from our discussions on the problem of religious freedom around the world.

If it was not for this wise woman in Proverbs inviting all humanity into her House of Wisdom, there could be no center for theological inquiry, working in this way.

The Book of Proverbs gives us authority as Christians to seek wisdom with our fellow human beings, no matter their background or beliefs. Faced with the problems of our planet – poverty, inequality, climate change, conflict – we are all simple and lacking in sense as a human species.

We all need to accept the Wise Woman's invitation to come into her house. We need to learn how to live together as God intends us to do, wisely and well, according to God's purpose for creation, and not according to our human folly and greed.

Not only every research centre like mine but also every congregation like yours is called by God our Creator to be a House of Wisdom, an open and inviting place where people from all backgrounds can learn together to live wisely and well.

This morning the Wise Woman of Proverbs invites you to see God in ordinary living.

## **2. Secondly, Proverbs offers us the wisdom to live well as a community.**

The Wise Woman invites us to a party in her house, not to private counseling sessions in her office!

The Book of Proverbs is written for a community seeking wisdom together in their common life. It is not written for private individuals or professional clergy to tell us how to gather once a week to be an audience and give a performance in worship. It is a collection of ancient sayings to show us to live together in our daily lives as a community of faith in the wider community, working together for the common good.

The House that Wisdom builds in the Book of Proverbs is a community house, fostering the communal wisdom we all need to nurture human wellbeing and planetary flourishing.

I was deeply moved when my friend and former teacher Peter Matheson took me on my last visit to Dunedin to see Quarantine Island and told me the story of how his father founded it with others during his ministry in this church in the 1950s to be such a community, a house of wisdom for the world, rooted in God our Creator.

But we don't need to be a special community on a special island to be the kind of community that the Wise Woman calls us to be in the Book of Proverbs, a House of Wisdom. When I look at this Church I see a holy island set in the sea of people and problems and possibilities that is Dunedin, a landing place for this city in all its diversity and difficulties, debates and dreams, a place for the city to be the kind of community God intends for all creation.

This morning the Wise Woman of Proverbs invites you to be such a community, echoing the Letter to the Ephesians that we read - calling us to live together as wise people, making the most of the time, understanding the will of God, "giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

## **3. Finally, with that cue from Ephesians, Proverbs provides us with the wisdom to live well as Christians.**

For two thousand years, the Christian tradition has seen the Wise Woman in the Book of Proverbs as a figure anticipating the coming of Jesus as God's wisdom made flesh in the world.

In the reading from John's Gospel for today, Jesus says,

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

Just as the Wise Woman in Proverbs prepares bread for those she welcomes into her house – the simple and those lacking sense – so Jesus prepared the bread of his own body for the life of the world.

It is in Jesus the Wise Woman that we find the wisdom to live well in the world. So much of what Jesus teaches in the Gospels are wisdom sayings on how to live well in the world – as in his Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike.

With these words of Jesus we return to where we began in the Book of Proverbs. God our Creator sends his sun to rise on all humanity, and sends down his rain not just on Dunedin but on all the earth.

Those who seek wisdom for life on earth are called this morning to the House that Wisdom has built, God's house where Jesus offers the bread of life for the life of the world – ordinary life, community life, our common life, our new life in Christ.

Amen.

*William Storrar - preached in Knox Church, Dunedin, Sunday 16 August 2015.*