

Our lectionary is often a very good thing for us, our series of readings that we have on Sunday morning, because it connects us with Christians all around the world, so that we're all hearing the same thing at the same time. But the trouble is, Christians, that sometimes the lectionary cuts things a little too short. We don't end up getting the full picture of something. And sometimes when you have too little of God's Word, you might miss the point. You might miss the point of what God is trying to tell us, and at the worst you might actually misunderstand it altogether. And that's actually happening today here in our Old Testament reading from Proverbs chapter 9. What we have is only half of the reading. And so to fully understand what God wants to teach us here, we need to get the other half. We need to see the whole picture, so that we understand it rightly.

So beginning at verse 10, chapter 9 says this: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life. If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; if you scoff, you alone will bear it. The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way, 'Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!' And to him who lacks sense she says, 'Stolen water is sweet,

and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.' But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol." So in other words, what we have here then is a picture of two different ways, what Proverbs calls the way of Wisdom and the way of Folly. And the question that it's asking us today is, which way are you going to follow? Which way are you going to go down?

Because it presents to us two different women, one that it calls Wisdom and one that it calls Folly. And these two women are the opposites of each other. They're like mirror images, so if one is one way, then the other is the other way. Take, for example, the woman Wisdom. She is described as building her house, as having hewn her seven pillars. It shows, first of all, that she has a very large house. Because if it has seven pillars when most houses in those days only had two or three, this was a house designed to hold a whole bunch of people, designed to hold a whole bunch of guests. And she is also very diligent in preparing her foods, because she wants to have many guests, because she's a very good hostess. She wants to take care of those who come to her. Folly, on the other hand, is doing the exact opposite. She's sitting in front of a house that she did not build. And she's not preparing any food, because she doesn't care if her guests are taken care of or not. She's not interested in doing all of those things, because she is lazy, where wisdom is very diligent.

Wisdom, on the other hand, is described as giving to her guests very, very rich foods. The kinds of things that are wonderful to have. Meats of all kinds, wonderful rich wines, some breads, and spread out on this giant, rich table. She really wants to take care of those who come to her. Folly, on the other hand, isn't doing anything like that. She's just sitting there. And the most that she offers to her guests are simple bread and water, the kind of thing that you would eat every day anyway. But she wants to be seen as if she's actually doing something. She wants to be seen as if she is actually wise. That's why she's sitting. Because in the Bible, teachers sit to teach. You see that happen with Jesus, for example, when he goes up on top of the mountain, and he sits down,

and then he begins to speak. Because the teacher sits and the students stand. We do it the other way around. That's why it can be sometimes confusing to us. But for her to sit like this means that she wants people to think that she's important, that she's actually giving them something, when, in fact, she's giving them nothing at all.

Wisdom, on the one hand, sends out her young women to go and to call to everyone in the town: "Come in and partake of this feast which I have prepared for you!" So in other words, the people who come have to get up. They have to leave. They have to do something in order to go find wisdom. Folly, on the other hand, is right there. She herself spreads her own message. So once you hear her message, you find her right away. You don't have to work for it. You don't have to try very hard, because she's just right there.

But the two women have the same invitation: "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" "Listen to my voice," they are saying, "and come into my house that I may give to you the things which I want to give." And so the question that Proverbs asks us again is, which woman are you going to listen to? The woman Wisdom or the woman Folly?

Because Christians, there's something more about these two women's messages too. Because the woman Wisdom gives to us very rich foods, the kind of foods that are wonderful, the kind of foods that fill us up, but they're the kind of foods that you have to work at to appreciate. Because, like all rich foods, like all things which are the wonderful and exquisite, you don't always appreciate them right away. Let me use an example of what I mean here. Do you know what makes a steak, for example, good? And what makes one steak different from another? Why this steak is good while this steak is bad? You don't know that kind of thing right away. You have to learn what makes a good steak. You have to learn what makes this one delicious as opposed to this one, because it's not immediately apparent. Or like a rich wine, for example. What makes one wine good and another wine bad? Because it's not just that all wines are equal. Some are good. Some are bad. And you only really learn to tell the difference between the two by experience, by learning something about them, so that you can see why something which tastes very bitter, for example, is actually quite delightful, why it is something which is quite nice. So you have to work at Wisdom's food. You have to learn how to appreciate them.

But, on the other hand, Folly presents to us food that is junk food. Food you don't have to work at. Food you just immediately take a liking to. And because you like it and can appreciate it right away and you don't have to work at it, that's what makes it so appealing to us. That's what makes it so we want to go down that way, even if it ultimately comes to nothing.

And so the question that we are presented is this: will we follow after the way of Wisdom, even though it is a difficult way, even though it is a hard way, a way were going to have to work at? Or will we follow the way of Folly, the easy way, but the way that leads to destruction?

But then the question comes up to us. How do I know? How do I know if I'm going down this way? How do I know if I'm following after Wisdom or after Folly? What do these two ways look like? And that's the point of the heart of our passage, the very middle of this chapter, verses 7 through 12. They describe to us the difference between these two ways, so that we can see for ourselves if we are following Wisdom or Folly. And it says to us that those who are following

after Folly, those who are scoffers, those who are wicked, are not going to receive instruction. They're not going to listen to the truth. They're going to say, "I'm just fine the way that I am. And who are you to tell me otherwise? Who are you to say that I'm going down the wrong way? I'm going to continue down this way, because I believe it to be right." Whereas those who are following after Wisdom, who are following after life, will delight in instruction, will delight to have something to learn. They will hear the truth, and they will say, "I guess I was wrong, but that's okay, because now I know what is the truth. Now I know what is the way that I should go. And thank you for showing me that way!"

And nowhere is this clearer, Christians--in fact, this is the very point of this whole passage--than how we respond to the Lord. Because the one who follows after Folly will not listen to what the Lord has to say. They will go their own way, the way that they choose to go. But the one who follows after Wisdom will listen to the Lord. Because as verse 10 says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." To follow him, to pay attention to him, to listen to his words is to find the wise way, to find the way which leads to life.

But that's not always easy, Christians. Because listening to God indeed is the way of Wisdom, but it's not an easy thing to do. Because it's going to mean that we might have to change the way that we think. It's going to mean that we're going to have to change what we do. Listening to God means that he will transform us, that he will make something different than what we already are. And if we are listening to him, that may very well be a painful thing. Because Christians, are we willing to listen to God when he says something that means we have to change our thinking? If he says something about the way our communities are or about the way our family is, are we willing to listen to that and to even change the way that we think, simply because the Lord has told us the truth? Are we willing to change if the Lord speaks? Because the way of Folly is the easy way, the way of just ignoring that, of saying "I got it all under control." But the way of Folly leads to death. Or the Lord comes to us and he tells us to do things which seem unpleasant to us. If he tells us to pray, for example, and sometimes we find prayer to be kind of boring, are we willing to listen to what God has to say? Or if he tells us to read the Word, for example, and we find reading the Word kind of tedious, are we willing to listen to what the Lord has to say? Or if he says that the way that we do things, say in our families or our communities or even in our church, is the right way as opposed to the way that we're thinking about it, are we willing to listen to what the Lord has to say? That's not always an easy thing to do. Sometimes it will be painful. Sometimes it may very well mean a very drastic change in our thinking or in our actions. But Christians, it is the way that leads to life, because the words of God are truth, and the words of God will lead us to life.

And so Christians, Jesus calls to you today, calls for you to come and to follow after him. Because Jesus himself is Wisdom, as we hear in Matthew 7 verse 24: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock." To listen to Jesus means that we find the words of truth, because Jesus is, as he says, "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." But listening to him is not always going to be easy. In fact, Jesus never said that it was going to be easy. He says, "Take up your cross and follow after me." Jesus tells us that "he who loses his life for my sake will find it." And he even says: "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Listening to God will be difficult. It will mean having to change our thinking. And it will sometimes be quite painful.

But Jesus comes to give us life. Jesus comes to transform us, to change us into something new, so that through him and in him alone, we will find everlasting life. Yes, Christians, it will be hard to listen to Jesus, but it will be worth it in the end. Because Jesus tells us, "Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and live, and walk in the way of insight." To follow God is hard, but it is the right way, because it leads us to him.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to transform us, to change us into something new, so that we may follow after you in everything. We pray that you would strengthen us for the task, because you are the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and in you and you alone will we find that everlasting life. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.