

Foolishness, Wisdom, and Awe
Based on Proverbs 9:9-18 and 1 Cor 1:18-25
Rev. Dr. Nicole Wilkinson
Cape May Presbyterian Church
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Yes, some of us wince when we hear Proverbs say, “the foolish woman is loud.” Sounds like a stereotype about women and the nonsense they spout, loudly, like the proverbial fishwife, haranguing in the street. But in Proverbs’ defense—I guess—the whole passage is not really about women, but about foolishness and wisdom. In nearby passages, Wisdom is imagined as a woman, who exactly like foolishness, invites passersby—“you who are simple, turn in here!” They both invite the ignorant in, but foolishness misleads them, while wisdom teaches them. Foolishness leads them to their own misery. She teaches them how good it feels to steal and to hoard, and it’s only later they realize that in stealing and hoarding, in a life of self-interest, they are on their way to a place of death.

Think of the kids who smoked in the high school bathroom--and I may or may not have been one of them--or the kids who vape there now. It’s fun to get away with something, and yes, it looks daring, even cool. I think that’s the feeling Proverbs is talking about when it says, “stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.” Secrecy, breaking the rules; it’s fun. And it’s only later that the teenage smoker realizes he cannot afford it, it’s robbing him of energy and money, and it is so, so hard to quit. As we now know, it was *designed* to be hard to quit. Addiction is the capitalist’s best friend, it outperforms supply and demand—an addict will pay any price, risk any outcome, just to have more. The tobacco companies understood that and made excellent use of it. The kids in the school bathroom smoking or vaping thought themselves very wise, but so did Philip Morris.

What seems wise to us is often not. And it’s often when we think we have it all figured out that we are being most deeply led astray. I see this in the spiritual-but-not-religious trend in the country. People believe that they are getting their spirituality addressed in their own way, on their own time, that they have a one-on-one relationship with God, and that therefore they do not need a faith community, they do not need to go to church. Part of me wants to say, with unkind sarcasm, yes, you figured out how to do in your own mind what most of humanity for most of human history felt they needed a structure and discipline to do. All those millions of people practicing all those world religions, but you figured it out. Because you are just that smart—smarter than pretty much all of your ancestors.

It turns out the ancestors were no fools. Sure they didn't know that the earth revolves around the sun or that bacteria cause infections, but they did know that they needed other people. They did know that they needed constant reminders that they were not the only being with feelings in all of creation. They knew that there was a benefit and a joy to living in community and to finding God there.

It is not actually a modern development that people scoff at religious belief. The number of scoffers may have increased. But the apostle Paul talks about those who find the cross nonsense. It's a stumbling block to Jews, he says—because a crucified messiah is no messiah at all as far as Jewish tradition was concerned. The messiah was to be anointed to lead the people to some kind of autonomy and prosperity. The messiah wasn't supposed to be shamed and publicly executed. It is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, Paul says. Because the Greeks valued male physical prowess—they invented the Olympics, remember. The Greeks thought *circumcision* was barbaric—why mutilate the perfect male form? When presented with the idea of Jesus' physical suffering as a path to salvation, the Greeks found it absurd. *That's your savior?* They said in effect. *How can you worship that kind of shame?*

And that's who we are. The people who do not worship physical perfection. The people ready to follow Jesus through suffering if necessary, if that path goes to a better world for all people. We don't have to win laurels and awards and wealth. We don't have to have the Ten Commandments displayed in the town square. We don't have to be honored by the society around us. That's the foolishness of Christianity, the foolishness of Jesus. We don't have to win.

Lots of Christians mourn what seems to have been the peak of American Christianity, the 1950s and 60s. When going to church was the norm, when Sunday schools were bursting at the seams. When church seemed to have a pride of place in American society. And yes, that was great in many ways. But we don't need that honor. It's not integral to who we are. Jesus wasn't honored in his society. He had a following, yes, but they abandoned him when he got into trouble. His followers essentially called him foolish, when he headed toward his own death. At the heart of our faith lies the truism that foolishness can be a powerful thing. That giving up self-preservation, giving up honor, giving up what the world calls wisdom—that can change the world.

Somewhere in here there is a connection between foolishness and wisdom and our theme of awe. It's taking me a while to get there, but bear with me.

I think that when Paul says God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, it is awe he means. Awe is that sense of wonder, when we encounter something beyond our ability to understand, beyond our ability to express or to categorize. There is so much to be learned about who we are, about the world we live in and learning is a beautiful thing. But what motivates the learning and what never can be diminished by that learning is awe.

When my kids were about 18 months old, we took them to the ocean for the first time. Ahmet stood in the baby waves and stared at the water for the longest time. It was hard to tell whether he was fascinated, or paralyzed with fear. But he was definitely awed. Everything is amazing to a kid that age, and the ocean was almost overwhelming. Maybe that's part of the reason that Jesus said we have to be like children in order to enter the kingdom of God. We need to recover that level of astonishment at the wonders of the world, of the human body, of life. Because astonishment is awe and awe is praise.

Look, I'm about as over-educated as they come, and I'm not saying education is a hindrance to awe. Once we learn that the waves will come and go and we can even play in them, the ocean may no longer overwhelm us. But it still awes us.

Knowledge can actually be awe-inspiring in itself. The more you learn about the natural world, the human body, the Bible, the more amazing it can seem. Did you know that "Half of the oxygen that we breathe in is produced by seaweed and phytoplankton that reside in the ocean?"¹

Or this that I just read about Acacia trees, common in parts of Africa. When animals like antelopes start to eat up the leaves of an acacia, the tree increases its tannin production to levels that are toxic to animals. And more than that, the tree also emits a cloud of ethylene gas that travels through the air, warning nearby trees, so they too can begin producing more tannins. So the antelope ends up with a belly ache and the acacias live to see another season.²

The problem with wisdom is not wisdom itself. It's our sense that we own it, that we are wise, that we have risen above all that came before us. The problem with wisdom is arrogance. It's the same reason that adults wonder less than children do.

¹ <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/ocean-oxygen.html> However, the same amount is consumed by marine life.

² <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg12717361-200-antelope-activate-the-acacias-alarm-system/>

We think we know. We think we understand things. We say to the world, you do not amaze me. We say to the church—you have nothing to teach me.

As foolishness is the opposite of wisdom, awe is the opposite of arrogance. The poet Rumi wrote, “sell your cleverness and buy some bewilderment.” Cleverness, the wisdom honored by the world, puffs us up above our fellow creatures, our neighbors, and our ancestors. Cleverness shuts us down to further learning, shuts us down to growth. Awe, like bewilderment, opens us up to new insights, to new ways of being in the world. Wisdom can make our lives more comfortable, but foolish awe will always make our lives more interesting, more beautiful, and more holy.