

## THE DAUGHTER OF GOD

When I was in the eighth grade, my Dad decided we should learn how to play golf together. I was pretty excited. He signed us up for lessons at the local course. We played with views of the sun setting on the river valley. When we returned home after our lessons one Saturday evening, I asked him if I could practice in the yard before dinner. He said yes, as long as I didn't strike any real golf balls. I could only use the foam practice balls, but he didn't explain *why*. After hitting some great shots, watching the foam balls land close to where I wanted them go, I was feeling confident. *Surely Dad doesn't realize how far along I am in my lessons, I thought. Or maybe the reason why I can't use real golf balls is he doesn't want to lose them in the woods. That must be why. I can use one of my own and search for it.* So I teed up. I lined up, my club facing the woods away from the cars passing by on the country road. And I sliced it right into the rear windshield of his car. Immediately I understood why I was not allowed to use a real one.

Sometimes disobedience is the only way we will ever find out why God asks us to do something here. God does not always explain why we are asked to do something before we have to do it.

I could not believe what I had done. Yet I wanted to find out my Dad's response more than I wanted to cover up my sin. So I went into the house and marched up the stairs. "Dad," I said, "I just shattered the rear windshield of your car with a golf ball. I'm really sorry."

He looked me in the eyes, paused long enough to make me gulp, and calmly said, "Thank you for coming to me immediately and telling me the truth." He then made two choices. He decided to get me a season's pass to play golf far away from his car. And he decided I was old enough to learn how to mow our big lawn for him. I did not expect his response. I could tell he was upset, but even more I could tell that it was just a car and I was still his beloved pubescent son. I could come to him with anything and he would still love me. My father revealed to me the heart of God, for his love did not come without judgment and his judgment did not come without love. Happy Father's Day, Dad.

My Dad has a daughter, my sister Maggie. He loves my sister and me but not in the same way. Maggie holds a unique place in his heart,

just as I do. If there is a unique place in a father and mother for their daughter, wouldn't we expect God to also have a special place in His heart for His daughter? So today we are going to honor the fatherly aspect of God by reflecting on a spiritual being very important to Him who rarely gets mentioned even when she is in the lectionary: the daughter of God, Wisdom.

Wait a second – God has a daughter? Yes! She is not a goddess, as some would have it. She is not just a literary device either. She does not make the Trinity a quaternity. She is a powerful, unique, beautiful, and friendly being. In the Bible she is described as the firstborn of creation.

There is an entire theological discipline called sophiology that studies her in the Eastern Orthodox Church, one of the three branches of Christianity. Hagia Sophia, a former Orthodox cathedral in Istanbul, was named after her.

Wisdom lives inside the Trinity. She is surrounded and protected by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She invites children of God to enter the Trinity to pray with her. She fills the space and is what moves between each member. Wisdom appears in the books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, in the Song of Songs, and in the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach from the Apocrypha.

She is not the Holy Spirit. She is the first gift of the Holy Spirit. She introduces us to the other gifts. Jesus saves, converts, baptizes, and gives us the Holy Spirit. Without Him we would not be children of God. Wisdom sanctifies, nurtures, and feeds us with love, knowledge and companionship. She makes us friends of God and prophets. Pleasing God pleases her.

Women embody her. Men seek her, however unconsciously. And deep inside the core of a man is the buried desire to live in a way so pleasing to God that God gives him His only daughter's hand in marriage.

The Song of Songs is one of our most sacred texts within the Hebrew Bible. As its inclusion into the canon was being debated, a rabbi called it "the holy of holies" of biblical books. It is not one of the historical books. This is spiritual truth in the form of love poetry, and romantic truth in the form of spiritual poetry. It has traditionally been interpreted in Jewish circles to refer to the relationship between God

as husband and Israel as wife. In Christian circles, this imagery was extended to reflect the Word's relationship to the Church or to each member of the Body of Christ. These are wonderful, valid interpretations that find biblical support for a reality many Jews and Christians have experienced throughout our history.

Most of them, however, skip over portions of the Song of Songs that portray the female lover as leading and pursuing the male lover. They neglect that the male beloved often seen as God has a mother in the poem, which does not work. I'm not saying these interpretations are wrong. A text can have more than one purpose and can point beyond itself to more than one reality.

Wisdom is personified as feminine in other books leading up to Song of Songs. She calls to us in the streets of our minds, though we ignore her. In Proverbs, perhaps pre-figuring the Last Supper, she asks young men to sacramentally eat of her bread and drink of her wine and allow her to protect them from the destructive nature of Lady Folly, one of Satan's disguises. Wisdom is often connected by scholars to the Word made flesh in Jesus, who is now revealed to individual believers as feminine or masculine depending on their orientation. This may or may not be true, but with so much attention given to the masculinity of God in our tradition, is it any wonder some straight men have a hard time placing their attraction to the divine within Christian experience and language that so often depicts the soul as feminine?

You would not be here today if you were not attracted to the divine. You would not be here if the divine were not attracted to you. By demoting God's daughter Wisdom from the conscious faith, we have obscured the very ground of man's attraction to what is holy. And then we wonder why many women bring their husbands to church and not the other way around. By permitting Wisdom to exist as only one of two polar opposites – an objectifying literary device or a deceptive goddess – we push her away and easily dismiss her without discerning her true identity. We turn one of God's gifts for building the Kingdom into a suspicious secret.

So, what is Wisdom like? *“For in her there is a spirit that is holy ... irresistible ... free from anxiety ... because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things ... she is a breath of the power of God ... in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets.”* (Wisdom of Solomon 7)

Does that sound like pure symbolism – or an invitation? Symbols are how we communicate an otherwise inexplicable layer of meaning, but interpreting something real as only a symbol is how we distance ourselves from what has the power to change our lives. Scholars tend to do this with Wisdom.

Don't ask me how I have come to this, but I suspect part of why we run into certain relationship problems is we begin to expect a human being to feed us in ways only the divine can and we begin to expect the divine to feed us in ways only a human being was intended to do.

If Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are a progressive series in spiritual growth, then Proverbs addresses the immature soul who needs heavy instruction, discipline, and structure from parents to prepare him to encounter Wisdom. This was my life from birth until I left home for college. Proverbs is essentially a manual for how to become the elder son in Jesus' parable of the prodigal. You could spend your whole life making wise choices like the elder son and never receive Wisdom.

In Ecclesiastes, Wisdom begins to court the soul, teaching him to abandon vain distractions and possessions that pale in comparison to the imperishable treasures she can give. She begins to uproot his pride and crack open his hardened heart through another person. This was my life from the first summer I fell in love with my fiancée Abby until I discovered my *vocatio*. And in Song of Songs, God gives his daughter Wisdom in spiritual marriage to the soul. This happened to me on December 16, 2013, the winter before I started seminary.

Yes, Song of Songs, on its literal level, is most likely a Near Eastern erotic poem. So why the heck is it in the Bible? It is in our canon because the words and images here line up so perfectly with spiritual reality that it cannot only be about two human beings who are crazy for each other, though that too is holy and worth including in the canon.

The poem opens with Wisdom praising God and asking Him to give her beloved – the individual soul – permission to kiss her: “*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,*” she says in the first verse of the first chapter. The soul is evidently a son of God, because she refers to him endearingly in royal terms. The soul has opened and brought Wisdom into the chambers of his heart, body, mind, and soul, making room for her to guide him.

We see more hints that the female lover in the Song of Songs represents Wisdom when she says in 2:2, “*as a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens.*” The love of the daughter of God is not the same as the love of maidens: it is not fleeting or inconsistent, without commitment or passion. Wisdom herself is a unique being able to give a different kind of love than we can at first – a lily among brambles.

The male beloved is no longer like the other trees in the forest. She refers to him in 2:3 as an apple tree, meaning he has begun to bear fruit as a result of his relationship with Wisdom. She is pleased with him. His fruit is “*sweet to her taste,*” meaning he has properly let himself be pruned and nourished by her Father the Gardener. We see the soul growing in maturity and their attraction to each other building.

When the male beloved speaks for a second time in the poem, he asks God to show him Wisdom’s face and let him hear her voice, signifying that he wants Jesus to give him eyes to see and ears to hear her.

In chapter 2, we see the resistance to Wisdom’s plans from the powers of this world in the form of foxes who seek to ruin “*our vineyards.*” If the principalities and powers resist her, then I want her. They seek to interrupt and prevent her from reaching souls and consummating her love for them, leaving some men spiritually displaced. In 4:7, the soul calls Wisdom his bride, indicating that they will soon be married. Further suggesting that the female beloved is divine, he says, “*there is no flaw in you.*” She does not say this about him throughout the text, so the male lover represents a human being – not God, as is traditionally claimed.

Wisdom is also alluded to in the book of Proverbs as the tree of life, presumably from the Garden of Eden. Earlier we learned that the soul is like an apple tree. There were many apple trees in the Garden of Eden. That her beloved has become one is by no means insignificant. Perhaps this is where Wisdom resides and where this poem partially takes place. Chapter 5 begins with the male lover entering “*his garden, his sister, his bride,*” indicating that she has permission to grant him entrance to the Garden of Eden, where they can safely grow in love.

Again, in 6:9, the soul calls Wisdom his perfect one, “*flawless to her that bore her.*” God loves me but has never called me flawless.

The one that bore her is the eternal Church – her mother. Later, the soul compares her to a palm tree that he will climb, a reference to her body. This represents God raising up the soul from shadows to true knowledge. In 7:9, her kisses are “*like the best wine that goes down smoothly, gliding over lips and teeth.*” Through her discipline she will intoxicate the soul into ecstasy with her love, convicting him with an experience of what he has faintly known and lived for.

Starting in 7:10, we see Lady Wisdom’s desire to be with her beloved without the interruptions or distractions that plague every relationship here. Wisdom says she wants to escape the city, which represents the oppression of what she can give him. In a sense, she wants to go on a retreat with the soul. She wants to lay with him in the tall grass of fields and hills in rural lands where they will be left alone. The fertility of the fields in the poem represents her own yearning to love him in this seclusion so that she can then lead him into true community.

She also says that she wants to lodge in the small towns where they will be anonymous, known only to each other. The opportunities to love each other evidently do not last long. The vines are budding, the grape blossoms are opening, and the pomegranates are in bloom. Spring will not last forever. The labor of summer is coming. This is their window of opportunity after a long winter alluded to earlier in the text, which perhaps represents a period of time when he did not perceive her. How long will your winter be?

For every story in Scripture, there is at least one spiritual experience God has prepared for His children. When do most of us first experience the reality behind Song of Songs? A woman in a Disciple Band this week said it perfectly, and I don’t think she knew I was preaching this sermon today. She said, “Wisdom first comes in the form of a person.” Not the kind of wisdom that gets us ahead in this world, but the one who supports Jesus’ invitation to abandon the world’s call upon our lives and instead serve the Kingdom, whatever that may specifically require from each of us.

Men often first fall in love with Wisdom when they fall in love with the woman who will become their wife. To encounter Wisdom as a spiritual being is to become fully conscious of the inner beauty and true identity of a human daughter of God in a deeper dimension. Making room in our lives for a human beloved prepares most of us to make room for a divine beloved.

Let's return to our Scripture reading for today.

In verse 8:1, Wisdom says, *“O that you were like a brother to me who nursed at my mother’s breast!”*

Despite all her longing and her beloved’s growth up to this point, Wisdom remains unsatisfied. She wishes he was already his true self. She wishes he had already lost his life so that he could find it. Though mature, he is not yet what God intended him to be. She wishes he were farther along the Way than he is.

Wisdom’s mother in this poem is the Church. God or Jesus gives Wisdom away in marriage, but the eternal Church nursed her. Because of this, she received the nutrients of true knowledge and being and is strong and capable in the matters of life. She is a foretaste of the beauty of holiness. It was by nursing at the Church’s breast and being held in God’s arms that Wisdom became who she is.

This is one of the few verses of despair in the Song of Songs. Wisdom longs for her beloved to have received the same privileges that she did, which are made available to us now by the life, death, resurrection, and Spirit of Jesus. Some of us did not grow up in the Church. Some of us did not come into a faith family until we were adults, and even for those of us who did grow up in the Church, our faith families cannot fully embody and feed us here as the eternal Church fed Wisdom. Often we are deprived of the nutrients we need to walk this Path. That is one reason why we need the Lord’s Supper so often.

Still verse 1: Wisdom says, *“If I met you outside, I would kiss you, and no one would despise me.”*

When she says “if I met you outside,” she means “if I met you on earth where you dwell.” She means “if I became a human being, I would kiss you and no one would think anything of it.” She could kiss the human soul and become real to him in public because she would be one of us. That is why Wisdom often first comes in the form of a person.

By saying “if I met you outside,” she expresses her longing to become real in the eyes of Christian men and women. No one would despise Wisdom as a human being because most of us would not recognize her.

In verse 2, Wisdom says, *“I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, and into the chamber of the one who bore me.”*

This verse further illustrates the troubles of the traditional interpretations of this poem. Would the Church, Israel, or the individual soul lead Christ or YHWH? No. Does any of that make sense in the context of the other Wisdom literature in the Bible? No. Does the Church have a mother? No. The Church *is* the mother. Wisdom is the daughter. She enters holy souls in every generation. She leads them in the way of love. A soul does not lead or dominate her at all.

We hear in this passage what Wisdom longs to do with her beloved. She wants to bring him into the house of her mother – the only place where they can be together uninterrupted. The chamber of the one who bore Wisdom is the chamber of creation where God and the eternal Church conceived the universe. Wisdom wants to mimic her mother and Father with her beloved, opening to him a realm of relief and confidence that will help him shoulder his challenges and responsibilities here.

In verse 2, Wisdom says, *“I would give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranates.”*

As Wisdom nursed at her mother’s breast and became divine, she longs for her beloved to become stronger and is willing to strengthen him with spiced wine. What is the significance between the milk of the Church and the spiced wine Wisdom offers the soul? Milk is associated with growth, motherhood, infancy, and dependence. Yet her lover is beyond infancy. He is mature. We are not raised in this realm in communities that perfectly embody the Church. The soul has passed beyond the point where milk can affect his spiritual development to any transformational degree.

Wine, however, he is old enough to drink. It represents grace, holiness, and sanctification, as evidenced by Jesus choosing wine as the embodiment of the New Covenant in His blood. It was also considered to have medicinal properties in ancient times. The nutrients we do not receive in spiritual infancy we receive in maturity through Wisdom’s wine. Because she was given milk from a young age, she is able to offer the soul a heavenly wine by which he becomes attracted to the nutrients of artful living, spiritual discipline, and true fellowship.



In verse 3, Wisdom says, “*O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!*”

If your left hand is not under her head and if your right hand is not embracing her, then your hands are distracted, or doing something without also giving your undivided attention to her for very long. The daughter of God longs for those moments when we rest from our labor and allow our hands to hold and embrace no task other than our friendship with God, in the hopes that we might become conscious of her. Wisdom brings holy desire to us. But alas, encounter with her is often brief and her embrace fleeting, for we return so quickly to tasks and entertainments that do not set our minds and hearts – our hands – upon her.

In verse 4, Wisdom says, “*I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!*”

Wisdom’s love awakens love for God. The daughters of Jerusalem represent all women who embody her and who desire to learn from her how to be a daughter of God. They want to know how to cooperate with her plans and ability to awaken love for God in men and in themselves. This verse is not only about abstaining from sex until we are in a relationship of love, truth, and trust. This is about abstaining from certain prayers until someone is ready to experience their power. This is about inner work. When we do this, it is uncomfortable. Inner work further initiates us in the knowledge and love and gifts of God that are waiting within us. We must wait until someone is ready for this before we send him or her the desire for it through prayer.

In verse 5, the daughters of Jerusalem say, “*Who is this coming up from the desert leaning upon her lover?*”

Here they are speaking about Wisdom and the soul who together have endured the trials of the desert, which in Christian life typically represents a time of transformation and struggle. It is the place of being tested, of shedding the false self, of discerning the Spirit’s voice. Wisdom has helped her beloved get through this time and she is weary from fighting for him. But he has come out stronger than he was before, just as Jesus did when He came out of the wilderness after His baptism. Wisdom can now lean on her beloved, which she could not do before they entered the desert.

In verse 5, Wisdom says, *“Beneath the apple tree I awakened you; there your mother conceived you; there she who bore you conceived.”*

With great economy, the author sets the desert of purgation against the orchard of illumination. After all of his labor, his love of God is awakened in grace while he is resting under a tree.

Here Wisdom awakens the soul in the same place where his mother the Church conceived him by the Spirit, suggesting that this experience is akin to but comes after being born again. Earlier, Wisdom calls the soul an apple tree that produces fruit sweet to her taste. Now she describes him as resting under an apple tree. What else is often under an apple tree? Apples – he has become fruit itself! Full of seeds that will grow into more apple trees and bear more fruit. Spiritual fatherhood. Perhaps becoming fruit itself is how we pray without ceasing.

In verse 6, Wisdom says, *“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.”*

A seal is like a locked door: it keeps things outside and it protects what is inside. Lady Wisdom is instructing her beloved to set her like a door upon his heart – to let her protect the progress he has made in this life and the gifts he has received, sealing them inside his heart so that he does not revert to his former life. She is telling him to let her grant or deny permission to enter his heart. With divine love and knowledge sealed, the soul now has strength and protection enough to be victorious against death, which seeks to undermine everything that has been accomplished in him up to this point.

A seal is also a reminder. Wisdom asks us to set her as a seal upon our arms so that we will never forget her, what she has done for us, and what is really important in this life.

We know from Deuteronomy that God is a consuming fire. These flashes of fire refer to grace descending upon us and doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves: namely, annihilating the final obstacles that prevent us from becoming friends and prophets of God – fruit itself! What Jesus began with the soul, God completes in holy fire, which removes from the beloved all that cannot be brought into marriage with Wisdom.

In verse 7, Wisdom says, “*Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one’s house, it would be utterly scorned.*”

The waters of death cannot extinguish the fires of God’s love. Once God has purged the soul with His fire and the Holy Spirit then gives the soul Wisdom, such a work cannot be undone. It is an indelible infusion and protection of grace. If one offered all of one’s wealth in exchange for this, it would be utterly rejected. We cannot attain the spiritual with the material because the spiritual cannot be earned. It is a gift we receive over time; not a transaction based on how much we do or can give back. Grace is free but it costs us everything. What God desires from us – what God wants us to send first to the altar – are our false selves to be consumed in the fire of His love so that our true selves may emerge into enduring friendship with Him.

Deep inside the core of a man is the desire to live in a way so pleasing to God that He gives him His only daughter’s hand in marriage. Ask God for Wisdom.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Living Christ, those who are oppressed in this world have been given power by God to redeem us. We are not redeemed by their deaths nor did God will that those at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, be killed. We are redeemed to the extent that we allow who they lived for to change who and what we are willing to live and die for. “*Deliver us from bloodshed, O God of our salvation, and our tongues will sing of your deliverance*” (Psalm 51:14), praying as you teach us to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

### **Influences for this sermon**

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