

**Grace Episcopal Church of Galena, IL
November 9, 2014**

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell

Text – Wisdom 6: 12-16

No doubt it has happened to most of you at one time or another. You are bombarded by thoughts, ideas, experiences. They seem to have some connection to each other—some common thread trying to be woven together into complete cloth. It might be coincidence. Or synchronicity. But your mind—your heart—are sensing a new thing. Maybe not a deep, pure truth. But a kernel, a seed of something significant.

That is where I have been these past few days. And yesterday's Thrive gathering at St. James Commons produced some more threads. So, I come here this morning without a sermon wrapped up in a tidy package and tied in a bow. But with the pieces only partly assembled. And a lot of mixed metaphors. And I invite you into a work in progress.

At every Thrive gathering, we sing a song. Five verses with refrain. The rhythm and meter of the words lends itself to many settings, so each time we sing it to a different, familiar tune—hymns we know as Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing; Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee; tunes named Holy Manna; Hyfrodol...Yesterday, since we are soon coming to Advent, we used Greensleeves (What Child is This).

The song's refrain goes like this: "Let us bring the gifts that differ and, in splendid, varied ways, sing a new church into being, one in faith and love and praise." It represents what we are trying to do in Thrive—revitalize the church. Find how we can not only survive in a difficult time in our world but how we can be a vibrant, inviting presence where others can share in the Gospel.

Well, as you might guess, there are those who take issue with this song. Since it can't be about the tune, given these venerable examples I named, it must be the words. Not "weighty" enough. Not about God but about our response to God. Whatever. I suspect it may be one word in that refrain. "New." "Bring a new church into being." If so, I don't disagree with the critics. Because, if you look at the verses, this is not really about "new" at all, unless it is a new way of seeing or thinking. The verses talk about the goodness of creation, the hopes of every nation, peace and justice, drawing the whole human family, male, female, every race together at one table. Do any of those sound "new?" And here, I think, is a key phrase: "Dare to dream the vision promised, sprung from seed of what has

been.” Let me say that again. New fruit, new life. But emanating from something we already have.

That echoed in yesterday’s presentation, too, as we talked about leadership—how structure and tradition can keep us grounded and yet give us the freedom to shape and mold our life together--whether it be a business or a service or a community of faith—in fresh ways.

The trouble is, people get scared. They get nervous or threatened when we mess with “tradition.” In fact, however, they may not even recognize the entire breadth of that tradition, but only the little slice that they learned about or practiced. And, I guess, that might be the core of the thoughts swirling around in me this week.

There is tradition that is ancient and deep that we simply do not know much about. As in any culture, certain things rise to the top. Others are submerged for one reason or another. It may be that some stand the test of time better than others. Or, it may be because some are more easily grasped by our human minds. Or--make a better fit with the directions (or dare I say, agenda?) of the dominant parties.

The alternate reading that I chose for today, from the Wisdom of Solomon gives us a glimpse of a submerged tradition. But, as we shall see, it is not just in the part of our Bible known as the Apocrypha. We find it in the Hebrew Scriptures in Proverbs and other books known as “wisdom literature.” We find the foot prints in our New Testament, too—in both the Gospels and in some of Paul’s letters. I am talking of Wisdom, Lady Wisdom, a personification of God that speaks and acts as a relational being in a unique way. Listen:

- 1) from Proverbs 8: The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
- 2) And, when he established the heavens I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep...when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him as a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.
- 3) From Wisdom of Solomon: For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty: therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
- 4) From Baruch: This is our God: no other can be compared to him. He found the whole way to knowledge, and gave her to his servant Jacob and to Israel, whom he loved. Afterward she appeared on earth and lived with humankind.

What we see and hear in these passage is a description of a divine presence closely related

to God, one that reveals God. A presence older than the creation of the Earth, a companion and co-worker of God, sometimes hard to distinguish from God. This wisdom literature is different from the more historical and prophetic books—they are more about practical knowledge and how to live and be just. Not so much about saga, heroic acts, the Law.

There are some who relate Lady Wisdom to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, some of those passages sound like the working of the Spirit. There are those who relate it more to Christ—those who believe that these represent a very early understanding of the Incarnation—God’s own self coming into the world—a way of understanding Jesus relation to God. This predated the concept of Jesus as “the Word of God” that we see in John’s Gospel at the end of the 1st century and, of course, our creedal concepts of Jesus as the “son of God” in the 4th century. (John 1: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the people. Colossians: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; Hebrews: He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.)

Now, I guess this brings us to the BIG question we were given at yesterday’s gathering. The “so what?” question. What does this mean to us? Where are you going with this, rector? Well, I am not suggesting that we overturn the Tradition and traditions that define us. In a few moments, we will say our historic creed together, as we do--and will continue to do--each week.

I am, however, eager to embrace the whole of tradition, to mine it for its treasures. And, I am concerned that others will be leery and even frightened by talk like this. Let me give you a real example of what I mean. It is the conference that I began to write about in the e-Blast on Friday. The conference I attended with three other clergy and seminarians twenty-one years ago this weekend. Here is what I wrote just months after the event (and please think of the timing—this was a mere 15 years or so after the first women were ordained in the Episcopal Church, ten years before Gene Robinson became bishop of NH):

It was billed as a global theological conference by women, for women and men which would be an opportunity to listen, to speak, to grow, to share stories, and to go beyond the boundaries of one's own experience. From 6 p.m. on Thursday until 1 p.m. on Sunday, we found ourselves swept into an event like no other that I can remember. It was a time of celebration--celebration of the rich diversity of those who came and of the gifts they brought. It was a time of singing--both familiar hymns and hymns written for this occasion; a time of dancing--sometimes simple arm movements, sometimes circle dances to Appalachian tunes; a time of ritual that integrated meaningful expressions of Christian faith without being specific to any individual tradition; and even a time of drawing and scribbling with Craypas. It stretched our minds and imaginations. It felt like the rushing wind of

the Holy Spirit bringing refreshment and renewal, helping us to discover new ways in which the ancient faith of the Church can be claimed for our lives in this time. And it brought reassurance that there is still life in the mainline religions.

All the way home, we replayed the weekend and talked about how we might be able to share all that we had learned and experienced with those who had not been there. Two months later, the bombshell hit. I opened the Chicago Tribune to the Friday religion section and saw headlines that screamed "Charges of pagan acts hit ecumenical event." I soon learned that the evangelical wings of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches had mounted a publicity campaign to condemn the conference and those who participated. They were calling for the firing of any denominational employees who were involved and charging that monies were misappropriated to support the event. A groundswell of controversy soon expanded beyond denominational newsletters and reached national news media including Ted Koppel's Nightline.

Four major themes emerged that were expressed in ways that made those who didn't attend feel threatened. First was the charge of engaging in pagan acts. I guess that is true. The opening rituals included Native American drummers and singers. We also used the Indian tradition of "talking circles" to facilitate our discussion groups. Asian American theologians shared how they had blended beliefs from their Eastern heritage with their Christian practices.

A second accusation involved the affirmation of lesbians as women of faith. Yes, there was an unscheduled gathering of lesbians before the entire group. Words were spoken, a song was sung, and most everyone in the ballroom stood in solidarity with these individuals (and, for that matter, all others who have been marginalized) affirming that they are, indeed, children of God.

Heresy was another bone of contention. In a seminar about Jesus, an African-American professor related the struggles of her people and how blacks need a living Jesus who can redeem them rather than only a dead Jesus on the cross. Quoting only her hyperbole, her statements were reported as evidence that the conference intended to destroy Christian beliefs and to reject essential Christian doctrine. I attended that seminar. The notes I took remind me that this speaker focused on the need to emphasize what Jesus lived for as an example of how we should live with each other.

*Finally, we were charged with goddess worship. With promoting a new religion with a new god. Who was that new God? It was Lady Wisdom, or the Greek translation: Sophia, one of many images and names for God used throughout the conference. I do not believe that we were worshipping Sophia. We were worshipping God--the one God--using different names just as we worship one God using names like Creator, Father, Mother, or Rock of Salvation.**

This conference did end up with people losing their jobs and funding being withdrawn from other projects. What a surprise it was to the planners—that this little conference in Minneapolis expected to draw a few hundred people would instead fill the space with more than 2,000, turn away another 1,500 and create national headlines through fear, paranoia, willful misreporting and denigration. Wow.

There is a big difference between throwing out the tradition and making up something entirely new. And reclaiming parts that have not been so well known but that may bring a whole other dimension to the faith. Our religious heritage has given us Scripture and

traditions (our creeds, doctrines, liturgies and such.) But these are not, in themselves, Truth. (With a capital "T"). They are "windows into the truth" that help to guide us on our faith journeys. But they are words and concepts crafted by human beings out of our incomplete human understanding of the Holy mystery. Because words only come out of our experience, they are always inadequate. Attempts to put these understandings of God and of truth and faith into a box labelled "sacred tradition" that is not open to exploration will not be helpful if they are to remain alive and relevant so that they bring life and vibrancy to real live people in difficult and changing times. This fits with our own Episcopal heritage, I think, so long as we don't cling to our own individual preferences. We have scripture. We have tradition. But our three-legged stool is balanced by reason that contains our God-given minds, our experiences. And is enlivened by the Holy Spirit, who blows and breathes where She will.

Amen.

* Italicized portions adapted from July 1994 sermon, "Truth Seeker" delivered at 1st Congregational Church, Wilmette, Illinois.