

Proverbs 9:1-6
August 15, 2021

Lady Wisdom or Lady Folly

How old is Queen Elizabeth the II?
What is the average weight of a pig?
What exactly is pimento cheese?
How many ounces are in a pound?

If you had the urge to pick up your phone--or open a new tab--and look up the answers to any of those questions--you aren't alone. At parties, in meetings, while walking with a friend, most of us do it without thinking. We have the answers to a lot of questions at our fingertips.

We are living in the greatest information age in all of human history. Unlike any other time, a greater number of people have access to the greatest amount of information. One person with a device and internet connection can access more information than ever before.

Without exception, we are living in the most information-saturated age ever. Scroll through nearly any social media application, go to any search engine, and without asking, you will be bombarded with headlines and quick facts, news articles and opinions: information. And by the time you click it and read it, it's changed, new information, more information added.

With this steady stream of input, we are on information overload. And that has some pretty big consequences. With so much information readily available, we have created an environment where one of the worst social sins is to appear uninformed. It can often feel embarrassing to not have an opinion on something or know the full facts. So in order to seem informed, we form our opinions hastily, based on punchy headlines, talking heads, or superficial impressions rather than true understanding. We would rather have ANY answer--even wrong ones--than say 'I don't know.'

And of course, the cost of a culture like this can be deadly and we've seen it. Misinformation accepted and spread with authority. Mistrust of institutions. Disregard of expertise. One observer notes that despite our access to answers and information, we are currently experiencing a "wisdom famine."

In contrast, Proverbs provides us with a picture of a "wisdom feast."¹

In our reading this morning, wisdom--who, biblically, is personified as a woman--is portrayed as a hostess with the mostest. Lady Wisdom--ancients called her--prepares a lavish feast; a table set with savory meats and fine wines, in her great big home. She sends out the invitation to everyone--come and eat of my food and drink of my wine, come and feast on wisdom. The benefit of feasting on wisdom is clear: life--rich and deep.

Just a few verses later in the same chapter, we meet Lady Folly. She, like Lady Wisdom, wants our company too. But instead of a great big home, she invites us to a dive. Instead of well risen breads and fine wines, what she offers is meager, thin, even deadly.

¹ The framing of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly that I used was outlined by Heidi Husted in August 2000. www.christiancentury.org/article/wisdom-famine

Proverbs suggest that we are given a choice between the two invitations. And that at times, one might be tempted to bypass Lady Wisdom's feast and try to survive on the thin gruel offered by Lady Folly.

It seems like an easy choice between the two, but in reality with so much information bombarding us on a daily basis, we often take that meager and thin route and claim understanding without context or deeper knowledge. We risk failing to cultivate wisdom. And in doing so, we find ourselves sitting at Lady Folly's table and bringing all of society with us.

Writer and creator of the weekly digest Brainpickings, Maria Popova explains the real reason why a lack of deeper understanding is hurting our society. In her work "Wisdom in the Age of Information," Popova writes:

"We live in a world awash with information, but we seem to face a growing scarcity of wisdom. And what's worse, we confuse the two. We believe that having access to more information produces more knowledge, which results in more wisdom. But, if anything, the opposite is true — more and more information without the proper context and interpretation only muddles our understanding of the world rather than enriching it."²

Popova suggests that to grasp the importance of this, we first need to define these concepts as a ladder of understanding.

At the base of the ladder is a piece of **information** which simply tells us some basic fact about the world.

Above that is **knowledge**--the understanding how different bits of information knit together can reveal some sort of truth about the world. And this rung on the ladder requires interpretation and context.

At the top of the ladder is **wisdom** and wisdom has a moral component. Popova suggests that wisdom is the application of *information* worth remembering and knowledge that matters to understanding... not only how the world works, but also how it should work.

Popova best explains this in a metaphor: Information is having a library of books on shipbuilding. Knowledge applies that information library to building a ship. Once you've built the ship, wisdom is what allows you to sail it without sinking, to protect it from storms, to sail it just right so that wind fills the sails. This moral wisdom helps tell the difference between the right and wrong direction in steering the ship.

Put simply: Wisdom is understanding how the information we've received and knowledge we've gained can help us make better decisions.

Perhaps that's why Proverbs--and frankly, the whole bible--is invested in our working toward wisdom.

² Popova, Maria. Wisdom in the Age of Information
www.brainpickings.org/2014/09/09/wisdom-in-the-age-of-information/

Because the Christian life is about transformation, right living, keeping away from Lady Folly. God offers us wisdom as a means for a richer, deeper life.

Wisdom gets us out of our heads--calling us beyond the theoretical to the practical, beyond the intellectual to the actual, beyond abstractions to application, and beyond beliefs to behavior. This biblical, holy wisdom is about what to do day by day. How to live as people of God in the world.

Now, the bad news. There is no shortcut to Lady Wisdom's feast. There's a reason wisdom most likely conjures images of elders, gurus, or super human beings. We Christians do not gain wisdom at the time of our baptism or when we are confirmed or join a church. Wisdom is a lifelong process. It comes after failure. It comes with relationships, with experiences, with and learning. Wisdom comes with slowing down and resting. It comes with humility and vulnerability and in those moments when we can admit out loud actually "I don't know." It comes when we recognize we have the resources to seek it.

In this great and wonderful age of information, risking a dearth of wisdom, Proverbs warns us: ignore the invitations to a feast of folly, of pride, cut corners and opinions based on headlines. Wise up. Do your work. It's the only way to a rich and deep life with God and with one another.

Amen.