

Who Doesn't Love a Good Mystery?  
Proverbs 8:1-4, 20-31

As a divinity school professor, I am an occasional preacher. Being an occasional preacher sometimes results in interesting responses. One of my favorite responses was to a sermon I gave at one of our Divinity School new student commissioning services. It was a special occasion, and I was eager for it to go well. After the service one of my students came up to me and said, "Good sermon, Dr. Jones! I didn't know you had it in you!" I loved the honesty in the expression of being pleasantly surprised. It outweighed the underlying sense of low expectations.

This student's response is actually related to my topic today. I want to talk about how we relate to other people. My student's response reflects two major ways that we relate to people. One way is to **take stock**. Taking stock means to size people up and then sort them out based on our estimations of who they are and how they might behave. Taking stock sees people as part of a situation to be navigated. We make an estimate of how we should interact with someone person as part of the bigger picture of what we are trying to do. My student thought, "The preacher is a reserved, bookish Old Testament professor. I'll adjust my expectations accordingly." There is nothing wrong with this way of relating to people. It is a basic skill. Our brains are adapted to be constantly aware of our circumstances, to be attuned to other people, their characteristics, and their responses. Much of life is about taking stock of what we can expect of people and planning accordingly.

Taking stock, however, is not the only way to relate to people. The second way of relating to people is the way of **taking delight**. This is what the student meant when she said, "Dr. Jones, I didn't know you had it in you." You exceeded my expectations. Taking delight

leads us to say, “You surprised me! There is more to you than I thought, and this makes me want to know even more about you.”

I am sure you can think of many people in your own life who have caused you to switch gears from taking stock to taking delight. There is always more to each person than we know. Each person is in their own way a kind of mystery. And who doesn't love a good mystery?

One of my favorite examples of the mysterious depths of people is the character in the Harry Potter novels named Neville Longbottom. Neville first appears as a shy, awkward student who loses his pet toad on the way to Hogwarts. He's clumsy, has trouble remembering spells and potions, and is the target of constant teasing by other students. Even good-hearted Harry Potter was sometimes reluctant to be around him. Yet as the novels progress, we discover more and more about Neville. We see his inner strength in coping with deep family tragedy, his fierce loyalty, and his courage in standing up for what is right. He matures into an inspiring leader in his own right. Along the way, many a reader might say “Neville Longbottom, I didn't know you had it in you.” You might say, yes, but Neville Longbottom is fictional character, not a real person. That is true, but the author J. K. Rowling is a real person. Perhaps she created such a character to tell us something about the many real life Nevilles that we only think we know.

Both taking stock and taking delight are important ways of relating to people. Taking stock is necessary in all areas of human relationships, especially the workplace, in the marketplace, and increasingly in cyberspace. Still, there is a fundamental difference between the two ways of relating. Taking stock treats the person we are interacting with as part of a larger landscape. It treats the person as one of the factors we have to deal with in pursuing some other goal. We may have entirely pleasant interactions, but interacting with the person is like an item on a longer list of tasks we need to accomplish. Taking stock-interactions can be more like

transactions. Again, this is a necessary part of life. Taking delight, however, is different. When we take delight in a person, we appreciate them for who they are. There is no larger agenda. They are the agenda. Taking delight is the essence of having a relationship. Theologian Sam Wells says that taking delight is similar to the way we treat people when we celebrate their birthday. There is no other goal than to appreciate the person for who they are. To take delight in someone is to treat them in ordinary life the way you would treat them if it were their birthday.

There is something of a paradox between taking stock and taking delight. While taking stock is more impersonal and less satisfying, it is also easier to do. While taking delight is more personal and meaningful, it is harder to do. Taking stock seems to be our default setting. Many of the judgments we make about other people happen automatically not only before we can know the real person, but even before we know we are actually making such judgments. We live in an interconnected and fast-paced world and interact with many people each day. The number of interactions and the need to accomplish many things make taking delight in people seem like a luxury we can't afford. Our systems of mass communication favor a "taking stock" mindset. People are often reduced to one or two labels and then sorted as if those labels are all anyone needs to know about them. We are often told to relate to others based on a group they are assigned to rather than who they are as individuals. Who wants to be treated only as a member of a group? Often our natural habits of sorting people by groups and shared characteristics are manipulated by those who play on our emotions for their own power and interests.

Taking stock is easy, almost automatic, but taking delight requires intention and focus. The good news is that our Christian faith gives us great wisdom for how to take stock less and take delight more. We can find this wisdom throughout the Bible, but I want to call our attention today to a special word of wisdom in the book of Proverbs chapter 8.

In Proverbs Chapter 8, the wisdom we seek comes from a very reliable source. The source of this wisdom is Wisdom herself! Proverbs Chapter 8 is a poem that personifies Wisdom as a female literary character named Lady Wisdom. We read about Lady Wisdom in verses 1-4: “Does not Wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand.... “To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.” The poem describes Wisdom through the literary device of a female figure who addresses her words to a wide audience in the public square. Lady Wisdom does not speak on her own behalf, however. She speaks her message on behalf of God. This image of Lady Wisdom is like the accounts of the women prophets mentioned in the Bible, women prophets such as the prophet Miriam, who led the Israelites in worship after their deliverance at the Red Sea, or the prophet Deborah who announced the day of God’s deliverance in the book of Judges, or the prophet Huldah, who counseled King Josiah. God speaks to us in many ways in the Bible, but in Proverbs 8, God speaks to us in the female voice of Lady Wisdom.

What is the message that Lady Wisdom speaks to us? The heart of her message is to give us a picture of God. You have probably heard the story of the little girl in Sunday School who was busy drawing a picture. Her teacher asked, “What are you drawing?” She said, “I’m drawing a picture of God.” The teacher said, “Oh honey, no one knows what God looks like.” The little girl said, “They will when I’m finished with this picture.” In Proverbs 8, Lady Wisdom uses poetry to paint a picture of God. Verses 22-29 provide the setting for this picture. The setting is a time before God had created anything in this world. How else could we describe that time other than through poetry? Wisdom can describe this setting because before there was anything else in creation, Wisdom was present with God. In verse 22 she says: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago,” and in verse 29 she says, “When he

established the heavens I was there.” The picture comes into sharpest focus in verse 31 in describing the moment in God’s time when God was creating the world and human beings. Wisdom says “I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”

Here’s the picture that the character of Wisdom gives us of God. Before there was a created order or any human beings within it, God existed in a personal relationship of mutual delight within God’s own being. Relationship, communion, and delight are essential to God’s character. God did not need a world or any other beings to experience communion and love. Instead, creation and human beings are the free choice of God. God is, as the poet Dante describes him, “the love that moves the sun and other stars.” Creation was not a chore for God. It was a delight. You and I are a part of that creation. The picture of God in Proverbs 8 is that we were created for God’s delight and to take delight in God and to share in God’s delight for the world and for one another.

The picture that Wisdom gives us of God in Proverbs 8 is a primary source for the picture of God contained in the rest of the Bible. This picture comes into clearer focus in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John describes Jesus as the eternal Word of God. Like the Wisdom of God, Jesus the Word of God was with God in the beginning. The Gospel also declares that Jesus was God in the beginning. The Word of God became flesh and dwelled among us, and we beheld his glory like the glory of the Father’s only Son. In the life of Jesus, the picture of God as an eternal relationship of love and joy comes into clearest focus as the picture of God the Father, our Creator, God the Son, our Savior, and God the Holy Spirit, our Sustainer, one God forever.

This picture of God is what our faith describes as the Trinity. Talk about a mystery! Some people think the doctrine of the Trinity is a good reason why you shouldn’t invite a

divinity school professor to fill the pulpit. And yet for all of its complexity and mystery, the revelation of God as Holy Trinity has a very practical meaning for us. The Trinity means we are able take delight in other people because God delights in us and gives us the grace to delight in others. It means that we can take delight in God's world because God takes delight in God's world. It means God is the sponsor of our science and our discoveries because God delights in the creation even more than we do. The Trinity means that we can take delight even in ourselves because God takes delight in our creation, our salvation, and our sanctification.

They say that the three most important words in real estate are location, location, location, and that the three most important words in music are practice, practice, practice. The three most important words in Christian faith are relationship, relationship, relationship. At the heart of God is a relationship of mutual love and delight that we call the Trinity. The relationship at the heart of God is our guide for our relationship with God and our relationships with other people, with ourselves, and with the world around us.

The clearest implication of the picture of God we receive in Proverbs 8 and in the Trinity is captured for me in a quote from Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers of *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. He said, "I believe that appreciation is a holy thing--that when we look for what's best in a person we happen to be with at the moment, we're doing what God does all the time. So in loving and appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something sacred."

It is natural for us to take stock of the people we encounter, and of ourselves. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that we haven't fully taken stock of anyone, however, until we recognize how God takes delight in them. God takes delight in their creation. God our Creator chose not to have a world without us in it. God takes delight in their salvation, giving all that God could give in his Son Jesus to make it possible for us to be reconciled to God. God takes

delight in their life through the Spirit of Life who directs us toward God. We are able to take delight in other people by participating in the way that God takes delight in them. This is the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of God's love and grace. Who doesn't love a good mystery? Especially a mystery who loves us first.