

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, MSC  
Danvers, MA  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
August 19, 2018  
Proverbs 9:1-6

### ***Sophia's Space***

Every space in a church can tell a story.

When a church, like many in New England, have been around for over one hundred years, and some over two hundred years, there is a lot of life that has happened in the spaces of our sacred buildings. This chapel, the Paul McIlroy chapel named after one our former ministers, has seen weddings and baptisms, lots of summer services, housed the new Prayer & Table service we now do, and served as a dressing room for our shepherds and kings and the holy family every first Saturday in December for the last seven years we have done our “living nativity.” The uses of this space have changed over the years as well any dynamic space should change.

Our beloved, beautiful, and simple sanctuary, very New England Congregational in design, has seen lots of singing and preaching and praying. It has housed shrieks of joy and tears of grief. It has sheltered beautiful organ music and amazing piano compositions. It has experienced snores of stolen naps during sermons and young people have fainted in its pews. The sanctuary has witnessed the presence of people who have been members of this church for over fifty years and the dramatic Bible story telling of little children barely able to read. Momentous decisions in the life of this church have occurred in our sanctuary—congregational meetings that passed yearly budgets, votes to call the ministers of this church, decisions to take risks because God calls us to have courage and faith in where the Holy Spirit is moving us. The decision to help a young talented woman from South Korea immigrate to this country was made in that sanctuary.

One of my favorite spaces in this sacred building has some big soft overstuffed couches that one can sink down in during a Council meeting. They are not everyone's cup of tea but there they remain. Probably thousands of committee, or as we now say, “ministry” meetings, have taken place on many nights and Sundays after worship. Ah, the stories those

couches could tell... I will never forget the four or five hours I met with your search committee almost eight years ago as we discussed our hopes and dreams for the ministry of this church congregation. For me, it was love at first sight. The Grandfather clock that Lew and Aaron have kept wound, the couches, the library of books, the little kitchen nook that never seems to keep clean enough, terrifying experiences of people's arms caught in the old dumbwaiter, and the closet full of "stuff." Marj Simpson's little Moderator's table that always seems to disappear. But, my favorite thing in that Reception Room is the copy of the Rembrandt painting hanging on the wall over the table where many feasts of food have nourished receptions, sessions of the Women's Group, and lunches for confirmation classes. The painting that I love is a copy of St. Matthew writing his gospel with the help of what some people call an angel, but who I like to think of as Sophia, who is God's wisdom. Rembrandt painted his St. Matthew and the angel in 1661. It is a wonderful example of the Golden Age in Dutch art. This oil on canvas painting sits in the Louvre art museum in Paris which also houses DaVinci's Mona Lisa. I've stood before the Mona Lisa but I will have to return to see Rembrandt's St. Matthew.

God's wisdom, affectionately known as *Sophia* in Greek lore and *Chokmah* (*Hokmah*) in the Hebrew Scriptures is thought of as Divine Wisdom and considered female in nature. (Sorry, guys, but your wives, girlfriends, and mothers really are always right!) Holy Wisdom or *Hagia Sophia* existed with God from the beginning. It is the *Logos* that the gospel writer of John writes about in the very first chapter of his gospel when introducing Jesus—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God..." You know the words.

The copy of St. Matthew and the Angel hanging in our reception room I believe was given to us by Alden Goodnow's family. Long before cell phones and digital cameras that can take amazing pictures of landscapes, people, and even art there were painters who were commissioned to paint copies of the great works of art. These indeed were real paintings but just not original. One time I went on line and for a few hundred dollars you could buy actual paintings that were copies of the original art. I'm pretty sure that is what we have hanging in our reception room.

Hanging St. Matthew and the Angel, or rather Sophia, whispering in the gospel writer's ear, in the room where so many church meetings take place is truly fitting. For in that room much of Maple Street Church's own "Good

News” or gospel is written in the deliberations that occur and the decisions that are made in leading this congregation and doing the work of God.

As a minister and as a person of faith I very much believe that the good things we do, the wise decisions we make, the actions we decide to take that are on behalf of love, of being compassionate, of working for equality and justice, and of seeking forgiveness are first whispered to us in our ears by Sophia, by God’s Divine Wisdom. I think that is how God works through the Holy Spirit to inspire us to heal the world. The destructive things, the selfish and hateful actions, the discrimination of people just because they are different, the ungenerous thoughts are not the work of Sophia. Those evil whispers emanate from somewhere else.

As you attend your committee or ministry meetings, or go to a Bible study, or attend a social function in our reception room, I hope you will take just a moment and before you speak, before you act, just take a glance up at the beautiful inspiration of Rembrandt depicting the inspiration of God’s Divine Wisdom, Sophia, whispering in our ears to do the right thing. May this church be Sophia’s space. Ask yourself before making decisions, “is this God’s wisdom; is this the action God would have us take, is this God’s vision for the church?” Amen.

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