

August 16, 2015
Pentecost 12
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Proverbs 9:1-6
Psalm 147
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:47-59

In the three year cycle of lectionary readings that we follow, the book of Proverbs rarely occurs. So it is probably worth our attention when it does.

Today's text from Proverbs 9 is an "invitation to wisdom." Wisdom is personified as a woman who has built a house and invited people to a lavish feast. (This is contrasted with the verses that follow, where folly is also personified as a woman.)

Our text tells us that the house built by wisdom is built on seven pillars. In that day, pillars would only be used if one were building a house of substantial size and quality. The number 7 is often seen as representing completeness or perfection. So the house built by wisdom has a special quality and character to it. Some scholars believe that this house even has a "sacred" quality to it.

And the meal that is prepared by wisdom is equally impressive. Multiple animals have been slaughtered and a grand table has been set. This means that this meal is far beyond the ordinary, everyday meals that the average Israelite would enjoy, because meals for average people did not involve meat, and usually did not involve wine. The table is set, the feast is rich – and all are invited.

And the final verse of the text tells us that partaking of this feast leads to life: “Come, eat my food, and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your foolish ways behind, and begin to live; learn how to be wise” (v. 6). For the writer of Proverbs, *to gain wisdom and to accept wisdom’s invitation means embracing the life that God has designed for us.*

As I thought this week about how wisdom is personified here in Proverbs, a question surfaced for me: *Is wisdom also personified in the New Testament?*

The answer to that question, I believe, is “yes.” In the beginning of John’s Gospel and in the letter to the Colossians we have hints of it, and the Apostle Paul makes it explicit when he tells the Corinthians: “Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God” (I Cor. 1:24).

Now the original writer of Proverbs 9 would not have made the connection I’m about to make. The author of Proverbs 9 and those for whom it was written would not have interpreted the words, “*come eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed,*” in terms of the Eucharist. But my job as a preacher is to make such connections. And in light of the Gospel text from John 6, I cannot help but make this particular one.

If personified wisdom in Proverbs built a large, sacred house and prepared a lavish feast that opened the doors to life, *even more* does Jesus, the embodied wisdom of God, build a holy house and prepare a feast that leads to life. The holy

house is the church – Christ’s Body. And the feast Jesus invites us to is a feast beyond our rational understanding.

Consider the text from John chapter 6. Throughout this chapter, Jesus has tried to help us to see that God’s “wisdom” – to steal a word from Proverbs – is not *knowledge* that is to be explained and understood. Jesus seems to want us to see that wisdom is a **relationship that is to be trusted and embraced**. Earlier in the Gospel Jesus speaks a great deal about “believing in” him, but here his language is not of belief in him, but rather of *eating and drinking* him. He says:

I assure you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them at the last day. For my flesh is the true food, and my blood is the true drink. All who eat my flesh and drink my blood remain in me, and I in them. [vv. 53-56]

I am about to say something that could be distorted or misunderstood without its full context. Nevertheless, here goes: *Eternal life does not come through believing the right things or understanding things correctly. Eternal life is the result of intimate communion with Jesus.* Eternal life is about taking the very life of the Triune God into your being, into your *body*, not just your mind.

Christ, the embodied Wisdom of God, has built a holy house, of which he is the head. And he spreads a lavish table and invites us to a feast. It is *his* table. And what he invites us to is literally a matter of life and death.

One preacher I read this week puts it like this:

Most weeks when we come to church and when we take to ourselves the bread and the wine of the Holy Supper, our thoughts are far too small. We cannot exaggerate what we're getting through that meal. Mostly our imaginations are simply not big enough, our expectations are pedestrian and trivial. What Jesus is offering us is a slice of life eternal, of the very Life Force that pulses as the heartbeat to everything that exists, that ever existed, or that ever will exist. [Scott Hoezee, John 6:51-58]

Just yesterday, I discovered this portion from a book by Stanley Hauerwas and

William Willimon entitled, *The Truth About God*:

"For us, one of the most relevant moments in the Sunday service is when, as we come forward for the Eucharist, the church tells us to hold out our hands to receive. There, before the altar, with empty hands outstretched, we are empty, open, receptive, hungry. The church has reformed us from those who seize and grab and clutch into those who graciously receive. Our desire has been reformed, our lives bent toward the God who promised blessing for the hungry. In the Eucharist we find the full reality of the Law, for there we discover that God has not abandoned us. In the Eucharist the Law is given its telos, creating peace in a world that knows no peace. Our hungers are named not as longing for the stuff of this world, but by a bit of bread and a sip of wine we learn to call just this much bread and this much wine a feast. It is all the more important therefore, for Christians to have our desires ordered by this great feast through which we learn God's love as truly unrelenting, seeking us all the way to the Cross."

In a moment, we will gather at the Lord's Table. As we prepare to do so, would you pray with me:

Lord Jesus, have mercy on us. Peel back the scales from our eyes and help us to see that the grace you offer us here is life *giving*, life *nurturing*, and life *sustaining*. Help us to know You in your fullness, to receive the fullness of life you offer us. May we abide in You, and You in us, in ways that are beyond human knowing. Amen.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.