

AUGUST 16, 2009
PENTECOST 11
“WISDOM’S FEAST”

Let us pray: O Holy Wisdom, thank you for inviting us to your Feast as honored guests, simple and senseless as we may so often seem to be. We are grateful for the gifts of bread and wine you set before us that nourish and delight us and feed our faith in your promise of life eternal—life here and now and forever of eternal dimensions that is your promised destiny not only for us but for the whole cosmos you created and redeemed and sanctified. In Jesus’ name, Wisdom Incarnate, I pray. Amen.

I’m grateful though hardly surprised that the texts we hear on this my last Sunday as your pastor happen to be, from my perspective, just the Word we need to hear from God. For as we’ve been discussing for some weeks now in our Bible study group that meets just before worship, which just

today concluded our study of the OT Book of Ecclesiastes, Wisdom with a capital “W” —whom we encounter in our reading from Proverbs—has long fascinated me as a central, if underappreciated, dimension of God’s own being and personality—if we can speak of God’s triune “person-hood” as personality, that is deeply rooted in both Israel’s experience of Yahweh and in Jesus’ own way of being in the world—Jesus whom we might well call God’s Word and Wisdom incarnate, enfleshed, embodied.

Some of you may have noticed that I often wear an odd, silver ring on which is engraved the figure of an owl. I wear it not because I’m especially fond of owls in a fashion or ornithological sense but because it’s the ancient Greek symbol for wisdom—Sophia, in Greek--and connected with the goddess Athena. My wearing it is not an act of idolatry to some pagan goddess but a reminder that Athens and Jerusalem—the secular and the sacred—do

indeed have a lot to do with one another and that, in some ways, wisdom—what my dictionary defines as “knowledge of what is true or right coupled with good judgment”—that is “discretion, understanding, sagacity, discernment,” being some synonyms, is an ideal to be aspired to and to pray for. But in the strongest Jewish and Christian sense, wisdom is first and foremost a gift of God who is godself the essence of Wisdom—is Wisdom personified.

I know this sounds a little esoteric—and God forbid, “new agey”—but it really isn’t. For the wisdom tradition is deeply embedded in the Bible in books like the Psalms and Proverbs, which we hear from today, but also in such neglected books as Ecclesiastes and Job and the Song of Solomon in the OT. But wisdom is also at home in the NT, in books like James and Ephesians and the Gospel of John, where Jesus is portrayed as the great teacher or

rabbi who declares today rather cryptically, *“I am the living bread who comes down from heaven”* as well as the Jesus of the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke who speaks so characteristically in his riddling parables—using the most common, everyday things of life to reveal the secret of the reign of God—things like mustard seeds, and sheep, prodigal sons and long-suffering fathers, and rich people who ignore the poor.

Wisdom is traditionally thought to be the province of age and the aged—and maybe that’s part of the reason I’m drawn to the theme of wisdom on this day that I ride off into the sunset of retirement. While packing my books for the move I ran across a little book entitled simply “Retirement” which I looked at earlier this week and found to be a collection of wise and rather silly proverbs, not all that unlike some of the proverbs we find in the book of the same name from which our first reading for today is drawn.

Let me give you a sample. Here's a good one to start with:

+*As we grow older, we learn that the wisest man is usually the one who thinks of himself the least so. A good warning, I think, to being too self-conscious about this matter of wisdom.*

+Here's a second, more contemporary saying, one that spouses of new retirees worry about: *Retirement is the time of life when you stop lying about your age and start lying about the house.*

+Or how about this one: *Retirement is the period when you stop quoting the proverb that time is money.*

+Or this one that sounds as if I might have written it myself: *We do not stop playing because we are old; we grow old because we stop playing.*

+Or this one: *“The aging process is a lot like grapes—some turn to vinegar but the best turn to wine.*

+And finally, apropos to today's dedication of our new-to-us but quite mature grand piano: *There's many a good tune played on an old fiddle.*

Well obviously—as we're frequently reminded in the inanities we find inside so-called “fortune cookies,” what passes for wisdom in our world is petty thin fare, as, if we're honest, many of the aphorisms we find in the Book of Proverbs turn out to be as well. But biblical wisdom, at least of the Christian sort, disabuses us of the idea that wisdom is the monopoly of the old in any simple chronological sense. Children, for Jesus, are often better signs of the kingdom of God than their elders who think they know it all—although remember how in Ephesians these last weeks we keep being encouraged to “mature” in the faith. Wisdom is neither confined to nor defined by mere age. Neither childishness nor old fogeyism is the province of wisdom.

Wisdom, I'd say, from a biblical perspective is the fruit of reflection upon experience in the light of God's living Word—and so it is always not a human work but the gift of God's Spirit. The simple admonition from Ephesians we hear in today's reading is a good example: "*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish—(that is the antonym of "wise"—but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery*"—(now how about that as a word of wisdom as we're just about to move to wine country!)—*but be filled with the Spirit*—the discerning Spirit of God's Wisdom.

One of the intriguing aspects of the figure of Wisdom as portrayed in especially Hebrew Scripture is that Wisdom is not only a feminine noun but is portrayed as a woman—some scholars think as a way of

introducing some feminine aspects into the Jewish understanding of Yahweh—of the Hebrew sense of God who while we know is beyond gender nonetheless often comes off seeming mighty masculine if not downright patriarchal and paternalistic. Woman Wisdom, if you will, serves to “soften” our sense of a “macho” God.

And so in today’s brief reading from Proverbs, Wisdom is portrayed as an enthusiastic hostess, who has carefully set her table, planned and prepared her multi-coursed meal, chosen and decanted her wine—not unlike, I can’t help but observe having seen Nora Ephron’s new movie starring Meryl Streep and Amy Adams, Julie and Julia of the movie—women who absolutely delight in playing hostess—of inviting folks and then, in the best sense of the word, “entertaining” them with food and drink and good conversation.

But notice too how having prepared her feast Lady Wisdom “*sent out her servant*

girls” with the message “*You that are simple, turn in here!*” And to those “*without sense she says, ‘Come eat my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.’*” I can’t help but think that this must have been a favorite passage of Jesus since so many of the stories he so like to tell—as well as the stories told about him serving as host at table, even when he found himself in someone else’s house, like Zacchaeus or Simon the Pharisee. His parable of the great wedding feast where the repeated invitations of the host are spurned by the invitees and so he sends his servants out to beat the bushes to invite everyone to come seems clearly modeled on this text regarding Lady Wisdom. Wisdom’s Feast is not a gathering of the wise and wealthy, but as Proverbs says, a feast to which the “simple” and those “without sense” are invited—“turn in here!”—in order that they may be fed at Wisdom’s table, “lay aside

immaturity, and truly live” — which means “to walk in the way of insight—the way of wisdom.”

That’s not a bad, however unusual it may be, way of seeing the mission of the church and particularly our congregation—nestled as it is in this heavily Persian neighborhood just up the street from the Mormon Temple. “Turn in here” is also our invitation, isn’t it—turn in here and take a seat at Wisdom’s Table which we understand, of course, to be the Table at which Jesus is both host and meal—in which he offers “bread from heaven” which in some strange sense is found to be his own body and blood given for us. We’re lucky here at Church of the Master that we do find new folks often joining us here at Wisdom’s Table both here in our welcoming sanctuary and then too out on the sidewalk following worship where we gather for coffee and conversation. God continues to send us folks—from all over the world and off the

very streets of our neighborhood—and your calling is to continue to invite them with a wave and a smile, “*Turn in here*” to Wisdom’s Feast all you who are weary and heavy laden—and here you will be fed and nourished and given rest for your souls. And moreover, here, as Ephesians says, you will be invited to join your voice in singing “*psalms and hymns and spiritual songs..., singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus.*” Thanks be to God.

Ok—here’s one last aphorism I’ll trying to live into as I rub my owl ring and practice trying to be wise by preaching less often: “*As we grow older and wiser, we talk less and say more*”

The peace that passes understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

OK—one last time I’ve chosen a new hymn for us to sing that certainly fits our

text and the occasion. I hope you like it.
But even if you don't, like some prescribed
medications, it's "good for you": #518,
"We Eat the Bread of Teaching."