

Proper XV Year B: 18/19 August 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Rev. Gary Cyr

So when you come to the altar to receive the bread and wine, take care, for you are being invited to a feast where you yourself are willing to be given, broken, and shared with the world – and as such, to be a blessing to the world.

Proverbs 9: 1-6
Ephesians 5: 15-20
John 6: 51-58
Psalm 34: 9-14

*“Tradition is wisdom collected.
Wisdom is experience gathered.
Experience is life encountered.”*

Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston

Over the course of several years, Bishop Steven had the spiritual practice of morning meditation. As part of the exercise, he'd share his words and thoughts that arose during this time of reflection with others who subscribed to his web page. The words I just read are an example from that spiritual exercise. Those words are what came to me as I read over today's readings and began to ponder their meaning before searching through commentaries and doing research. I must confess, though, that my very first thought was “not bread again!” We've been talking about bread and feeding for more than three weeks and still we have another gospel relating to bread. But it's the lesson from Proverbs that provoked my memory in recalling Bishop Steven's words.

We often look to the bible as the source of ultimate truth, of divine revelation; as the authority in all matters spiritual. Proverbs, however, tells a different story, one that trusts in the individual's ability to seek understanding. The book is thus teaching the reader about piety and living within community. It's about building up the community through a peaceful and secure means that ensures the viability of the whole. Proverbs speaks about interrelatedness, where Wisdom is the teacher – hence, Charleston's words coming to my mind.

Now listen to the words from this passage as translated in the Jewish Study Bible:

¹ Wisdom has built her house;
she has hewn her seven pillars.

² She has prepared the feast,
mixed the wine,
and also set her table.

³ She has sent out her maids to announce
on the heights of the town,

⁴ "Let the simple enter in here!";
To those devoid of sense she says,

⁵ "Come, eat my food
and drink the wine I have mixed!

⁶ Give up simpleness and live!
Walk in the way of understanding!"

Notice all the feminine pronouns. Wisdom is here understood as the feminine divine: God as mother. What Proverbs is attesting to is that human wisdom exists in conjunction with the wisdom of Torah. It's instruction focuses on relationship with one another, and most especially with God, the source of wisdom and Wisdom itself. God is the source of instruction as well as the One who desires and fosters relationship. This is demonstrated by a banquet table, filled with good things, coupled with an invitation to all who seek understanding, who are being asked to walk apart from the world while living in the world. In essence, this is how we, in our present day and age, ought to live in the world with one another: from a place of abundance and blessing. When I parlay this understanding with the gospel reading from today, I hear Jesus giving instruction for a new kind of feast, a renewed relationship with God, not one simply based on the Mosaic Law (the Law as handed down by Moses) but on the words of Jesus as the embodiment of God's Wisdom.

What's happening in John's world that he has Jesus saying these shocking words: eat my flesh and drink my blood? Our modern-day sensibilities are assaulted with thoughts that

suggest cannibalism. We can find ways to excuse or pardon away what is being said; we can even avoid talking about it. But that does a disservice to Jesus' words.

It's very difficult to read this passage and not think sacramentally; to hear what Jesus is saying as the precursor to our Eucharist. After all, John's gospel doesn't have a "last supper" scene as found in the synoptic gospels. We too easily gravitate towards our modern notion of communion, which is a rabbit hole of controversy, i.e. are we talking transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or the real presence; is it a sacrifice, a commemoration, or a memorial meal? As you can see, for a theological nerd, this rabbit hole is nirvana. For the rest of us, it's a huge distraction.

Jesus is more concerned with the Wisdom of Torah and the Wisdom of Proverbs than having a philosophical debate. He is more interested in conveying the indwelling of God, the mutual indwelling of the Sacred with creation that is made manifest through his own life – his words, his actions, his teachings. The wisdom of yore is brought to fulfillment in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Jesus' sense of communion is one where we receive from God's abundance, and it is freely given. We can't earn it; we most definitely don't deserve it. Yet God offers it with abandon. As Rob Bell, pastor and Christian apologist writes: "It is the feast of the kin-dom of God, where all are accepted and everyone belongs without a need to earn their place or fight for recognition."

The kin-dom feast – the Eucharist – is where we experience God's abundance; where we receive God's grace. We encounter the life of the world in this gift of food and wine, the body and blood of Christ – taken, blessed, broken, and given. The fourfold understanding of what happens at the altar: wine and bread are offered and taken, then they are blessed, after which the bread is broken apart and shared, given, to those who seek to participate in God's abundance and be in relationship with God through Christ. That is Jesus' message and what he, himself, embodies. His physical body will be broken by a market economy of greed that can't accept the generosity of a self-giving God; his blood will be spilled by an empire that can't accept peace and justice as the hallmark of community and relationship – the very essence of God's kin-dom.

Wisdom has set the table. The feast is ready. All are invited. Therefore, bring your offering of bread and wine, as well as the offering of your tithe and pledge, your body, mind, and being. Let it be received, blessed, broken, and given so that others may have life and share in it abundantly. Dwell in God as God dwells in you. Live Eucharistically and you will have life most fully.

Many of Jesus' followers were unable to accept this mandate, too accustomed to their worldly ways, that his message of offering and giving was so completely countercultural and redefining that they walked away rather than say yes to the kingdom feast. For many, it's folly to have faith in God's abundance. That's not enough for them, and they remain unsatisfied; always seeking more for themselves. For others, the bread that satisfies is found through Jesus. So when you come to the altar to receive the bread and wine, take care, for you are being invited to a feast where you yourself are willing to be given, broken, and shared with the world – and as such, to be a blessing to the world. For what is received is in turn offered, as what is offered is received. That is relationship with God, that is communion with the one we call Wisdom. If you seek understanding and a relationship with God, come to the altar this day. Be fed so that you may go forth and be communion to the world. Let Wisdom be your companion.