

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
August 15, 2021 Pentecost 12/Proper 15/Year B  
Texts – 1 Kings 2: 1-12, 3: 3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5: 15-20; John 6: 51-58

Once in a while, you can detect a common theme running through the various readings on a given Sunday – not always, but sometimes. The lectionary today is introducing us to the theme of Wisdom, and we'll be getting more of it in the weeks to come. It's surely not the only theme in the readings today, but it's an important one.

Today we are introduced to Solomon, the one who has gone down in the tradition as the wise king. We even sometimes use the phrase "the wisdom of Solomon" to describe a person who has that rare and uncanny ability to discern a clear and right path in the midst of competing interests or thorny issues. The faithful have often attributed the Proverbs to him, although it is doubtful that he wrote them. And no person, including Solomon, is always wise. Solomon surely lets his power and ego cloud his judgment at times. Regardless, he carries the moniker of the wise one. And today's passage gives us an opening glimpse into why that's the case.

First, a little backstory. We've been immersed in the story of the King David for most of the summer thus far. David looms large in the tradition, despite his imperfections, despite his all-too-human willingness to sacrifice others for his own benefit. He's come to the end of his life, and as he lies on his deathbed, he learns that his son, Adonijah, had begun to assume succession to the throne. Adonijah, being the elder son, was the rightful heir to David, but the Lord had made it clear, at least to some, that David's younger son Solomon would succeed him. When David hears that Adonijah was already celebrating his reign, David organizes an insurrection to ensure Solomon becomes king. Solomon takes the throne and Adonijah rightfully fears for his life, for he now is in danger of losing his head.

But Solomon does not immediately take vengeance on his brother. Instead, he gives Adonijah time to demonstrate that he is not a scoundrel, and eventually tells him simply to go home. Unfortunately, Adonijah can't let it go. He continues to plot to seize the throne, and Solomon finally puts him to death. Ruthless? Absolutely. Politically wise? Probably, given the context.

And that brings us to today. David has just died. Solomon is on the throne. God appears to Solomon in a dream and invites him to ask for whatever he wants. Instead of power, empire, riches, and accolades, Solomon asks that he be given an "understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." In other words, Solomon asks for wisdom. The Lord is obviously pleased with this request. Solomon would not always succeed, especially when we look through the lens of history. But at least he knew what Godly leadership required.

The writer of Ephesians picks up the wisdom thread. "Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil." Wisdom and Folly both call out to us. Sometimes it's not always clear which path is which.

If you're anything like me, by God's grace you occasionally have stumbled onto a wise path. You've said or done just what was called for, perhaps unaware of what you were doing, but grateful after the fact. And on the other hand, I'm sure you have blundered and will continue to blunder, do the exact wrong thing at the wrong moment, choose stupidly. Like me, you've probably walked straight down the path of folly, distracted by your own ego, false promises, or baggage from your past. And hopefully, with God's grace, you have managed to exit without any permanent damage, much wiser, so to speak, for the experience.

Wisdom and folly will always tug at all of us, regardless of our age or experience. There's no use denying it to ourselves or to one another.

What we all can do, not as a guarantee against folly, but as a foundation for gaining true wisdom, is always to remember a key insight from the Book of Proverbs, which we'll be hearing from in a few weeks. It's repeated elsewhere in scripture as well. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom." Don't let the

word, “fear,” put you off. It does not mean that God is an ugly monster from whom we should run. Tragically, far too many children have been taught to fear God and others in that way. No, to fear the Lord is to stand in awe and reverence, to sense deep within the majesty of God, to be driven from within, not coerced by others, to worship, praise and respond to the Holy One.

But there is more. Wisdom might begin with a healthy fear of the Lord, but it develops with the bold act of taking God in. It matures as we come forward week after week to eat the flesh of Christ, and reflect on what it means to have Christ, the living God, alive in us. This is hard to grasp, because it sounds so weird. And the reflection John offers in his gospel this morning does not make it any easier.

The Jesus we meet in John’s gospel offends our sensibilities in all sorts of ways, but never more than when he graphically describes the interrelationships between himself, God and us. John uses the story of the feeding of the 5000, which we have been expounding on for several weeks now, to speak of himself as the bread of life. He offers himself to the world by inviting us to eat his flesh and drink his blood. This is John’s understanding of Eucharist: it is that act whereby we, Jesus’ followers, nourish our true life with God by taking God in the flesh directly into ourselves.

The Jews who heard this were people whose law described in great detail how one must properly dispose of the blood of a slaughtered animal before eating it, and how one must avoid contamination by bodily fluids. Is it any wonder that, when they heard Jesus talk like that, they replied “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” And is it any wonder that, as the passage relays a little later on, “Because of this [teaching] many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him?” It was just too much for them to deal with, too offensive: God in the flesh – in us.

It is true that the image of eating Christ’s flesh and drinking his blood has always been offensive to many. The first Christians were sometimes accused of practicing cannibalism. But perhaps what is even more offensive than the image is its message. Just as God fully empties Godself in Christ, so Christ fully dissolves himself in us as we eat the bread and drink the wine. God’s complete self-giving to us through Christ in the Eucharist displays the infinite depth of God’s love for us, a love that indeed surpasses all understanding. In speaking of the meaning of the Eucharist, Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century mystic and theologian, once wrote “divine love takes us into itself, and we are one with it.” How can that be? I don’t pretend to know. But wisdom allows us the grace to ponder it without fully understanding it.

And there is even more. The divine love reflected in the act of sharing Eucharist together also roots and grounds our life together. That is why John’s version of the last supper has Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, and commanding them to love one another as he has loved them.

Wisdom might begin in the fear of the Lord. But it matures in the humble act of opening ourselves to take in the depths of God’s love so that we become that love for one another and the world. It also understands that such a love is no empty piety or comfortable cushion. It entails crucifixion for love’s sake.

And there, finally, is the ultimate offense. God’s love does not protect us from the world’s hatred and hostility. Instead, God’s love calls us into it. We have to live with Folly, even as we learn to resist walking down its path.

That is the wisdom of God that paradoxically leads to life. That is what we as a community of faith are called to model, to teach, and to live.