

A Sermon for the  
11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
August 16, 2009  
Texts: Proverbs 9:1-6  
Ephesians 5:15-20  
John 6:51-58

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“Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, “You that are simple, turn in here!” To those without sense she says, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside foolishness, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

Proverbs 9:1-6

“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, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” Ephesians 5:15-16

[Jesus said], “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true blood and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.’” John 6:51-56

We are living in times crying out for wisdom. A time, as Proverbs declares this morning, “for laying aside foolishness and walking in the way of insight, for dining on the feast that Wisdom has prepared.” Or, as Paul speaks, a time for “living, not as unwise people, but as wise; not being foolish, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.” The feast of wisdom, John wants to let us know, is in the One who is the incarnation of God’s wisdom, the One who is the Bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world; who gives his life to, and for, the world. Expressed by Jesus in our gospel today in an admittedly challenging manner, “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have my life in them; those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

Jesus gets up in the face of those who complain about and dispute his claims, and proclaims in the most graphic way how deeply a part of us he intends to become, and how deeply we need to be in him. So he speaks of our need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. And it is not a polite expression for eating that he uses. In the always multifaceted Greek language of the

gospels it is not a word for polite dining that is used here. The word for eating used here is one that is normally used to speak of a wild animal gnawing on its prey. Those who gnaw on my flesh - really get into me - will abide in me and I in them.

And abiding, I think, is the point of this rather vulgar image Jesus uses. It's part of the whole theme of abiding in Jesus, resting deeply in him and he in us, that is central to John's gospel. Feast deeply on him, feast on the life he lived and gave up for us, so that it can become our life, and all of the promises - of forgiveness, of resurrection, of healing, of wholeness, of wisdom - enter into us and reshape and redefine our life. John, the latest of the gospels in the New Testament, does not tell the story of Jesus establishing the sacrament of his body and blood, but he speaks of it in places like this sixth chapter where he deepens the meaning and significance what we do on Sundays, when we gather around the Lord's Table.

So, as I said at the beginning we are living in times crying out for wisdom, crying out for people who have partaken deeply of the life Jesus lived and gave for us, people who are in touch with his wisdom and understanding of the will of God. This comment is in response to what is dominating our nation today, the so-called health care "debate" which bears little resemblance to the reasoned, rational, civil, exchanges of view points and ideas that are the primary definition of a debate.

Back in 2003, the ELCA adopted a social statement called "Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor." With the depth of fear, anger, and anxiety being displayed at Town Hall scream-ins around the country, I thought I should go back and take a look at that social statement to be reminded of what our church says on the issue. In the introduction, some of the dimensions of the crisis are outlined: "People unnecessarily endure poor health. Rising health care costs leave a growing number of people without adequate health care. Health care resources are often rationed based on ability to pay rather than need. Finding access to quality health care services is difficult for many. The growing number of elderly people adds another stress on health care resources." Concluding with, "Fear and self-interest defeat social justice in the political processes of health care reform."

"The Christian church is called to be an active participant in fashioning a just and effective health care system. Responding to those who were sick was integral to the life and ministry of Jesus and has been a central aspect of the Church's mission throughout its history...We of the ELCA have an enduring commitment to work for and support health care for all people as a shared endeavor."

The other news item that caught my attention this week was a story about the work of a charitable organization called the Remote Area Medical Volunteer Corps. This is a foundation that seeks doctors, nurses, pilots who are willing to donate time and expertise to bring medical care to remote areas of the world where health care is not easily accessible, remote areas like...Los Angeles, CA. That's why it was in the news. RAM was in Los Angeles this week, running a free clinic in The Forum, one of the large arenas in LA. Thousands have lined up to receive medical care without cost, the line stretched for blocks. It just highlights the critical need for the church to be committed to helping create a "just and effective health care system" in our country. And the measurement by which "justness" of whatever system is created is how the least - the poorest and least powerful - of Jesus' brothers and sisters are being treated.

The church has always done an excellent job of responding with compassion to allay the suffering of the needy, as RAM was doing in Los Angeles. But justice is about moving beyond the point of meeting the person's immediate health care needs. I'm reminded of a workshop the youth group attended while we were down in New Orleans last month. It was intended to deepen our understanding of what the Bible means by justice. The leader of the workshop offered a parable about a village on a river. One day a villager was out by the river and noticed a baby floating down the river. Shocked, the villager rushed into the water to rescue the baby, when another baby floated by. Struggling over to catch that one as well, another appeared, then another. The villager cried out to someone else walking along the bank to come and help. More and more babies were coming down the river and pretty soon the whole village was mobilized to rescue these babies. The villagers organized and committed themselves to doing all they could to rescue babies. And they were able to rescue many of them. Then someone made a suggestion. Maybe some of us should go upriver to see how this is happening, and stop whoever is throwing these babies in the river. Now the village had moved beyond providing compassionate care to doing justice.

We, as the church, as people deeply filled with the life of Jesus Christ, are called to the work of not only bringing emergency medical care to those in need, but to the creation of a just system of health care distribution in which no one is excluded. How we best achieve that is open for discussion, a reasoned, rational and civil discussion. As advocates for justice our first concern is that in any reform the least, the poor, the excluded, are served. We are in a time crying out for people of wisdom, especially people who abide in Christ's wisdom, who have been fed with his wisdom at his holy table. Amen