

12th Sunday after the Pentecost
August 15, 2021
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Proverbs 9:1-18
John 6:51-58

This chapter in Proverbs concludes a long poem in which the son receives instruction about wisdom from his parents. We can't measure wisdom as we do intelligence. Though we might gain wisdom through formal academics, we probably gain more wisdom through the trial and errors of living.

We face a choice. Both lady Wisdom and the stupid woman call us with the same words, "Let the simple enter here." Both will feed us, except one meal leads to life and the other to death. Death, though, is not physical death but living death, a life freighted with fear, anxiety, and hopelessness. Living death is to live without satisfaction or contentment. Living death is life without joy, pleasure, or happiness. Living death is to live without gratitude. Living death is life in which we cannot extend or receive love.

We would like to think that we would choose Wisdom every time, but realistically, we don't. We make mistakes, despite our best intentions. Those mistakes, however, can become another one of wisdom's lessons if we have enough humility to accept them as such.

For us, then, the life-giving meal Lady Wisdom offers is Jesus, the living bread.

Jesus' discourse on living bread followed John's account of Jesus feeding the 5000. Though he fed them with five loaves of barley bread and two fish, the people, hungering for Jesus, followed him to Capernaum. When they found him, he said, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." (6:27)

Though we might connect this pericope from John's gospel to communion, it was not his intent. The Last Supper happened later. Rather, John understood that Jesus, expressed through his ministry and teaching, was our path to eternal life. Eternal life was not just immortality after death. It was a life lived in a manner that was life-giving. It was life lived in true peace, meaning a life not merely without anxiety and despair, but infused with justice rooted in steadfast love. Eternal life is hopeful, even during turmoil and struggle. Eternal life is joyful and filled with gratitude so we can be generous and share our time, talent, and treasure. Eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man was to embody Jesus and all that Jesus represented.

While this Bread of Life soliloquy applies to us individually, Jesus addressed this to the crowd. Though we can have eternal life individually, we won't find the kingdom of heaven if the community does not collectively embrace Jesus' life-giving ways.

We are Lady Wisdom because we offer as the church living bread, the Bread of Life. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (6:35b) When we listen to our community, we hear many people who hunger and thirst. We offer what people need and what people seek, even if they can't quite articulate it.

We, however, have difficulty making ourselves heard above the cries of the stupid woman, who beckons people with the same message. Furthermore, people hear many stupid women urging them to indulge in ways that provide almost instant gratification. The stupid women appeal to insecurities, think of commercials telling us that we can have fabulous lives if we buy their product. Think about messages promising us immeasurable wealth in a short time without too much work, such as the lottery or casino gambling. Think about those medication

messages promising relief from our anxiety. The stupid women touch people's vulnerabilities, play with their egos, and amp up their fears.

We will make our message heard when we, like her maids, go out among the people to proclaim Jesus' radical ways. Living bread does not feed people when they seek comfort and strength in the ways of the stupid woman. Living bread feeds people when they embrace the upside-down ways of the gospel: leadership as servanthood, wealth as generosity, and the bread and the cup as weapons of peace. Living bread teaches us that perfect love casts out fear and as stewards of creation no one should suffer from scarcity or deprivation. Living bread is patience, not quick, easy schemes. Living bread proclaims the common good over personal gratification and satisfaction.

The church beckons the simple when it incarnates Jesus in its community. Jesus becomes incarnate when the community sees love manifest in a church's actions. The church incarnates Jesus when the church embraces its understanding of church not as a noun, but a verb. We are the body of Christ.