

August 19, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### The Way of Wisdom

Proverbs 9:1-6      *Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.*

Psalm 111          *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.*

Ephesians 5:15-20      *Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,  
making the most of the time, because the days are evil.*

John 6:35, 52-59      *“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”*

#### From Immaturity to Insight

Wisdom is a fairly neglected dimension of our scriptures and spiritual tradition. The wisdom books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs rarely get much attention. Yet, the threads of the wisdom tradition run throughout scripture, including the gospels. Wisdom is an important resource for the inward and outward journeys of our spiritual lives. This morning I want simply to open up this rich and important dimension of scripture and of our spiritual lives.

Wisdom has to do with awareness of life in relationship to God, and what that awareness means for the matters of daily living. Through wisdom, we grow beyond ego-centeredness, the notion that the world exists for our own purposes and desires, and should go the way we want. Our capacity for wisdom enables us to examine patterns of thinking and acting around us and in us, and measure them against life as God has created it to be lived. Wisdom is glimpsing the wholeness of life, and perceiving our place in it. Psalm 8 is a good example. “When I ponder the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established, what are we human beings that you should be mindful of us or even care for us?” We humans are very small, and yet we have been given a place, a role, a niche in the creation. Wisdom contemplates and discerns our place within the whole of what God has created.

Wisdom is personified as a woman, which is remarkable given the male dominated society of ancient Israel. Wisdom is the first of God's creations and God's co-worker in the

creation itself(3:19-20; 8:22-31). In today's reading from Proverbs, Wisdom builds her house and prepares a feast, then calls out the invitation to all who would enter and partake. We are invited to leave behind simple-mindedness and immaturity, and to live more fully through insight, awareness, and understanding. Wisdom is not intellectualism. It is not knowing a lot ABOUT things. Wisdom means seeing more deeply into and perceiving the meaning of things. Wisdom is insight that leads to fruitful ways of living, in harmony with our truest nature.

Wisdom is the opposite of ego-centered individualism so pervasive in our culture. The name of Ayn Rand has surfaced recently in the political arena. Nothing could be more in conflict with wisdom as expressed in our scriptures than Rand's view of human life. You can find things in the Book of Proverbs that seem to support the notion of hard work paying off in increased wealth, but it is not the same as what we see today. Individuals amassing as much power and wealth as they can for themselves, disregarding the well being of the community, the society, has nothing to do with biblical wisdom. In Ayn Rand's world, they are the heroes, the moral giants, whereas the poor are seen as weak, along with others who can't make it in a dog-eat-dog society. In Rand's view, a civilization that values altruism, the helping of others, is doomed to fail.

Ayn Rand's novels might be interesting to read when you are a college student, when you are intensely focused on the ego—Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? How can I become something important, make my mark? But ego-centered individualism runs counter to the reality of how life, how the world, the creation works. Such a view is something we must outgrow and enter into the real world of interdependence, mutuality, and the simple realization that we as individuals and as a human race are not the center of the universe. The world does not exist for, and indeed suffers from, our ego-centered purposes. As Elaine Marie Prevallet of the Sisters of Loretto Community writes so effectively and beautifully, we live by the interconnectedness that is at the heart of the created world. In other words, life IS community.

At the heart of the wisdom tradition is this proverb: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight(9:10).” Psalm 111 includes it as well: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; those who practice it have a good understanding(v. 10).” Fear, in this sense, does not mean psychological or emotional terror. It is not “being afraid of” God, the way some sectors of Christianity use the phrase to frighten people into religious conformity. “Fear”, as used here, means living with awed awareness of the sacred dimension of life. Awed reverence for life fosters humble understanding, not the kind of knowledge that is used for arrogant, self-serving,

and violent purposes. Wisdom knows that it does not know.

There was a pertinent quote from Martin Luther this week in the Church of the Saviour's INWARD/OUTWARD website: "Discipleship is not limited to what you can understand—it must transcend all comprehension. Plunge into the deep waters beyond your own understanding." That sounds like it is straight out of the Book of Proverbs. It is the same as when Buddhism talks about the need to have a "don't know mind" as the condition for gaining true insight into life and living. We have to be open. We have to grow beyond the immaturity of thinking we know everything, of having minds crammed so full of our own cleverness and pretensions that we cannot really see or listen to God. The Tao te Ching says: "Those who know don't talk; those who talk don't know." To listen, we have to be silent. To receive, we have to be empty. To let insight and understanding in, we have to be open. As an example, how about this from the Book of Proverbs? "Whoever belittles another lacks sense, but an intelligent(wise) person remains silent (11:12)." That is insight. That is wisdom. And it puts into perspective all the belittling and hate-filled rhetoric that constitutes what we call politics. It also speaks to the ways we ourselves talk about one another and other people, or the times we are so busy pressing our own agenda that we don't listen respectfully to others.

Wisdom is the path from immaturity to the way of insight and understanding.

### **Make the Most of Time**

Cultivating wisdom and insight helps us discern the best ways to live. The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians advises Jesus' community to live as wise people, making the most of time because the days are evil. I don't know what was meant by the days being evil, but I do have a keen sense that time is precious, that my days are not unlimited, and that I waste a lot of time and energy on things that don't matter. I also know that our society and culture are flooded with things that are evil, or at the least a colossal waste our time. Here is a fruitful exercise for our inward journey. We can take an inventory of our time and energy, and how we use them. What are the things that enrich our lives, help us live more fully, and what are the things that numb us, filling up our days with distractions? To which of these are we giving our time and energy?

The writer cautions against over-indulgence, telling the community to be filled instead with the Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and songs, making music to God, and being thankful. These words could be an invitation for us to take a look at the things to which we might be addicted, the things with which we might be numbing ourselves or

immersing ourselves in illusions. Not just food or drink, but attitudes and habits of thinking about ourselves or others or the world that keep us from full, free, and joyful living.

It is interesting that the writer lifts up worship and singing as so important. One thing about singing—it joins you with others. It creates instant community. Every voice is important. Everyone joins in with what they've got. What matters most is not the individual voice, whether we think it lovely or not, but the experience of many voices becoming one voice. When we get beyond ourselves by joining in the song, the hymn, the psalm, somehow the log jams in us of dissatisfaction or unhappiness or self-isolation begin to break up. The way is opened up for gratitude. I love these verses in Ephesians because they tell us that through our being together as a community in singing and worship, we experience what the Proverbs text said. We leave behind our immaturity, our self-preoccupation. We are lifted into the bigger picture of life and can gain truer insight and experience gratitude. Did you know that our worship and singing are about the most radical thing we could do? Very counter-cultural.

The writer of Ephesians is simply saying that we can fill ourselves with things that bring dullness and the wasting of our precious lives, or with things that are good for us, that nourish our true selves as children of God. This, too, is the way of wisdom.

### **We Are What We Eat**

Which brings us finally to the food images in today's readings. Wisdom is like good, nourishing food. Physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually, we are what we eat. As we are on the journey, leaving behind immaturity and ego-centered views and living, we begin to taste wisdom. Woman Wisdom invites us to a feast, to eat our fill of insight, to partake of things that nourish life. The writer of Ephesians counsels the communities to fill themselves with the Spirit of God through singing and giving thanks to God in every moment and circumstance. A steady diet of singing, worship, and gratitude.

The Pharisees are repulsed by Jesus' images of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. These words seem to refer specifically to the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. They remind us to take seriously the sharing the Eucharist as a communion with the presence and life of Jesus with us still. We take into ourselves his life, which is our true life as human beings. Yet, it is imagery for something more. Our scriptures, as well as those of other religious traditions, often use eating images to speak about taking into ourselves spiritual truth. The kind of life spoken of in our spiritual tradition is not something to do in our spare time, nibbling here and there. It is not just having a religious component to our

lives. It is about our whole life, inside and out. It isn't about becoming adherents of a particular religion. It is about awakening to life as it is created to be. It is about life in its truest meaning, or as Jesus says, eternal life. And that doesn't mean just life after we die. It means a depth and quality of life right now, right here, which happens to last forever.

Our community, from the beginning, has offered a particular way of being a Christian community. It is characterized by committing ourselves to and working faithfully with certain important spiritual practices. They are disciplines that, if we work with them consistently and faithfully, nurture us in the growth of wisdom and insight, of discerning the best ways to live, ways that are in harmony with all of creation and our place in it. Like the Woman Wisdom calling out into the streets, the life of wisdom, the way of insight, is always an invitation, to be freely accepted or declined. So it is with the life of faith with which we work here, as persons and as a community. It is an invitation to a feast.