

Twelfth Sunday after Whitsunday

Psalm 111

Proverbs 9:1-6

John 6:51-58

A Tale of Two Feasts

I love bread. My mouth waters for wheat germ and whole grain, for rye and roti. My stomach grumbles for sourdough and soda, teacakes and Texas toast. And even when scientists and doctors tell me too much bread might be a bad thing...I can't resist. I love bread.

Bread is an energy producing carbohydrate. Bread is a great source of B vitamins, iron and fiber.

Bread is one of the worlds oldest staple foods. Evidence from 30,000 years ago in Europe revealed starch residue on rocks used for pounding plants and grains. Nearly every culture from around the globe has developed bread to fit their needs and uses. From grain cakes in antiquity to the wonder bread of the twentieth century, bread has remained an essential ingredient in most diets.

Bread is sustaining, energy producing, vital, and common.

Not surprisingly, bread appears again and again in our sacred stories. When the Israelites are famished, God delivers manna to the desert to satisfy them. When Elijah is so deep in despair that he begs God for death, God feeds him bread to empower his mission. Jesus fed the multitudes with loaves of bread and fishes. At prayer we plead for this gift from God: 'give us this day our daily bread.' And with his last meal before death, Jesus serves bread and wine.

You see, for the biblical writers—from the ancient priests of Israel to the first disciples of Jesus of Nazareth—bread was as central to them as it is to us, and more so. There are 89 appearances of bread in our scriptures—it appears in nearly every book of the Bible. Bread is used as a metaphor and poetry. Bread is used as life giving, life sustaining, a real life saving resource—through bread God guides, God provides. Bread is comfort and mercy. Bread is valuable, limited, fragile.

Bread appears time and time again because the people of God, the people of the world could relate. The rich and the poor, the freed and the enslaved, the young and the old, the religious and the not-so-religious, they knew bread, they ate bread, they needed bread. They knew what it would or could mean to receive their fill, and what it could mean to not have enough. Other than water, bread was the single most common image to reach all factions of society.

For the most part—the Biblical writers use the image of bread to entice and invite.

Enter stage right: Lady Wisdom.

“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

That is the invitation we receive in our reading this morning from the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs accomplishes something no other biblical book does: it simply compiles numerous short instructions for living an effective life on earth. While other books articulate profound theological truths and lengthy narratives Proverbs concerns itself completely with instructing people in the path of wisdom—that is, the path of growing closer to God, to the Divine—not through knowledge, but through insight, experience, curiosity and even love.

Lady Wisdom is, of course, the one whom the ancient divines and philosophers named as personified wisdom. Wisdom was known to the ancients as one who lived and reigned and dwelled with God—of one being with God, source from God, but not God. She has been described as noble, caring and just. One without blemish, beautiful, full of grace and truth.

Lady Wisdom, the Proverbs explain, was with God at the Creation. Before the springs were overflowing with water, before the mountains were settled in place, before God set the heavens or fixed the clouds or gave the sea its boundary, Wisdom was born. Her role in this wild creation is to rejoice in God’s whole world, delighting in mankind, enticing and inviting.

Lady Wisdom extends an invitation to a feast—a table set with savory breads and sweet wines—set with the most basic necessities, the most common of foods to signal to Creation that the banquet she prepares is not just for the wealthy and the power, nor just for the poor and powerless, nor only for those who believe fully, nor those for believe not at all, but all are invited to the table she sets on behalf of God. She sends our her servants to seek and invite, she even makes the call herself:

“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

The ancients knew that this wasn't a literal feast—of bread and wine—but a metaphor—a feast of God, sitting at that eternal table with God, life with God. Wisdom's own words tell us that the food and drink she prepares are metaphors for the banquet of life, and partaking of the meal—of the bread she has baked, the wine she has mixed, is connected with walking on the path of understanding, of fullness, of life.

Our text makes clear the benefits of following Lady Wisdom, of answering her invitation, gathering in her house and consuming what she has prepared—Bread. Life. Fullness.

But if we read on a bit in Proverbs, if we go a bit further than the text assigned for today allows, we are greeted by another invitation.

Enter stage left: Dame Folly.

Dame Folly, too, is beautiful and attractive. Though not, like Wisdom, born of God, she arrived on the scene on the tails of Wisdom. And Dame Folly invites us to her feast—of stale bread and water. But, with her feast we are promised a life of riches and power. A life where we rise to top, like a rich cream, while others stay low—far, beneath, away. Folly promises comfort and simplicity. She promises us ignorance to the ills of the world, freedom from our guilt and blind eyes to our offenses. She mimics Lady Wisdom and calls to the rich and the poor, the simple and not-so-simple, she entices and invites.

A choice between Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly. And while it seems to be an easy choice and obvious choice. It is a difficult one. A choice required of us every single day—and I am sad to say I have chosen Folly over Wisdom time and time again.

How comfortable Dame Folly has made it for me to turn off my television, close my facebook, ignore my texts, to give up, when the world begins to bubble over.

When another black person dies at the hands of the police and I choose to shrug my shoulders instead of becoming outraged, Dame Folly.

When I walk by Mickey, the homeless man near my home who asks for some food, and I ignore him. Don't even look into his eyes, then go into my apartment and throw away bags of uneaten, unused, expired food, Dame Folly.

When I continue to preach about and teach about and worship the God I cannot see, but hate my brothers and sisters who I can and do see, Dame Folly.

She throws an amazing party, she is quite the host. Dame Folly sits us at the finest table, where we are comfortable and unaffected—cushioned by our privilege, reclining our ignorance.

Lady Wisdom's invitation while wide and inclusive, it comes with a mighty task. For Lady Wisdom requires struggle, trial and error, sacrifice and sometimes even pain. For Lady Wisdom, life with God, with the Divine, the Holy, life with each other requires us to work. Because the bread she offers, this life with God, is life defined not by our own immature and selfish ways, but by the ways of God—ways of justice and mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

The bread Lady Wisdom offers, that life with God is not a feast in the future, when all wrongs will be made right, when the last be made first, but a feast here and now. With God, with each other, here and now. Bread offered in the midst of this messy and complicated life. It is a humbling invitation, a sobering invitation. Perhaps that is what Lady Wisdom meant when she wrote at the bottom of her invitation, “lay aside your immaturity, to live, to walk in the way of insight.”

It is not easy. But Lady Wisdom, though not God, is of God, and like God, Lady Wisdom’s invitation is a standing one, an open one. No matter how many times we turn to Dame Folly, sit at his table and feast on her stale bread and water, Lady Wisdom awaits us, baking fresh warm bread, mixing sweet wine. Inviting us to her table, to God’s table, inviting us to feast.

+ Thanks be to God. Amen.