

Proper 15B: John 6:51-58
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Chewing on Wisdom

A colleague of mine, who is a college chaplain, shares how a student, a young man of about 20 years, complained to him about his father's failing when it came to giving advice. "Your generation didn't tell us anything!" he asserted. "What are you talking about?" the chaplain asked. "When I was home last summer, I asked my father, 'I'm getting ready to go out on my own. Tell me what I need to do to have a happy life.' He responded to me with a bunch of gibberish, nonsense about how he was miserable in his job, about how he maybe made a mistake in marrying my mother, about how nobody had ever really understood him. It was pitiful."

You can sympathize with the young man. Like many young adults today, he recognizes the lack of guidance our society offers now when it comes to leading a good life, and his father's generation is no help. They had rebelled against the rules their parents imposed on them and vowed never to do to their kids what they hated having done to them. But it left their children like this student without any direction, without any rules *even to rebel against*.

To be sure, there are a plenty of people today who share that older attitude, who insist that "no one is going to tell me what to do." But there are others who would love to have someone give them insights into life and who can show them a path amid life's problems.

Now, many people think that's what religion is for, for providing moral structure and rules for life. And to be sure, fundamentalist religions—of Christian, Muslim, and secular varieties—are attractive to those who need structure in their lives, who need expectations spelled out clearly and definitively for them.

But approaching Christianity that way does it a grave disservice. For while there are some rules in the Bible, in places like Leviticus and Deuteronomy and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the fact is that most Sundays our Scripture readings consist not of rules but of stories, stories about God and people, about Jesus and his disciples. If you are looking for God to spell out the rules for life, most Sundays you'll be disappointed.

Rather than a shortcoming, though, what this says to me is that the Biblical authors recognized that rules, even God-given, divinely authorized rules, are never enough. For so many of the deep moral dilemmas of life, we need something more than rules.

For instance, the ancient philosopher Aristotle, who wrote a lot about morality, when he deals with lying and truth-telling, says that it is not enough simply to tell somebody the truth. Rather, that truth is best which is told to the right person, at the right time, for the right reasons. And of course, you can't come up with a rule for that. You have to use discernment and prudence—you have to have wisdom—to know the right time, right place, and right reason.

That is why, I think, the Early Church Fathers wrote so much about wisdom, prudence, and championed it as a virtue, sometime above all others. They understood that, while you can't always come up with a rule for every dilemma in life, if you are not going to make a mess of your life, you need a moral compass, some virtuous ability of discernment and guidance. You need wisdom.

But wisdom gets short shrift today. You hardly ever hear anyone talking about it in public discourse or even in private conversations. It is no longer seen as desirable, as something to seek after. I know a graduate student who for his master's thesis did a study of the mission statements of various American colleges and universities over the past hundred years. He noted that in the late 1800s, colleges and universities often used "wisdom" in their motto or statement of purpose. They said to young adults "come here and we will make you a wise person." But by the mid-20th century colleges and universities offered students not wisdom but "knowledge." They are no longer schools of virtue but have become "repositories of knowledge." In other words, colleges moved from saying that they would make you into a certain kind of person—a wise person—to giving you lots of information. The graduate student who did this study suggested that the day will come soon when colleges will advertise themselves with "come and study with us and we will dump on you huge amounts of data."

I don't think we are too far from that, given the attention given today to the powers and possibilities of "big data." We've been hearing about this, about "big data" in our class after worship on social media. But as is clear from those presentations, information, knowledge, know-how is one thing, but knowing how and even whether to employ that information is another. Those are not "data questions," those are moral questions.

In fact, as we are seeing in our class, the people and companies with access to the most information, the employees of social media companies, are often the most unscrupulous in using it, as they utilize our data, facts about us, to get us hooked on their services. It's clear from this that we don't need more facts. We don't need more information. What we are dying of is a lack of courage, a lack of vision, a lack of insight. In other words, we are dying for a lack of wisdom. What we need in government and in business, in the arts and in journalism, are not more informed leaders, but wiser leaders, leaders who have greater wisdom.

But even outside of those big societal issues, there are plenty of decisions that we must make in life—often the most important ones—that require more than facts, more than rules. They are not something you can devise a rule or write an algorithm for. Decisions like, Should I marry this person? Am I ready to have a child? Is this move good for me and my family? Will this promotion bring me greater job satisfaction? Should I play it safe or take a risk? These are questions whose answers cannot be reduced to rules. They require wisdom.

The thing about wisdom, though, the kind I am talking about, the kind discussed in the Bible, is that it is not something that you can buy at a store or acquire through classes at a university. In the Bible, wisdom is more than a concept or an idea. Rather, wisdom is personal. In the book of Proverbs, for instance, wisdom is described as a virtuous woman. Wisdom was God's first creation, and she was with God at the foundation of the world. Indeed, she, Wisdom, was built into the fabric of reality because Wisdom helped make the world. To have wisdom is thus to

know what is real, to know what is really going on in the world, and to know how to work with that reality, to work “with the grain” of the universe, so to speak. And in today’s reading Lady Wisdom reaches out, beckons, calling those turned off by the pursuit of short-lived pleasures, inviting them to know the deeper reality, to sup at her banquet table, and feast on her bread and wine.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus takes the same role as wisdom. He is the Word of God, who was with God in the beginning, and he is the *logos*, the pattern, the order, in which everything was made. That is to say, Jesus is not just a “wise teacher,” he didn’t just show us wisdom; he embodied it. He is wisdom that came from “on high,” wisdom made flesh. And in today’s Gospel, he calls out to people, like Lady Wisdom, inviting them to eat at his table, that is, to learn his ways, promising us that if we eat of him, take him in, integrating his ways into lives, we will not just be happy, but will be eternally happy, will have “eternal life.”

It's important to point out here that, according to John, “eternal life” is not just something we will have in the future, after we die, living forever in heaven (as it is often understood). Eternal life is something we already have. Eternal life is how Jesus describes the kind of life he offers believers now. This life is “eternal” not on account of how long we will live, but on account of the quality of that life we have. Our biological life may be long or short, but with Jesus, our life is enriched, empowered, filled up so much that it cannot be contained in this life but flows over into the next. This is what comes about when we stick with Jesus, when we eat of him and take life from his teachings.

That may seem like an odd metaphor, likening learning Jesus’ teachings to chewing on meat, but I’m not the one who came up with it. The prophet Isaiah, hundreds of years before Jesus, describes the sound a lion makes over its prey, with the Hebrew word *hagah*, which means to meditate. The idea being that a person acts over the Scriptures the same way a lion acts over its catch. They purr and growl in pleasure of taking in what will make them more themselves, strong, lithe, swift. Those who follow God delight in his teachings, like a lion delights in his catch. This is quite different from merely reading God’s word, or thinking about it. This kind of meditating is not so much an intellectual process, figuring out meanings, as it is a physical one, hearing and rehearsing these words as we sound them again, letting the sounds sink into our muscles and bones. This is meditation as mastication. We are to eat up the Word of God, feasting on Jesus, savoring him, integrating him into our very being, assimilating his ways into the tissues of our lives.

Now, it should be clear already, the wisdom Jesus offers is not the same as the wisdom offered by the world. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul takes what passes for wisdom in his day, the esteemed ivory tower wisdom of Greek philosophy and turns it inside out. “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,” he writes, “but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor 1:22-25).

This kind of wisdom is obviously not something that you can get from the street vendor or even the Greek academies. It comes from God. The letter of James counsels: “If any of you lacks

wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” (James 1:5) Perhaps this is why colleges and universities stopped offering wisdom. While knowledge may be attainable with hard work and striving, wisdom comes only as a gift of God.

Jesus is the wisdom of God, wisdom not just personified, but made into a person, and he invites us to a banquet, calling us to feast on his wisdom, to masticate—I mean, meditate—on him.

We in the church have talked a lot about Jesus as the “Truth.” And indeed he is. But we live, we are told, in a “post-truth world.” For us to “make Jesus known” in our world, we need to present Jesus not only as the Truth but also as the Wisdom of God, to present Jesus as the way to live a good, holy, happy, eternal life. This is central to our mission today, and we neglect it at our peril.

Aaron Milavec, speaking of the church, warns that “Any community that cannot artfully and effectively pass on its cherished way of life as a program for divine wisdom and graced existence cannot long endure. Any way of life that cannot be clearly specified, exhibited, and differentiated from the alternative modes operative within the surrounding culture is doomed to growing insignificance and gradual assimilation.” That is to say, any church that cannot show those outside a better, more graced-filled way to live, will collapse. And they deserve to fail.

Which is why I am so delighted to welcome this morning two new members, Arielle and Avery, into our church. We are blessed to have them, and we hope they will be blessed by being among us. We have the opportunity, and a responsibility to them, a responsibility to teach them the wisdom of God, to show them how to live gracefully, to walk with them as they grow up, teaching them Jesus’ ways, to offer them the bread of heaven, and to share with them in the joys of eternal life. I have every confidence you are up to the challenge!