

COME FEAST ON THE BREAD OF LADY WISDOM

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 18, 2024

In the last four weeks while Deacon Rich and I have been preaching, we have faced a unique challenge. It's a challenge will still be hanging around for one more week! You see, for five Sundays in a row the gospel reading in the lectionary is from John chapter six. And it's a long chapter. Five weeks spent working our way through sixty-nine verses. Usually, if you run across a chapter this long, it will shift topics at least once or twice. But that's not the case here in John chapter six. The focus continues to remain on one topic, and if I were to give you a little time to think about it you would probably guess, bread.

Chapter six verse one began five weeks ago. We first encountered the word bread in verse five where Jesus said: "Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?" It is the story of his feeding of the five thousand. Then, slowly, we work our way through all the bread passages week by week, until finally ending next Sunday when, in verse fifty-eight, Jesus says "I am the true bread that came down from heaven...Anyone who eats this bread will not die." Bread bread bread bread bread. Sixty-nine verses and five weeks talking about bread. That's a lot of bread! The word is repeated sixteen times in this chapter.

Jesus speaks of himself as the true bread of God that gives life to the world. He says: "I am the bread," "I am the bread of life," "I am the living bread," "this bread is my flesh". This past Monday I wrestled over how to approach this topic, yet again, hopefully from a different angle. After all, if I had blathered on and on, on the same topic every week, you would have all gotten up and left! So, what else could God want to say from John chapter six? The answer finally came to me yesterday.

But guess what? I still have one more week to talk about bread! Aren't you lucky?! If I was really smart, I would have planned these weeks better. Maybe I would have shared these five weeks with the rest of the clergy. Let's see, Fr. Joe preaches about bread on July 28. Deacon Michael takes over August 4, then followed by Deacon Rich August 11, and Fr. John August 18. Rats! Unfortunately, Deacon John is still out of town! If he ends up watching this service, I'm sure he'll be breathing a sigh of relief that he was not around to get his turn at bread!

Well, are you ready to find out what I came up with yesterday to say about bread? I'm going to talk about metaphorical bread. A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that bread is one of many staple foods. It is used to provide the majority of nutrition in many parts of the world. But there is a kind of "bread," a kind of sustenance that many in our world have always hungered for. God has placed this hunger within us. Much of the Christian Church as well has been longing for this bread. And yet, they may not have even known that this bread would truly satisfy them. So, what is it? It is the bread of true spiritual wisdom. And, although familiar to those in the east, the wisdom traditions are not well known to most of us of European heritage. There have been various cultures and religions and traditions throughout the world that have found this spiritual wisdom, have fed on it, and allowed it to sustain them. It is found in Judaism and Orthodox Christianity and Islam and Hinduism and Buddhism.

Today's Psalm speaks to us of this wisdom. The Message Bible translates the passage this way: "Lady Wisdom has built and furnished her home; it's supported by seven hewn timbers. The banquet meal is ready to be served: lamb roasted, wine poured out, table set with silver and flowers. Having dismissed her serving maids, Lady Wisdom goes to town, stands in a prominent place, and invites everyone within sound of her voice: 'Are you

confused about life, don't know what's going on? Come with me, oh come, have dinner with me! I've prepared a wonderful spread—fresh-baked bread, roast lamb, carefully selected wines. Leave your impoverished confusion and *live!* Walk up the street to a life with meaning.'" You see, Lady wisdom is speaking to us, telling us: "Oh, my children, come and eat! I have prepared a sumptuous feast that will nourish your soul."

What is this feast that Lady Wisdom provides? And how do we find our way to wisdom's table? Why is this wisdom so vital for us if we are to experience life in its fullest? I don't have enough time to answer all these questions. Kabir Helminski a Sufi wisdom teacher speaks words that apply to many who are hungering for this wisdom, including many in the Christian Church. Listen carefully to his brief words: "We are knee-deep in a river, searching for water." Let me repeat it: "We are knee-deep in a river, searching for water." Try to picture this sorry soul, standing knee deep in a river, feeling its cool touch against her skin, and yet she is still wondering where the water can be found. And here it is, all around her! You and I are knee-deep and surrounded by this spiritual wisdom, but we may not even recognize that it is there.

Wisdom words and wisdom literature; poetry, aphorisms, parables, riddles, paradoxes; words and stories that hold more than one simple and easy meaning. These are deep waters, and yet, they are all around us. But if we don't see it and dig into it, it has little chance of transforming us.

As Christians, you and I know some of this wisdom literature. It is found in our Bible; the book of Wisdom in the Apocrypha, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and some of the later Psalms. These books were written around the time of Israel's exile in Babylon in 586 – 546 B.C. And that's significant. Because it was during this exile that the Jewish people were heavily influenced by

Babylonian culture, and more importantly, by the Babylonian wisdom school which was one of the most well known in the world of that time.

This wisdom tradition was brought back to Israel and was used to train up many wisdom masters who were called *moshel* meshalim. The greatest of all wisdom master to ever live was Jesus of Nazareth. Author Cynthia Bourgeault wrote: “the Israelite culture was blown wide open by its second profound encounter with Wisdom in the person of Jesus Christ. Those who could recognize him saw him for what he was: a *moshel meshalim*, a master of Wisdom, teaching a science of transformation that was both ancient and timeless.” Although you probably hadn’t thought of Jesus as a wisdom master, the people of that time who listened to him immediately recognized it. He said many things that could be understood plainly on one level, but many missed their deeper layers of meaning, paradoxical things; like, the first shall be last and the last first; and, if you want life, you must lose it. Jesus, the divine wisdom teacher opened the eyes of those who were willing to see. And these people in turn went out opening the eyes of others. The community of people of the way grew exponentially.

Jesus calls you and me to walk again this wisdom path, to feed on this bread. But this wisdom path takes effort to find. Cynthia Bourgeault states the problem this way: “perhaps the problem is not that our vision has grown too small but that we are using too little of ourselves to see”. Over the centuries the Christian Church slowly lost its sight, it lost its foundation in the wisdom teaching of Jesus. The institutional church slowly grew cold and secular. It began to lose its fire and connection to Jesus their divine wisdom master. But thankfully individuals who could see would occasionally rise up, bringing reform and gathering followers to them, reigniting the spark.

It was during the Enlightenment Era that the spark was nearly snuffed out. The fire of divine wisdom in the Christian Church grew cold. And yet, it has begun to see a reawakening in our day as individuals and communities seek for deeper truth, seek with their mind and body and soul.

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