

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 15

RCL Lectionary, Year B

Proverbs 9:1-6 / Psalm 34:9-14 / Ephesians 5:15-20 / John 6:51-58

August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

## Children of Wisdom

by **The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

So I have to wonder how many in Church of Our Saviour, and indeed how many in Southern Marin, would raise their hands when the call of lady wisdom comes in today's reading from Proverbs – come all you who are simple! How many of us would claim to be simple in our sophisticated, erudite, and often well-endowed part of the world? Probably not many!

But I still think the place of wisdom in our world in the West remains fragile, at best. We often view our teachers more as purveyors of information rather than the deep truths that build our humanity. We turn to our vast resources of technology and wealth often with an eye more to utility than solidarity. And we live in a society that tends to undervalue the intellectual, the thoughtful, the quietude of careful and care-filled living in a contingent world. Our nuclear family households have at times marginalized the place of the elder as a keeper of wisdom, and we undervalue our most experienced members while placing huge value on the new, the glamorous, and often, therefore, the inexperienced. And then we at times wonder at our own propensity for shallow things: for food that does not satisfy; for drink that does not quench our thirst for more abundant life. For our tendency to get caught up in ways that the writer to the Ephesians warned against so long ago.

I wonder, too, at the recent push in our education system for more testing of basic skills. Wisdom tells us that there is more to living in creation than the standard three "R's." Do we risk sacrificing wisdom's character in our children - fidelity in hardship, patience in adversity, solidarity with the weak and ill, and that lively insight that comes with true wonder - on the altar of standardized tests? We need children not just able to compete and survive. We need children of thought, character, and sound judgment.

We need children of wisdom.

One of our biggest challenges, or at least it seems to me, is that wisdom is not quantifiable in our carefully measured scientific, economic, and legal multi-verse. We cannot market or dispense wisdom and measure its effect, but most of us who encounter it know it. We know it because it gives our lives depth and breadth, meaning and connection. We know lady wisdom by the nurture she offers us. We know her in the ways she invites us in: quietly, reverently, affectionately, patiently. She speaks only when we are ready to listen. She steps in to our lives when we are baffled or befuddled. She asks questions when we feel certain.

So wisdom calls us.

At first glance, wisdom in our Judeo-Christian tradition seems to reside quietly in scripture, nestled in sections between the dramatic biblical histories and the fiery prophets, the psalms, and the Gospels and letters. But just who is she – this almost enigmatic figure who calls from the high places in town, who spreads a table with hospitality?

For the ancient culture in which today's verses from Proverbs were penned, wisdom was both practical and truly precious: A rare gift that could not be captured or held, like the wind. But one essential for humanity to breathe. Most mainstream scholars in the West argue, therefore, that lady wisdom in these verses in metaphor – a personification unique to this age-old poetry. But the Eastern Christian tradition, especially with Byzantine roots, honors *Hagia Sophia*, Holy Wisdom, a feminine image of Christ.

The seven pillars mentioned in this passage points to the ancient image of the pillars of creation. Wisdom has hewn the very foundations of the cosmos. She is spoken elsewhere in Proverbs about being present at the very beginning like the *logos*, the Word, the Christ:

“ . . .when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race. “ (Proverbs 8:29-31)

And so, this lady wisdom is the Christ, an elder God who was at the beginning and knows our ends. An intimate God who knows us as a mother knows her own children. An incarnate God who knows our hunger and who calls us to table.

Again, like Jesus' hearers in today's Gospel, we are called into a unique wisdom teaching about the nature of Christ's gift for us – a self-offering that the rest of the world might view as foolishness. Jesus' words to us in today's Gospel about offering us his flesh is also demands a wise ear and heart for us to understand -- not a simple one or an unholy literalism that claims at times to be wise. Our Eucharistic Christianity is, in a sense, what some have called a Wisdom Christianity, one which we carry for our children as it holds the key to our values as a people born of Spirit in baptism and about the business of helping heal a broken world. It is a practice we keep – in many respects simple – simple as bread and wine, broken and shared. Simple gifts, perhaps, for simple people. But lest we forget, there is a wisdom in simplicity. . .especially in such a complex age as ours.

Today's reading from Proverbs highlights that the table set before us each Sunday is not simply a table to assuage guilt; nor is it simply a memorial to remind us of Jesus' redeeming work two millennia ago; nor is it merely a place to re-charge us spiritually for another week. It is so much more. It is a table of wisdom -- the wisdom borne by our tradition; the living and eternal wisdom that blooms in our lives where they come in touch with something and truly Someone timeless; the wisdom that is found in following after this Christ, who calls us as lady wisdom to the table to partake. And from that, we draw meaning, purpose, and a deeper sense of place in God's great vision of a world borne anew, a world where wisdom walks freely amongst her children.