

8.18.2024 Pentecost 13

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

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

“Walk in the way of wisdom”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today’s text from Proverbs reads, “*Lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight.*” Wisdom is described as a path or way leading to insight. The English word, “insight,” of course, means “inner sight,” the ability to understand and grasp a mystery that is not clearly visible and often hidden from view.

Insight into sacred reality is not simply about academic training and learning; it is the journey into a holy mystery that must be lived to be known. We live into faith in Jesus Christ.

Nowhere is this clearer than in “the bread of life” narrative in John’s gospel. In saying, “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven,*” Jesus was also challenging the religious elite, who, for all their training and learning, had not gained insight into themselves or God. The religious leaders were scandalized, asking, “*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” Their question concerns a God who shares our flesh and blood in order that humanity might gain insight into themselves and the mystery of God.

A unique feature of John’s gospel is that, rather than referring to his “body and blood,” Jesus uses the words, “flesh and blood.” This may not seem like a very big difference, but within the context of John’s gospel, it is significant. John consistently uses the word “flesh” to describe the incarnation and work of Jesus. For example, John 1:14 reads, “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth and we have beheld his glory.*”

The words, “body and blood,” are part of the Synoptic gospels and Paul’s letters, but they are wholly absent from Jesus’ language about himself in John’s gospel. We might be forgiven, of course, for hearing in the words, “flesh and blood,” a reference to the Eucharist, yet Jesus’ words about himself in John are pointing elsewhere. In speaking about his “flesh and blood” Jesus is pointing toward the mystery of his incarnation: Jesus is pointing to his cross and resurrection.

Jesus’ words, “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh,*” are contrasted with his being lifted up on the cross, and his being raised up after three days (see Jn. 3:14). This movement of descent and ascent points to the mystery of his flesh and blood – his

incarnation, cross, and resurrection offering eternal life as life for the world.

And so, we arrive at the central issue of the religious leaders' dispute with Jesus: "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*" This is the scandal of the incarnation of God: that God would come down from heaven to die on a cross for human beings.

Jesus' language seemed foolish to religious leaders and scandalous to Greek intellectual thought. People had been trained to think of God as immutable and without change, as impassable and without emotion. In the ancient world, it was distasteful to consider that God might become human, taking on our "flesh and blood," the very sign of human weakness and changeability. As human beings, our flesh and blood undergo change as we age, grow old, and die. We suffer illness and addiction, grief at the death of loved ones, challenges such as the loss of work, enduring regrets, and profound loneliness. Daily, our flesh and blood ride upon waves of emotion. For many, it remains unthinkable that God would take on the frailty of our flesh.

Yet this seeming foolishness is the wisdom of God's love for this world. Jesus dwells in our flesh and blood that his eternal life might be ours. As Jesus said to Martha, "*Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die*" (Jn. 11:25-26). The scandal of a God who shares our flesh and blood, dying for humanity, continues today as we struggle intellectually to accept this mystery of God's eternal love.

Paul says it well, "*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (1 Cor. 1:18). Contrasting God's foolish wisdom with the common wisdom of the world, Paul asks, "*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar?... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*" (1 Cor. 1:20).

Two millennia later, humanity continues to struggle with God. In its infinite wisdom, humanity continues to make war upon its neighbors. Insisting we know better; humanity continues to use guns to kill those whom they hate and wish to silence. Human beings continue to distort the intellect they have been given by using their strength and knowledge to oppress and destroy those who seem different. We do these things because we no longer see the divine image of God in the flesh and blood of our neighbor.

Paul's question continues to ring out: "*Where is the one who is wise?*" Though we have progressed far beyond the people of antiquity with scientific and technological knowledge, we have lost insight into the sacred image of our humanity. Where is the wisdom of our own age? Paul's words to the Ephesians, "*Be careful, then, how you live...making the most of the time,*"

should give us pause about our own use of time. Will the times in which we live be described as wise or foolish by future generations?

I invite you to look at the cross above the high altar. It has been turned to reveal a mystery always hidden from us in plain sight: the God who suffered in the flesh and blood of our humanity, offering his flesh as bread for the life of the world.

Before we celebrate the Eucharist today, I invite you to meditate upon the cross, asking yourself, "How have I used my flesh and blood, my very life, for the lives of others?"

As you look at your hands, ask yourself, "How have I used my time and the work of my hands, my flesh and blood, for Christ and for my neighbor?"

As you meditate upon the cross, hear anew to Jesus' words in the bread and the wine, "*Given for you.*" He is the living mystery of God given for you.

Jesus is the living bread that came down from heaven for the life of the world. In believing and living into this holy mystery, you will come to know yourself and your neighbor.

Receive him in faith. Serve him in your flesh and blood. Give yourself for your neighbor.

*The one who eats of this bread will live forever. Amen.*