

**Proper 15 B August 19, 2018**

**Potatoes, Eggs, and Coffee**

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When I was on vacation, I heard a very good parable or story that exemplifies wisdom. It begins with a son who went to his mother to complain and vent about the many hardships he was facing in his life. One of his complaints was he felt that as soon as one adversity seemed to be resolved another quickly took its place. His mother listened quietly to him, and when he had finished, instead of telling him what to do, she invited him to come into the kitchen with her. In the kitchen she filled three large pots with water, put them on the stove and turned the burners up to high, and the two of them waited in silence for the water to boil in the three pots. Once the water was boiling, the mother took several potatoes and put them in one pot. Then she took several eggs and put them in another pot. In the third pot of boiling water she put in a handful of freshly ground coffee beans. Then she waited in silence while the son impatiently wondered what his mother was up to.

After 20 minutes, the mother drained the potatoes from the first pot, carefully removed the eggs from the second pot, and ladled an aromatic cup of coffee from the third pot. Then the mother asked her son what he saw. He answered the obvious: potatoes, eggs, and coffee.

His mother, of course, replied there is much more to it. And went on to say, the potatoes went into the boiling water hard and strong and came out soft and weak. The eggs went into the boiling water fragile and thin and came out hard and strong, tough to break. Then she gave her son the cup of coffee and asked him to smell it and taste it. For the first time that day, the son smiled when he held the aromatic cup of coffee to face and took a sip of the delicious brew. The coffee, his mother said, transformed the water into something that not only tastes good, but for some offers comfort, a treat, a pick me up, and can even make someone smile.

Each are options for how to handle adversity. The terrible truth is we can't do much about adversity in itself – it is often a part of life and life has a way of happening that is often beyond our control. But what we can control is how we handle adversity, and that is what matters.

The parable then asked the question, which one do you want to be? And that is a good personal way to hear this modern parable. For me, however, when I heard this parable I was struck with its beautiful portrayal of wisdom and was grateful for the

reminder of what wisdom is: a gift from God, as we heard in our first lesson from the Old Testament, and it is a way to live, as we heard in the second reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. But it was today's Gospel reading that made me remember this parable, because today's Gospel reminds us that Jesus is far more than a teacher of wisdom, he is the very embodiment of wisdom.

We make a grave mistake if we think of wisdom as the same thing as information, data, facts, or knowledge. Wisdom isn't experience either. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament does not teach wisdom as any of those things. Wisdom is not knowing. Wisdom, according to scholars like Walter Bruggeman is discernment and reflection of life, the world God created, and God's intention for what God created. This includes human beings, who are made in God's image. Commentators like the Rt. Rev. Taylor Porter, Bishop of Western North Carolina, tell us he understands wisdom as recognizing, accepting and embracing life in all its complexities and, in his words, messiness, instead of attempting to control the world and the people in it.

Both understandings of wisdom can point us to today's Gospel where Jesus is still in the middle of his bread of life discourse. Only, today's section of that long piece of John's Gospel, has Jesus stating something very difficult to hear and understand, especially if we take his words literally. Those words where Jesus overtly insists he is the bread of life, and if that isn't weird enough, he also stated that eating his flesh and drinking his blood is how he will abide with those who do so. It's very explicit language, even in the original Greek, where the word translated "eat" can also be translated "gnaw" or "chew".

Some of you might be saying, "yuck, that sounds gross." It does. It can sound like cannibalism. It also sounds like Jesus is contradicting Jewish law stating Jews could not ingest blood, which is why they have a special way of preparing the meat they eat that ensures there is no residual blood in it. But scholars and theologians assure us Jesus is not talking about either of those things. Instead, these words of Jesus are how the author of John's Gospel is showing us who Jesus is: the embodiment of holy wisdom.

In Proverbs, one of the books of wisdom literature in the Bible, there are times when wisdom is personified as a woman who prepares food and sends word to people to "eat my bread and drink my wine" as a way to "lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in my insight." You can read it for yourself in Proverbs 9. Many theologians believe the words of Jesus in John's Gospel today point to this teaching and others like it in Proverbs and is just one example of many of the ways Jesus showed us he is God's presence in the world. God who became flesh and dwelt among us, as the author of John also wrote. Its wisdom personified because Jesus did indeed come into a world

that was far from the garden of Eden God created back in the beginning of the Bible. Jesus came into a world that was full of corruption, full of evil. He came into a world that was as unfair then as it is now. He came into a world that was complicated, complex, and messy. Instead of trying to take over, wisdom embraced the world for all its adversity, and its beauty, and like those ground coffee beans, did something amazing which he offers it to us. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has redeemed the messiness and complexity of the world, and through the sacrament of Holy Communion, enters into the very complexity and messiness of each and every one of us. Wisdom enters into our mouths and we chew it and swallow it and it becomes part of our muscle and sinews and bones and our hearts and minds and souls so that it cannot be separated from our physical or mental or spiritual being. Jesus becomes part of us, because that is how much God loves us.

Because God knows the world is complex, complicated, unfair, unjust, and messy. And God knows we don't know everything about it yet, sometimes the beauty and wonder of it still manages to surprise and delight and humble us. That is one of the values of wisdom, it not only helps us recognize beauty, and God present among us, it gives us humility to learn, and grow. Hopefully, we are growing ever closer into the dream God has for us and for this world, as messy and complex and beautiful and wonderful as we all are.

But sometimes, we forget. Sometimes the church forgets. Sometimes we slip back into our arrogance and listen to the voices of power and greed instead of the wisdom of a mother who put three pots on to boil. Now, those voices of power and greed love to convince us that because we are filled with God's love, God's grace, because we are forgiven, it doesn't really matter what we do. The rules don't apply. And that is when terrible atrocities happen. That is when sin gets so bad evil enters in and people are used, abused, and hurt. I don't have to describe those kinds of things to you. You hear about them all the time. The failings of people to love God and each other. The failings of institutions to live into their mission and intention. Whether it's the priests who abused children or the man who killed his wife and children, or the corporation that shuts down a local independent business that provided local jobs, or the hurt family member who tries to ruin the reputation of another, we can probably all think of atrocities that require confession and reconciliation. And forgiveness. And we are not so very good at these things. That is why we need to eat and chew that bread of life, Jesus, because Jesus is not afraid of the evils of this world, so we can confess and face them.

That is why our liturgy includes the confession, and we all say that confession together. And after we confess, we are reminded of God's forgiveness, and our call to forgive. The purpose of the confession is to remind us that all of us here today are

complex individuals, and our parish is a complex community, and sometimes we forget. Confession is also the invitation to turn away from sin, to remember whose we are, and far from being excused from any accountability, we are, as Paul reminded those followers of Jesus in Ephesus in our second reading today, called to live into the life Jesus and wisdom call us. Which means forgiving, even the tough stuff. And to give God thanks, maybe even to give God thanks for the adversities we face. Perhaps by doing so we might take the first step in accepting the world as it is instead of longing for the fantasy we want it to be, so that instead of becoming boiled down to soft mush, or hard boiled into someone uncaring, we can do the work with God to be so fully present that through us God can transform any adversity into something as deliciously aromatic as freshly brewed coffee on a chilly morning, something powerful enough to make the world a bit less corrupt, a bit less wasteful, a bit less uncaring, and a bit more like the world of love for all people God created in the first place.