

lec 20B, August 18, 2024

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

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Today we're invited to the table, where Lady Wisdom has laid out a feast! It's a story about hospitality in the kingdom of God.

Eating together is something most congregations do often, and as we do so, we stand in a long line of those who have gone before us. It's no exaggeration to say that the whole Christian church on earth is built on table fellowship. Pastor and teacher Fred Craddock wrote that eating and drinking together is the most important act of Christian community in the whole New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Sharing food is a sign of healthy life together—show me a congregation that doesn't like to eat together, and I'll show you a congregation that's in big trouble.

In Proverbs, Wisdom sets out a banquet and invites everyone to eat—food and drink that nourishes the body and feeds the hungry heart, too.

Here's the Proverbs reading as it is translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

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 the 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 condition and live!  
Walk up the street to a life with meaning.”

It's a party that is—and isn't—like our own festive meals.

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<sup>1</sup> *Preaching through the Christian Year*, 380.

Lady Wisdom does things that most hosts will recognize. Like Lady Wisdom, when you are getting ready for a special dinner, you set the table with extra care—unfolding a table cloth that’s usually in a drawer, taking out some fancy bowls or platters that you don’t use every day, maybe putting out candles and flowers. And then there’s the menu—usually something that you wouldn’t have every day, but something special to match the occasion.

But when I hear this story of Lady Wisdom getting ready for dinner, and think about getting ready for company myself, I notice something missing here...that hostess anxiety that can strike right before the guests arrive. I love to gather people around a table, but I’m always nervous before they come, especially when it’s people I’ve invited for the first time. A few minutes before they’re supposed to arrive, I look around and worry about how my house will look through their eyes. Maybe they’ll notice the stains in the carpet, or the paint peeling in the kitchen, or the corner of the coffee table with tooth marks in it—bad dog!

These anxieties can sometimes make me a tiny bit unreasonable. Like the time I had a major meltdown when a placemat went missing and I didn’t have enough to set the table with matching linens. And yes, I did accuse the husband of making off with it (why anyone would do that I’m not sure, but at the time he seemed like the likely perpetrator. He was later proved innocent.)

Okay, so that was extreme but I think it reveals the vulnerability that come with hospitality. The space we inhabit reveals a lot about us, and not only about how well we can set a table. When your guests come to your house and browse the bookshelves, or notice what’s hanging on the walls, or see your family photographs, they’ll get to know you better. Which is what you wanted when you invited them, or did you?

We long to be fully known—and yet we’re also afraid of being seen.

Hospitality is risky. It’s sharing our food, and even more than that, sharing ourselves. Every invitation brings the risk of rejection. And every acceptance draws us into the risks of vulnerable love. Whenever you let

someone come closer, to see you more clearly, and know you more fully, you risk being hurt.

Lady Wisdom is a risk-taking hostess, in more ways than one. She sends her serving girls away right when you think she would want the help. And more than that, did you hear how she assembles her guests? She just goes on down to the corner and starts inviting everyone who's there—"everyone within the sound of her voice."

Who does that??

I read a recent story of people who did go with Lady Wisdom's approach to the guest list, at their weddings!

Ah yes, the guest list, one of the first challenges of planning a wedding. Whether you're going for a small intimate wedding or a major blow-out, you're going to have to make choices. If it's family only, does that include second cousins? Your sister's wife's adult children? The uncle who isn't speaking to your mother? If you're planning for a few hundred people, does that mean the groom's whole fraternity, the bride's softball team, a plus-one for all your friends?

Once those negotiations have been concluded, you send out the invitations. But the struggle isn't over. These days, guests have gone rogue, even at special events like weddings. You invite people and they won't commit until the last minute. Or they bring along people you didn't invite. Or they say they'll come, and they don't show up.

The New York Times covered the story of couples who have taken action when confronted with a lot of last minute cancellations. Facing hefty charges for empty seats at their wedding dinners, they filled those seats with open invitations posted on Facebook. At one wedding, 45 strangers came to celebrate the event, replacing those delinquent guests. The bride explained, "With the cost per plate, for those seats to go empty was just not acceptable. They didn't know me, but they showed up and participated and got to know our friends and family and danced the night away with us."

Since then, she made friends with some of them, accepted invitations to two of their weddings and even officiated at one.<sup>2</sup>

So maybe we have something to learn from Lady Wisdom. But I'm guessing most of us won't go with her approach for our lower-stake events.

Hospitality is risky. It costs us something. It makes us vulnerable--and in our weakness we share Christ's own power, the power of love.

Lady Wisdom's invitation is to dinner, and more. It's an invitation to a life that matters. An invitation to the life that really is life.

Jesus calls us to that life in the gospel of John, in today's strange and disturbing words. This is God with us, the bread that is the life of the world--bread given to sustain us. Bread that becomes part of us, as we take it in our mouths, chew it, swallow it with a sip of wine. Eat this bread, and live forever--an extravagant claim, from Jesus who calls us into eternal life that has already begun, right here, right now.

We come here every Sunday to eat at Christ's table—set with flowers, and candles, and fine linens. There's a place for everyone at that table.

Welcome to God's radical hospitality. Come to the party, and live.

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<sup>2</sup> "You're a Wedding Crasher? I'll Get You Sone Cake," New York Times, May 15, 2022.