

**To partake of wisdom**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 16, 2015.

*Lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of insight.*

*Proverbs 9: 6*

In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a wise and mature woman who maintains a large home with seven pillars. This portion of the Bible's wisdom literature is a collection of admonitions and exhortations as a teacher addressing her students. Its main message is that we are to be fed with wisdom to gain insight into the possibilities that exist within each of us.

Wisdom prepares a banquet of good wine and food to nourish those who partake at her table. She calls the unwise and immature to feast at her banquet table for nourishment in gaining maturity and insight. Her invitation is particularly important to those who are short on common sense and are headed in the wrong direction. To partake at the table of wisdom is to be provided with the nourishment of the right truths and values for making right choices.

Wisdom that is born out of maturity comes in stages. We show maturity when we climb out of the sandbox and leave the toys in the playroom and get out on the playing field to learn teamwork, fairness and sportsmanship. It is on the fields of friendly strife that we learn to give our very best as a team and accept occasional defeat with the determination to do better. We enter another level of maturity in school and later in the working world when we live by the virtues of fairness and honesty in business dealings. That others may not play by the same rules is no excuse for giving up our own values of honesty and integrity. When we make the most important decision of our lives in choosing a life partner, wisdom helps us not only in choosing the right person but also in being the right person.

It is painful to watch those who make obvious wrong choices in their lives against the advice of everyone. They will take a job for which they are ill prepared or marry the wrong person with full knowledge of their unsuitability or make foolhardy investments that cost them dearly. Strangely for them, making a decision against all advice to the contrary is a way of expressing their individuality and independence. Using poor judgment is part of a pattern that reinforces low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence.

The qualities of wisdom and civility are necessary for us to live and work together. These qualities are put to the test when we disagree. It is said that a true test of our character is how we behave in a quarrel. It is in the heat of an argument that it is easy to say things we don't mean and later regret. It is a mark of maturity to be in dissent without creating dissension.

I was a student in the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge at the height of the civil rights movement. The attention of the nation was focused on guaranteeing that all Americans will have their basic rights of citizenship in voting, housing, education and public accommodations. One of my seminary classmates, Jonathan Daniels gave his life for the cause in Selma, Alabama and is now commemorated on the church calendar on August 14. It was not his nature to be confrontational, but he could not stand aside when he saw African Americans being treated as second-class citizens. The deputy sheriff who shot and killed Jonathan was put on trial for murder and was acquitted on grounds of self-defense by a jury of his peers, twelve white men. It was a travesty of justice. When the sheriff was interviewed thirty years later he showed no remorse and said he would do it again. Now, fifty years later our nation is still rife with racial tension with people being killed on the streets with the majority being African Americans. It seems as if little or nothing has changed.

The central marks of Christian character are integrity and wholeness. There should be no missing pieces in who we are and where we stand. The difference between reputation and character is that reputation is what people think of us and character is what God knows of us. There are three aspects of our inner character. The first is what others see and know in us. The second is who we think we are and the third is who we really are. A simple test of our character is how we describe the character of others. To demean the character of others reveals far more about us than about them.

The intent in developing Christian character is to grow in maturity, insight, integrity, conscientiousness, reliability, authenticity, transparency, civility and kindness. These characteristics are more valuable than any earthly accomplishments because in the end what God looks for in us is the strength of character that enables us to do the right thing at the right time and for the right reason.

The wisdom of God is best revealed in the person and life of Christ. As we partake of the elements of bread and wine, we become one with him and pray to grow in wisdom and the knowledge of God. Jesus as the Living Bread of Life is greater than the manna that sustained his ancestors in their journey in the wilderness. When we partake of the bread of heaven we are encouraged in the wisdom and truth that sustains us for eternity. As we become one with Christ we also become one with each other as members of his body, the church. In the traditional language of the Book of Common Prayer we are “made one body with him that he may dwell in us, and we in him.” Book of Common Prayer, page 336.

In partaking of these elements of bread and wine, we are lifted from everyday concerns to a vision of who we are and what we can become. God’s love for us is far greater than any evil that we do. The significance of the bread and wine in the Eucharist is far more than the flesh and blood of Christ. When we feast at the banquet of wisdom we give thanks to God for what has been done for us in Christ. Our response is to live the example of his life; a life lived always for others.