

“Power Food — Part II ”

Last Sunday we heard the story of Elijah who ate rock-baked cake and water and then ***“went in the strength of that food forty day and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.”*** That food was provided to position Elijah for a miraculous encounter with God. It was an encounter that would change not only Elijah’s life (because it changed Elijah’s mind and heart); it was an encounter that changed the course of Israel’s history, and turned the chosen people away from following the Baals to true worship of Yahweh.

I tried to connect that food consumed by Elijah to the Bread of Life of which Jesus has been speaking for the past several weeks in this sixth chapter of John. That connection continues this morning, as we hear Jesus announce: ***“my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”***

Some years ago, a pastor in the Ohio District presented to the District Pastors Conference a paper on the Bread of Life discourse in which he insisted that the chapter we have been hearing for the past three weeks has nothing to do with Holy Communion . . . I think more than anything, these words of Jesus emphasize just how connected to the Eucharist these words are, and underscores a central facet of Lutheran teaching about the Sacrament: ***“my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.”*** Not mere symbol, true food and drink . . . such that, when we eat of it, we ***“have eternal life.”*** Now, I will agree with that pastor that the Bread of Life chapter is not about just the Eucharist . . . but clearly it must be about the delivery system that Jesus has established for us to get this food.

Which brings me to the other lessons appointed for this day.

In the Proverbs that frame today’s First Lesson, we hear of Wisdom. The Book of Proverbs frequently personifies, indeed anthropomorphizes, “Wisdom” . . . and it’s always as a “she.” Because this is so culturally conditioned, Wisdom is often portrayed as performing what today we would call “household chores” that, in the case of Wisdom, have deep

meaning. [Aren't we all glad that today things are so much different, and that males and females alike share in all these "household chores" equally?(Yes, your Pastor is being sarcastic.)] So in this reading Wisdom is in the mode of meal preparation. She ***"has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars"*** In other words, Wisdom has shaped the world. She has prepared the feast, and set the table . . . and now the invitation goes forth: ***"You that are simple, turn in here!"***

If you are convinced that these words do not apply to you, from the perspective of the Proverbs, you have just proven that they apply especially and undeniably to you. Because the simple will pass by, but those who are the opposite of the simple are those who seek wisdom (may not yet have it, but seek it). ***"To those without sense she says, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.'"*** It is easy to point to ***"those without sense"*** — they are the people who do not agree with me! (Yes, once again your Pastor is being sarcastic.) No, Wisdom identifies them as those who are immature in their thinking and doing — and inevitably that translates into "self-centered." ***"Follow your instincts."*** Ophra Winfrey once said, ***"That's where true wisdom manifests itself."*** That is very bad counsel indeed . . . instincts, like everything human, are very much corrupted.

Once again, powerful food is being offered. Remember, Elijah walked for forty days and forty nights because of a simple meal sent down from heaven. Here Wisdom offers meat, bread, and wine to prosper those who would partake. The Eucharistic connections abound . . . bread and wine . . . my flesh and blood . . . true food . . . true drink. But . . . do we make the connection?

In today's Second Lesson, St. Paul picks up on the theme of Proverbs when he writes, ***"Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."*** Wisdom invites the simple and the senseless to partake of her rich food simply

because it is good to do so. Paul adds another component: ***“making the most of the time, because the days are evil.”***

I suspect a case could be made for every time period in the Church’s life giving evidence of evil days. St. Paul likely had in mind the situation in Ephesus, the site of a huge Temple to Artemis (or Diana), the cult of which involved prostitution. Today we have the internet virtually saturated with pornography [I read somewhere that pornography sites account for 70 percent of all web sites on the net]. In Paul’s day, “worship” in the cult of Diana meant going to the temple at Ephesus for the purpose of sex with a temple prostitute (a position, I might add, of some distinction in that city ... as I say that why do names like Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, and Miley Cyrus come to mind? [Yes, again some sarcasm.]])

What Paul is doing is inserting a note of urgency to the pursuit of Wisdom . . . he’s saying that time is running out. Time to do what? To make a wholesale change in the way you live: ***“not as unwise people but as wise”*** people. Being smart and living wisely do not always come together. I went to high school with a pair of twins whom I will only identify as David and Donna. David was about as smart a person as you could ever encounter . . . bookish, a whiz at math and science . . . indeed I believe he went on to become a research scientist. Donna, on the other hand, was something of a fluff-head (although I will allow that this may have been her “act”). David, smart as he was, would sometimes get himself lost in the hallways at school; Donna was an absolute social whirlwind (it helped that she was cute as all get-out). Smart and wise do not always come in the same package.

Paul wants us to forget about smart and move to wise. The author of Proverbs wants the same thing. For Proverbs that means ingesting wisdom. For Paul that means turning your back on what the world has to offer and centering yourself on prayer, praise, and worship. I think Dr. Ralph Klein, one of my seminary professors, put it well when he wrote: ***“Personified wisdom invites her guests to a lush banquet. Her invitation***

is open to all, but also encourages dramatic change: forsake foolishness and live! The slogan ‘God loves us unconditionally’ is only half right. God loves us with the expectation and hope that love will transform us into believing and righteous people.”

Is this what Jesus is talking about? The Jews who are listening to Him mutter: **“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”** That’s not a bad question, if you think about it . . . how indeed? But, we may ask, *“How will Wisdom provide her banquet?”* Of course, this is expressed as mystery and symbol. Yet we dare not get carried away by the symbol, and we dare not let the mystery carry us.

We Lutherans confess that *“in, with, and under the bread we partake of the Body of Christ and in, with, and under the wine, we share the blood of Christ.”* Does that “explain how?” I don’t think so. It merely restates the mystery. But maybe that’s all we can and should do! I have often complained, most often to Confirmands, that I watch people as they come to and return from the Eucharist. This is what I see: people kind of moping their way up to the altar rail and then moping their way back to the pews . . . Does not something actually happen? Does not “true food” and “true drink” actually and literally course through every fiber of your being? *“Christ in you”* is not merely to be a play on words . . . we mean just that! *“Christ in you”*

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Will you just let that settle in for a moment? Can that be anything but total joy and wonder? This is Power Food! So why aren’t there more here to eat and drink? Foolishness? To be sure. Laziness? I don’t know . . . and I wouldn’t make that judgment too broadly. I think all three lessons today would support this diagnosis: Lack of wisdom.

Any time there is not pumping in you a thriving, pulsating hunger for Christ . . . more Christ . . . ever more Christ — then Wisdom is lacking. Lindy Black writes: *“The book of Job asks, ‘Where shall wisdom be found and where is the place of understanding? Man does not know the way to it and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says: Not*

in me and the sea says: not in me. It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air; only abyss and death say: we have heard a rumor of it with our ears.’ This means that wisdom is not a human possibility. The praise of wisdom is not a praise of [us] and [our] power.” Indeed, just the opposite. Wisdom is not following your own instincts, it is overriding those instincts with Christ’s living presence. It is seeking Christ, wanting Christ, feeding on Christ — **“true food . . . true drink”!** — more and more and evermore.

“The great twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich was addressing a distinguished audience of theologians in Chicago. He said something about Jesus not being real. An older gentleman stood up at the end of the talk, and eating a juicy apple, addressed Dr. Tillich. As he spoke, he bit into the apple. When he finished the apple, he asked Tillich if he could tell if the apple was bitter or sweet. Tillich replied, ‘No, sir, I haven’t tasted your apple.’ The man replied, ‘And you haven’t tasted my Jesus either.’” Until you can say with the juice figuratively running down your chin how sweet Jesus is to you, you haven’t really tasted Him either.

“Come, eat,” cries Wisdom, **“come drink.”** **“Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts .”** beckons St. Paul. **“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them”** promises Jesus.

Come . . . eat.

Amen.