

Sermon – “Table Matters”

Scripture – Proverbs 9:1-6, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15

Sunday, August 29, 2021

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Proverbs 9:1-6. Proverbs, along with the rest of Scripture, affirms the belief that there is only one God. This is also called monotheism. However, wisdom is portrayed in Proverbs as God’s consort and companion. Wisdom is God’s first creation, who stands with and beside God as the balance of the world is created... If Wisdom is mysterious, wisdom is at the same time reliable. Wisdom is a gift of God to God’s children, inviting them to learn wisdom’s insight and way of relating to the world. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing and understanding of God’s word.

*1 Wisdom has built her house, wisdom has hewn her seven pillars. 2 Wisdom has slaughtered her animals, mixed her wine, wisdom has also set her table. 3 Wisdom has sent out her servant-girls, wisdom calls from the highest places in the town, 4 "You that are simple, turn in here!" To those without sense wisdom says, 5 "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. 6 Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight." Amen.*

What Wisdom is to the Book of Proverbs, the Word is to John, who begins his gospel with “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Jesus is not only a gifted teacher, a compassionate healer, a worker of miraculous signs and wonders, Jesus, in the flesh, is our *bread come down from heaven*. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, not unlike the one who feasts at Wisdom’s banquet and knows life everlasting.

Our second scripture reading is selected verses from Mark 7, where Jesus and his followers are being questioned by the Pharisees about their table manners. Apparently they were not keeping the Jewish purity code. For the citizens of the first-century Mediterranean world, especially its eastern regions, the matters of “clean and unclean” were fundamental religious categories. By calling the purity codes into question, Jesus turns the table on their concern and calls people of faith beyond mere ritual to lives of integrity and genuine devotion.

*1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6 Jesus said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."*

*14 Then Jesus called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "Table Matters"

*The text: Wisdom has set her table...Proverbs 9:2b*

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, we thank you for those who set our tables and for the importance of the matters shared around those tables. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Seven years ago the table that I set as a little girl arrived in the kitchen of our Springfield home. My mother was downsizing following my dad's death and Peter and I were delighted to receive this treasured gift where loved ones gathered through the years of my growing up.

Receiving the gift of my childhood table was a reminder that all of our tables are sacred space. The people we love the most sit with us there. Meals are shared. Stories are told. We laugh together and cry together at our tables. Tables are one of the most intimate and important places of human connection and memory. Together we remember where we have been, and we dream of where we might go. We pray at our tables and in the presence of God's goodness and grace, discover what matters. Throughout faith history God has a way of showing up at our tables from the table at Passover, to the table of the twelve during the Last Supper, to the table of communion which we have the privilege of partaking each month.

Setting and sharing tables is one of the most uniquely human things we do. No other creature consumes its food at a table. The matters shared at our tables remind us that physical nourishment is not all that matters. One does not live by bread alone and we do not eat only for sustenance.

I have many memories of matters shared around my childhood table. One matter that stands out for me was the expectation of eating our vegetables and my mom convincing my brother to eat his spinach by appealing to "Popeye the Sailor" and his big muscles.

In retrospect perhaps the expectation of eating our vegetables was a gift we didn't fully appreciate at the time...not only because vegetables are healthy and an important part of one's diet but also because there are times in our lives when we are asked to swallow situations and circumstances that are distasteful, yet by doing so we grow, mature, and become more seasoned human beings. Not everything that is good for us tastes good!

Emotional Muscles is the name of a book on parenting by Kerry and Jack Novick. The premise of the book is that in order for children to gain emotional strength, they need parents who are strong, consistent and reliable, able to set the table that nourishes them and able to set the boundaries that protect them. If we indulge our children at the table or in life, we do them no favors.

The limitations and disappointments our children experience growing up not only offer them an opportunity to exercise coping skills which will build emotional muscles that serve them later in life, it also provides an opportunity for us, as their parents, to be present, to encourage, to sustain and to reassure them of what matters. And when we are experiencing losses and disappointments, our ability to cope and to nourish our spirits models the emotional and spiritual strength we hope they too will develop at wisdom's table.

In Angela Reed's book *Quest for Spiritual Community* she reminds us how important the home is in the development of one's faith. She tells the story of Susanna Wesley, the mother of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and how she created a fruitful environment to nourish her children's minds, spirits and bodies, characterized by order and well-developed methods. Her son, John, found her approach memorable and asked for a copy of the 'principal rules' she used to educate her children as he initiated communities of faith. More than one historian has argued that Methodism did not begin at Oxford, rather around a kitchen table in a modest home in Epworth, England during the first two decades of the eighteenth century where John Wesley grew up.

Today's scripture readings give us food for thought and passages to be savored. The psalmist proclaims: *Taste and see the goodness of God* and Proverbs reminds us of the choices life presents us. Those who "eat the bread and drink the wine" at the table set by Wisdom lay aside immaturity. They grow up emotionally as well as physically and gain insight along the way. Just as food and drink nourish physical life, the teachings of Wisdom and the Word are matters that feed the spiritual and ethical life.

Wisdom has set her table and manners are important to teach our children. However, Jesus reminds us that living an authentic life of faith goes beyond table manners, clean hands, and the food one eats. The words that come from Christ's mouth in today's gospel reading echo the message of ancient Hebrew prophets. Religious rituals around cleanliness, without integrity, kindness and generosity toward one another are meaningless to the God who bends down to lift infants and whose understanding is unsearchable.

No, one's faith is not based on what one eats! What matters in one's faith are the words one's life speaks. A person of faith prepares a table that welcomes, nourishes, and respects one's guests. A person of faith sets a place at the table for everyone born.

May the table we set together at Westminster Presbyterian Church be long and wide, full of interesting and diverse people with stories to share and grace to celebrate. May the food and drink we serve be healthy and delicious and may the wisdom and matters imparted around our table nourish each of us to lay aside immaturity, to live lives of justice and joy, and to walk in the way of insight. Amen