

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. James Lee Walker

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There was a comic some years, a standup comic named Emo Phillips. Does anybody remember him (one person says yes)? He was a very unusual comic who appealed to a very narrow portion of the population, apparently just to me and the person who just raised his hand! Emo had one line that he used one time making fun of not only himself, but of people in modern times who very often have a lot of information but don't understand what all that information means. His comment was: "I read a book once. It made my brain bleed." I can see why he wasn't big in Orange County. For some reason I will often recall that verse when I am reading the Bible. There were stories which seemed so simple to me when I was a child, but after a while, those stories became more complex.

I thought about the verses just read this morning, I don't know how many of you got the lectionary sheet when you came in this morning, but the Scriptures we read this morning are talking about Wisdom. "Wisdom" is a very interesting concept, particularly starting in the Hebrew scriptures, where its more than a sort of quality that some people have like being humorous or being very clever. Oh, yes, its more than just cleverness. Wisdom in the Old Testament, over a period of centuries, begins to really be spoken of as a living being. This morning we talked about how "Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals." All these are things that one would do in in ancient times when preparing a feast for something which to us would be equivalent to, say, a house warming. Today's second Scripture reading says: "Be careful then of how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time because the days are evil."

It goes on saying that Wisdom is very powerful, that we should live in Wisdom. Then here comes the third reading, the Gospel. All three of these readings are supposed to tie together on a Sunday. In a startling way, in the midst of all this "Wisdom talk," suddenly Jesus starts saying: "Drink my blood and eat my flesh." Can you imagine how that must of struck the people who first heard it? We have that language about eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ, we grow up with it, and we don't think about the ancient people, the pagans, who first heard the Christians talking in the time of the Apostles. Literally, some of them they weren't just trying to be

nasty, they literally thought the Christians were cannibals because they spoke of drinking blood and eating flesh.

It must have sounded very strange to the Jews who heard it. They are forbidden to have blood in their food at meals. Meat must be processed with salt to draw the blood out, because you're not supposed to consume it. So how strange these lessons can seem in a way, speaking of Wisdom coming into us and then suddenly speaking in language that sounds almost a little crazy. But you've got to read it long enough to "let your brain bleed," to come to the understanding that it's not something silly or bizarre or ridiculous. It's something so grand and cosmic that we have great difficulty "getting our minds around it."

Give your brain a real good workout and your mind and your soul and your spirit, because of course Jesus isn't talking about cannibalism. He isn't just talking about something nice that He said about bread and wine at His Passover Meal. He's talking about things like The Incarnation. He's talking about how God has prepared a banquet for His People and the banquet isn't just up here on the altar. It's the whole show folks. It's everything. It's life, it's the universe, it's all the experience God has given us to "feed on."

God doesn't just put it on the table and walk away. He is the Experience upon which we feed, upon Love, and upon Mercy, and upon Wisdom. You can't just read these scriptures once. You must read them again and again. You must call upon Wisdom. In the Christian tradition, Wisdom is very much identified with Jesus Christ the Son of God. In the ancient languages, "Wisdom" is a feminine word. The Christian Mystics saw no contradiction in applying the feminine concept of Wisdom as a name for the Son of God, because they saw no difference there. Wisdom, like God, transcends gender.

My first remembrances of Bible stories as a very young child are two-fold. One, I remember that I had a book that someone in the family had given me. It was the Children's Golden Book of the Bible. Do you remember children's Golden Book series? OK, this was the Golden Book for Children of the Bible. It was a big coffee table size book. It was mostly illustrations and some very large print. It was aimed at the kindergarten and grade school crowd. I used to just love to go through it, even before I could read, looking at those pictures.

If you remember them, you know that Golden Books were famous for their lovely illustrations always done by a wonderful artist. They were very real looking, lots of pastel pictures, and the thing that I enjoyed about them was there was always radiant light and dramatic poses. They only chose the really great stories for the kids in the Bible. It didn't cover every Bible story, only the dramatic and "action" ones like Daniel in the Lions Den, Noah's Ark, and David and Goliath. They didn't have any stories like Solomon letting two bickering mothers talk about chopping up a child to share. We were spared that.

I remember in particular, the picture of Noah's Ark when it had landed. The great rainbow was up above, and the sun coming out from the parting clouds, and the joyous animals, and Noah and his family coming down to this new freshly cleansed world. It was so beautiful and so exciting for a little kid of four or five to look at and I kind of put aside the troublesome part of the picture, which down at the bottom and along the edges where the art work was a little darker, all these human corpses of the evil people who had been drowned, I just put that aside.

I remember the simplicity of the stories that were told to me in the Sunday School back then. There were no projectors, no record players, no Internet, no audio/visual materials to be used. So, all the teachers, who were mostly just people without any formal "Sunday School teacher" training would come up every Sunday with an easel on which was a large piece of card board that had been covered in a light blue felt material. Remember the felt boards, any of you who taught Sunday School? You had these little paper cut outs of Jesus and the little lambs and the angels, whatever the story was talking about, and as the teacher was telling the story she would reach over and rub these little figures on the felt for a second which would build up a charge of static electricity causing it to stick to the felt for a short time. We would watch these little things and the teacher would have to keep moving them back up because they would slip down.

I remember the joy one time of seeing the teacher who was telling us the story of the Crucifixion, and she said that the people came and made fun of Jesus, and they said: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross", and He did. He fell off the felt board.

It was a wonderful simple time of enjoying these dramatic stories that were in the Bible, but eventually I began to look at these stories more and more

closely. I began to raise questions like: What is all this stuff about eating flesh and drinking blood? Why did all those people have to die? Am I as bad as they were? Will an angry God “get me?”

If they had all those wonderful miracles back then, why don't they have all those same kind of miracles now? How come I've never seen anybody walk on water? How come I've never seen anybody raised up into the heavens? All these questions started to come. What I began to figure out as I moved on into Middle school and High school, College and Seminary, was that these stories had a lot more to them than what you saw on the surface. I began to discover you can't quite figure them out all by yourself. First thing is, you need to talk to other people. You need to get a good Bible commentary. You need to share your thoughts and ideas and you need to pray.

In addition to the felt board and the Sunday School teacher, and later all the wonderful audio/visual materials and the movies about Jesus that you would see, there is also some unseen inner quality that begins to develop. Hopefully, it develops in every Christian who is open to it. The quality of which I speak is Wisdom. Again, Wisdom is more than just a characteristic, more than just a quality of a person, something that the ancient Hebrews realized had a life unto itself, that came into peoples lives and changed them.

Think about this “current generation.” By “current generation,” I mean everybody who is alive today whether they are a little kid or a very old senior citizen. The “current generation,” that is, all of us, have more information available to us, more data available to us, than any other group of people, any other generation that ever existed in Human history.

It used to be growing up, if you could get to the library once a month, you were lucky. Now, you wake up and from the time you turn on a television or a radio or your computer or just walk into a food store and see all of the signs and the magazines and newspapers for sale, we are bombarded constantly with data and information. Many of us never have the time to inventory all this data, let alone reflect upon it in a meaningful way. Do we ever process that information and that data in a way that makes for wisdom?

That's what wisdom is about. Its not just the gathering and the holding of data like the computer does on a hard drive. It is actually opening up your heart to Wisdom, the Wisdom of God Who can come in and sort it and help

you put it together and begin to find out what the meaning of it is. That can only be accomplished through prayer; it has to be done in community.

Everyone has got to experience the wisdom of God in community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Theologian who died in the Nazi Concentration Camp, and spent the last few months of his life in solitary confinement was Passionate about Christian Community. We know from notes he smuggled out that when he was in solitary, he would recite the Psalms. He said that even there in his empty cell, by reciting what people had said long ago he reached across the time and space barriers from his cell and was in community with the People of God all over the planet and through all history.

People, what we need to do in this Church, in this Parish, and in each individual life, is not just sit there and let information and data bombard us. We need to take it like the very food of the soul and the spirit and the mind that it is and ask for Holy Wisdom, the power of Christ, the Holy Spirit, to enter into our lives, not just about theological questions, but about questions of how to be a good neighbor, how to lead a moral life, how to follow the example of Jesus. Look again at this wonderful sentence in the beginning of the Collect of the Day this morning.

It says: “God you have given your only son to be for us a sacrifice for sin and also an example of Godly life. Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily, to follow daily, in the blessed steps of his most holy life.”

As a Priest standing in front of you in the pulpit, I want to go: “Yes, and that is my cause and intention to walk in the footsteps of Jesus; but what were those footsteps like?” To begin with, if I were to truly “walk in the footsteps of Jesus, it would make a powerful change in my lifestyle. Anyone who has ever been in my home knows that nobody has a collection of toys like I do. Every kind of piece of kitch and souvenirs from everywhere I’ve traveled, and old odd antiques, every wall is covered, every cabinet that displays this stuff is filled. When I moved from Connecticut to here in California, literally, after the movers filled up one moving van, the guy told me: “You just go on to Los Angeles, we’ll bring another truck and follow you.”

Jesus didn't live that way. Jesus had the simplicity of life where he simply walked about with what He could carry on his back and in his purse. Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin. Sacrifice is not even an attractive word to me, but you know over the years, Wisdom has begun to teach me. A lot of that stuff that I have just holds me down. There are many things I'm missing because I can't just pick up and move to a place like Jesus did.

Words in the Bible and the Mass and the hymnal that I have read for years that have been mysterious to me are now beginning to make sense. Bread and wine, flesh and blood, Jesus is talking about everything from fermented grapes and cooked wheat grain to the very depth of the love that He pours out upon us from Heaven and from the Cross.

In the Hebrew tradition of the Old Testament, there are many statements saying that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Fear of the Lord is a very strange concept to me. Why should we be afraid of a loving Father, of a kind and beneficent God?

A nun told me once: "The fear of God is something like fear of the doctor. We're afraid to go to the doctor because he might give us a shot or he might tell us we have to have surgery or give us a bad tasting medicine." But, she said: "What you really need to be afraid of most of all is if you *don't* go to the doctor. Even if the medicine and the cure is hard to take, if you don't get cured you're in far greater trouble." The greatest thing we have to "fear" about God is if we turn away from Him, if we refuse His healing grace.

In the Mystic tradition of Christianity there is a saying: "The beginning of wisdom is silence." We have so much noise in our lives today from TV and radio and media. We miss one of the most insidious things about IPODs and other music gadgets that seal us off in isolated worlds. When you say to some child: "Don't just stay in your room. Get out of your room and go out into the world, it's a beautiful day." So the first thing the child does on the way to the out of doors is to pick up their little world in the bedroom and plug it into their ears and walk outside into the sunshine in a bubble unaware of what is going on around them. Unaware of the sounds that the birds make in the tree, of the sounds of the city and the honking of the horns and everything around them. Stop the noise! The beginning of wisdom is silence.

This morning I think what the Scriptures are asking us is fairly simple and that is that Wisdom is more than cleverness, its more than just knowing a lot of neat answers to give to Trivia questions at a cocktail party. It's a living thing that has to do with the incarnate God that comes into our lives when we open our lives up and say: "Lord, this assemblage of knowledge and data, help me sort it through. Help me find the meaning that I should assign to all of this as I walk through life. Help me, O Lord, to fear you, not in the sense of terror and trembling, but in the sense of knowing how meaningless and empty and without proper direction my life will be if I turn my back on You and refuse to receive Your wisdom and Your life giving knowledge. O Lord, You let it be known to Your Prophet Elijah who fled to the cave that You are not in the sound of the earthquake, You are not in the thunder, You are not in the wind, but in a still small quiet voice. So that I might hear Your Still Small Voice in this noisy and busy and distracting world, O Lord, let me also remember what the Christian Mystics teach us, the beginning of wisdom is silence.