

Sermon – “Kitchen Table Wisdom”

Scripture – Proverbs 9:1-6, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Our first scripture reading is Proverbs 9:1-6. In Proverbs, as in the rest of Scripture, we understand that God is one, God alone. And yet 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 as we open the pages of scripture together.

*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."*

*21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “Kitchen Table Wisdom”

The text: “Wisdom has also set her table...” Proverbs 9:2b

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, we gather with grateful hearts for the wisdom and word we have received around our kitchen tables. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

What memories are etched in each of our minds around kitchen tables... what stories, what words of wisdom, what rituals have been passed on over the meals in our homes?

My older brother Barry (who lives in Jacksonville, Florida) and I were reminiscing about our childhood mealtimes in one of our weekly phone conversations and we could recall where each of us sat around the kitchen table at 15583 Orchid Drive in South Holland, Illinois. The same “Lazy Susan,” that was sometimes turned too fast in an effort to pass food, now sits on our kitchen table at 26 Island Bay Lane. It is one of those precious fixtures passed on to the next generation.

Barry had an interesting memory of not wanting to eat his vegetables and some of the shenanigans that surrounded this part of the meal. I remember my mom could get him to eat his spinach by appealing to “Popeye the Sailor” and his big muscles. Barry and I both agreed that peas were much more difficult to swallow and this requirement sometimes meant extended time at the table alone following the meal.

As we talked I thought that 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 better human beings.

Perhaps we do our children a disservice if we do not expect of them the same things that were expected of us. 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 not do them any favors. The limitations and disappointments our children experience growing up not only offer them an opportunity to practice and 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 our reliable and consistent love during these difficult times. And when we are experiencing losses and disappointments ourselves, our ability to cope and to nourish our spirits along the way models the emotional and spiritual strength we hope they too will develop at wisdom’s table.

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 feed the spiritual and ethical life.

Wisdom has set the table. Christ is the living bread that came down from heaven. Let us feast on the Word and raise our glasses in gratitude to the Gracious God who welcomes us around the table of life and is our companion in the life that is ours.

*Kitchen Table Wisdom* is the name of a National Bestseller book of short stories written by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician who believes in the importance of stories told around kitchen tables. *This is not just a way of passing time, she writes. It is a way wisdom gets passed along. It is the stuff that*

*helps us to live a life worth remembering.* Dr. Remen believes *most parents know the importance of telling children their story, so that they come to know, in the tellings, who they are and to whom they belong.*

As we begin another year of “feasting on the Word” at Westminster in our educational ministries, we are excited about the opportunity to spend time with the children and youth of this congregation, to talk about faith, Wisdom and the Word. However this is only a part of their story. We believe it is in the home that spiritual formation takes precedence. In a culture of fast food and fast pace, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of eating together and taking the time to share stories around our kitchen tables, to pray together, and to talk about life and faith with those we love... not because we have all the answers but because we are fellow travelers on the “way of insight!”

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, but 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.

Not unlike Dr. Remen, the author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, who had the privilege of listening to her patients’ stories, one of the greatest joys as your pastors is learning your stories. We marvel at the Wisdom and the Word passed on from one generation to the next within the families of this faith community. We delight in the bond between parent and child, grandparent and grandchild that is shared in these stories. We savor the nourishment, the strength and the spiritual formation that grows out of these loving and intimate relationships. We are here to nurture those connections and to be a part of the stories shared around your kitchen tables.

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.

The Prophet Micah reminds us: *God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

No, one’s faith is not based on what one eats! One’s faith is based on the words one’s life speaks. A person of faith prepares a table that welcomes, nourishes and respects one’s guests. 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 celebrate. May the food and drink we serve be healthy and delicious and may the wisdom imparted around our table nurture each of us to lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight. Through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, our bread come down from heaven, may it be so. Amen.