

To feast at the banquet of wisdom

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 16, 2009.

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 calls the unwise and immature to feast at her banquet that they might be nourished on maturity and insight. This portion of the Bible's wisdom literature is a collection of admonitions and exhortations by a teacher addressed to the students. Its main message is to be filled with the food and wine of wisdom to gain insight into the possibilities that exist within each of us. To partake at the table of wisdom is to choose the straightforward moral choice between the way of folly and the way of wisdom.

There are a great many foolish things that people do, whether in a marriage, in business, in churches or communities. Our nation is currently witnessing the misuse of the rights of peaceable assembly and free speech. Local politicians come to engage with their constituents only to be confronted with hecklers disrupting the meetings and shouting them down. Organized resistance groups are engaging in screaming matches, scuffles, and threats resulting in arrests and the hanging of public officials in effigy. These traditional town hall meetings designed to be informative and to allow dialogue between elected officials and their constituents have been hijacked by net working campaigns with scripted talking points and posters designed to disrupt the process. What some call grass roots activism is really "astro-turf" campaigning that looks like grass but has no roots with no other purpose than to be disruptive. Organizers of these campaigns turn what was a town meeting into a town brawl.

In the town of Hingham where I live, 1500 people turned out at a raucous special town meeting called for the sole purpose of reversing the school board's decision to name a local elementary school. Putting things into perspective, I couldn't help but think about people getting killed in Afghanistan, genocide in Darfur and forty-five million Americans without adequate health care coverage and the town was in an uproar over the choice of the name of a school! What they called "democracy in action" was a power play to overturn what the elected members of the school board had decided. There was bad behavior on both sides and the whole experience reminded me that one of the marks of maturity is the ability to be in dissent without creating dissension.

You have to wonder what has happened to the qualities of maturity and civility. The marks of Christian maturity and insight are demonstrated in the way people treat each other over issues in which they disagree. Whether in a marriage or family, at school or at work, the true test of a character is how people behave in a quarrel. When we find ourselves in the heat of an argument we have to be careful not to say things we later regret.

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 and fairness. It is there that we learn to give it our very best to win and accept occasional defeat with the determination to do better next time. We enter another level of maturity when we are out into the working world and abide by the virtues of fairness and honesty in business dealings. To find that others don't play by the same rules is

not an excuse to give up our own values. What better example than Bernie Madoff whose fraudulent business practices cheated so many people out of their earnings they had invested with him. When the law caught up with him, he said that he had seen that day coming. He knew all along that what he was doing was wrong, yet continued until he was caught.

The central mark of Christian character is integrity and wholeness. There should be no missing pieces in who we are. The difference between reputation and character is that reputation is what people think of us and character is what God knows of us. We all have three inner characters. The first is what others see and know in us, the second is that which we think we are, and the third is who we really are. Another test of our character is how we describe another's character. People who frequently belittle others are saying more about themselves.

The aim of Christian education and formation is to develop the basic characteristics of maturity, insight, integrity, conscientiousness, reliability, authenticity, transparency, civility, kindness, and thoughtfulness. All these characteristics befit the Christian person. These traits are more valuable than any diploma, degrees, medals or awards. In the end, what God looks for is the evidence of our having done the right thing, especially in the face of opposition.

The book of Proverbs tells us that wisdom has built her house and has extended the invitation to feast at the banquet of maturity and insight. It goes on to tell us that, *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.* (Proverbs 9:10) The mature person who lives by wisdom and truth is drawn to partake of the bread of heaven and the wine of the Spirit.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians exhorts us to be careful how we live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of time because the days are evil. Make no doubt about it; there are evil powers in this world for which we must remain alert. Jesus tells us that we must be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. (Matthew 10:16) Each time we gather here to remember him as the spiritual sustenance of our lives; we are reminded that we must never make peace with oppression, lest we become victims of our own oppression.