

St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 7, 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Proverbs 9:1-6,10,13-18

¹ Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars. ² She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table. ³ She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the highest point of the city. ⁴ "Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment. ⁵ "Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. ⁶ Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding.

¹⁰ "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

¹³ The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge. ¹⁴ She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, ¹⁵ calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way. ¹⁶ "Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment. ¹⁷ "Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!" ¹⁸ But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave. (NIV)

Two Party Invitations

Dear brothers and sisters of Christ,

A great way to remember simple truths is with proverbs. Proverbs are those little sayings that communicate common sense wisdom. For instance, which of the following is easier to remember:

- "Don't go too fast with a job you're doing, or you might get sloppy." or "Haste makes waste."
- "Being on time or even early for things often has advantages." or "The early bird gets the worm."

Little rhymes or word pictures have a way of lodging in our minds and affecting our actions.

Well, as most of you know, there's a Bible book called Proverbs. It's full of little, wise sayings that deal with all kinds of real-life situations. Today, we're going to think about one chapter of this book of Proverbs, one that has a longer word picture in it. This word picture will help us understand something about Jesus, our faith, and Christian education. This word picture is really a story, a story of two party invitations. Let's use our imaginations and take a walk down the street where these parties are taking place, so we can find out what they are.

Wisdom's invitation

You're walking down a city street. You look to your left to see a mansion. It looks old, but still pretty well kept up. Kind of stuffy, you think, but still inviting. It's set back from

the road a little, but you can still see inside the picture window. Servants are busily at work, setting a grand banquet table. The smell of gourmet food wafts through the air.

The house is surrounded by a wrought iron gate, but the gate is standing open. Someone is standing at the open gate, a nice looking young woman. As you walk by, she looks you in the eye with a smile. "Come in!" she says brightly. "We've been waiting for you!" She hands you a printed invitation. Strangely, it has your name on it. "You are cordially invited to come into the mansion for a gourmet feast," she says. The invitation says the same. "Come in and enjoy the finest food and the best wine. All you care to eat."

"What's the charge?" you ask.

"Oh, there's no charge. It's all free."

"Really? Free?" you say skeptically.

"Yes. Oh, and there's more." She takes a step closer, looking you in the eyes. "This is actually the home of your family. You belong here."

"My family?" you reply. "Are you sure?"

"I am. And this mansion? It's not even the biggest one. There is another set of grand mansions beyond this one. And they're all for you."

You look around. "Where are these mansions?" you ask.

"You can't see them now, but when the time comes for you to move on, you'll be chauffeured in a limousine. But all in good time. Now, come in! Eat and drink the finest. *And live forever.*"

You look in the window of the grand dining room and see a beautiful woman. She's in charge of the feast. She's looking you in the eyes. She beckons as if to say, "Come in! All this is for you!" You can't put your finger on it, but there's something in her eyes, something that seems sincere.

Folly's invitation

Well, that's one of the party invitations. Let's keep walking.

On your right you see a nice house. Very nice, yet not as fancy and stuffy as the mansion. This house looks very inviting. As you get closer, the booms from the stereo inside rattle your fillings.

"COME IN!" The shout startles you. It comes from a lady sitting out front. She stands and gets in your face. "You look like you could use some time to relax and enjoy life a little, to have some fun. You do like fun, don't you?"

"Sure," you say. "Who doesn't?"

"Then this is the place for you. Come on inside. We've got plenty of food, and it is so good." She looks this way and that, as if she's about to tell you a secret. "Know why it tastes so good?" she whispers. You shake your head. "Because it's all the food you're not supposed to eat!" she laughs. "Forbidden fruit always tastes better." You nod, remembering how you used to crave the candy mom used to hide in the cupboard.

"Can I peek inside?" you ask.

"Of course," she says. You look inside. It's filled with people having time of their lives. Your jaw drops as you see some of the X-rated things they're doing, but after watching a few minutes you're not so shocked anymore. You're drawn to it. "That's not all," she says. "There are more things to do than this if this is not what you're into. You do what you want here. You eat what you want. It's a party, and it's on your terms."

Your eye catches a door in the back of the main room. “Is there a back room?” you ask.

“Yes,” she says, her face turning more serious. “But don’t worry about that now. Come in! Party! Indulge!” She looks you in the eye. She’s a beautiful woman, but there’s something in her eyes, something that tells you she’s being less than honest.

She is hiding something. For if you were to look inside her house, beyond the partiers, there is a back room. It’s where all the partiers eventually end up. Inside that room are piles of rotting corpses.

Where will you go?

Where will you go? Kids? Grownups? Parents, where will your children go? Which party will they attend? Where will you lead them?

Everybody eats somewhere. And really only in one of two places—either in mansion of Wisdom or home of Folly. Everybody eats. Where will you? The difference between the two—you heard it—is the difference between life and death.

Parents, I have a true-or-false question for you. True or False: “Children should be allowed to decide on their own what religious instruction they receive.”

There’s a misconception many people have. Many think that there’s an area of brain that’s for religious stuff, like a little box. They imagine that it’s closed at birth. They think that when kids are older the box can be opened a little once in a while. “We’ll take kids to Sunday School and let them sample a little religion. Maybe to church once in a while.”

I’ve got news for you. That part in the brain that holds religious stuff—it’s wide open from day one! From the day each of us is born, we take in stuff, stuff that shapes who we are, stuff that will guide what we do. And there are really only two kinds of stuff we can take in: wisdom and folly.

What does God want us to take in, to eat and digest and live on? Wisdom, of course. But what does God mean when he tells us to dine on wisdom?

Before we answer that, let me tell you something about Hebrew poetry, because that’s what the book of Proverbs is. When we write something, we often put the main point at the beginning or the end. In school, learning to write paragraphs, I learned to make the first sentence the topic sentence. Or when we tell a joke, the punchline comes at the end, right? Well, the poets of the Old Testament, they sometimes do something kinda wacky, at the Holy Spirit’s direction. They put the main thought of their poem or song—can you guess where? Right in the middle! This happens in some psalms, even some whole books of the Old Testament are like this. And look at Proverbs 9. Right in the middle of these two party invitations is a little section that holds the key to understanding both of them. And how does the section begin? (I’ll give you a hint: the answer is on one of the banners in our church today.) That’s right: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Where does God want us to eat? At which party? At Wisdom’s. And what does that mean, to eat at the feast of wisdom? It means to fear the Lord—not in the sense of trembling in fear of him, but to respect him, to honor him as a loving Father and Lord. It means to know the Holy One, Jesus Christ, personally and intimately, to believe in him.

Christ Jesus, the Holy One, is called the wisdom of God (1Co 1:24). He has built his church. And through his servants he invites everyone in. "Come in! Eat! and live!" they cry.

The church, Wisdom's mansion, looks old. It is. It's almost as old as the world, the family of believers. Ever since God made a promise to save humankind. The church is old. It's kind of stuffy sometimes. Some parts are crumbling and weak. Some parts are ugly. But here is where Christ is, feeding souls that they might live forever.

What's for dinner in the mansion of Christ? In short, he is. The main dish served here is Jesus. He comes to us and says, "Digest me." In other words, "Believe in me. Believe that I'm the one who gives you life forever. Believe that I'm the one who loves you and has made you God's child and an heir of glory. Believe in me." Or, in the words Jesus used in John 6, "Eat my flesh. Drink my blood." Digest him, believe in him with all your heart.

Here in the mansion of Wisdom, the main dish is served in many ways.

Here in baptism, for instance. Here Jesus comes and tells people, "Everything I accomplished for you by living a perfect life, by dying an innocent death to pay for all sins, by rising from the grave to conquer death—I'm connecting all that to you through this water." In baptism, sinners like us feast on the good news about Jesus and his forgiving love.

Here when God's Word is read and proclaimed and sung and heard and learned—here true wisdom is served. In our Sunday School and all the Bible studies we offer. In our elementary school and preschool, where God's Word is taught every single day. In all these places, Jesus is served up for people to believe in and live.

And who could forget the feast, the Lord's Supper? The Lord's body and blood—that's an acquired taste, to be eaten only after instruction and preparation. But, oh, it's a feast. In a special way Jesus comes to us and gives us pardon for all our sins—and where that is, there is life. Best of all, this feast is only a tantalizing foretaste of the great feast in the great mansion, to which God's angels will one day chauffeur us.

Where will you go? Where will you dine?

Children of God, go to the party where you belong—in the family mansion. God has made the feast of life yours. Go to Jesus. Go where he is served up. Believe in him. Learn of him. Eat! And live!