

“What Goes Out, What Comes In?”

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1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

Proverbs 9:1-6

John 6:51-58

Over the summer, I have received a flurry of wedding invitations and Save-the-Dates-- it seems like even more than I would receive in a typical year before the pandemic. Couples that have been holding off on making their marriage vows publicly due to safety concerns with the pandemic seem to be rushing to celebrate now that most of their loved ones have the COVID vaccine. I hope that as these weddings happen in the next 6 months, there will indeed be a banquet for each that is sumptuous, celebratory, and safe-- and more importantly, a blessing upon the vows these lovers will make to one another.

Today, we have an invitation to a banquet. Our host is Sophia-- that is, in Greek, the personification of Wisdom. Lady Wisdom, or Sophia, has been busy: she has built a seven-pillared house; slaughtered the animals; mixed the wine; set the table; called out her invitation from the high places, and sent her servants to gather guests as well.

All we have to do is show up. Although, you may think the invitation isn't addressed to you. After all, she calls out, “You that are simple, turn in here!” and “to those without sense” she beckons, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of my wine.” So, I imagine Wisdom's invitation is probably in the recycle bin, or unopened in the junk-mail inbox, for those who already figure they are plenty wise.

Too bad. Because what they are missing out on, is *life*. “Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight,” Wisdom invites.

In Solomon's dream, he names before God, “I do not know how to go out or come in;” Solomon-- still a boy-- finds himself humble before the great task of serving the people God has chosen, as their king. And so, Solomon asks God, “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” In other words, Solomon asks for wisdom.

I keep refreshing my screen to see who will confirm their attendance on the guest list to Wisdom's banquet. But what I see instead is a father who assaulted a teacher in California when he saw his daughter walk out of the building, on her first day of school, wearing a face mask. I see mobs of parents who oppose masking heckle and stalk parents who want their schools to mask to keep children safe. I see one state governor threatening to withhold teacher salaries in school districts that go against a statewide order that bans masking

mandates-- this in a state that has one quarter of the country's COVID cases. One of our own worship participants had a recent experience of a major security threat in the workplace due to someone disgruntled over a mask requirement. Where is people's common sense? Where is the care for the common good? Why aren't people thinking about how they go out, and how they come in-- and also what goes out, and what comes in? I mean this in the absolutely literal sense, in terms of the question of masking.

But I also ask this question metaphorically, in terms of how we consider what we say and how we say it. I had a disagreement recently. It began on social media. I took it off social media, and sent a private email. What I got back was a response so filled with wrongful assumptions that left me reeling in shock. So I composed another email in my head, responding and reacting to each absurd thing the other person had said. And then I waited several days. And then, I picked up the phone, and listened. And we talked. And while we did not come to a place of agreement, when I hung up the phone I felt at peace, and I sensed the other person did, too.

As I see it, Wisdom has set her banquet before us, but we are letting the food rot in a wasted heap. Wisdom has set before us the ways of life, and the ways of death, and we have rushed to be first in line for death. I am angry. I am fearful. I am grieving, that we as a country cannot value life, value the common good, protect children and the vulnerable-- and those who may not realize just how vulnerable they are-- and unite around what we have to do to keep people safe.

But while my (self)-righteous indignation might win the internet, at least among my circle of friends who think like me, it won't change hearts and minds. It certainly hasn't changed the minds of certain people I truly love, who refuse to get a vaccine or wear masks. And so, I humbly ask for a seat at Wisdom's banquet.

I'm drawn to the one story the scripture gives to give evidence of King Solomon's wisdom. Two women from the same house have each had a baby, just three days apart from each other. One woman, in her sleep, rolled onto her baby, and he died. So, in the night, she switched the babies, and put her dead son at the other woman's breast, and put the living baby at her own breast. This is the story one woman tells before King Solomon, asking for his wise judgment. However, the other woman claimed the reverse was true: that the living son was indeed her son. Solomon's answer is to ask for his sword, and command that the living child be cut in two, so that each mother could have half his body. One woman agrees this is a fine solution, but the other mother insists the baby be given to the other mother, "because compassion for her own son burned within her." Solomon determined the mother who would spare his life to be the true mother.

Anyone who has lost a pregnancy or a newborn knows how callous Solomon's solution was. If you have had this experience, you know the mind-blowing trauma a loss of a pregnancy or a child can be. Clearly, the woman who took her housemate's child was overwhelmed with loss and longing, regret and grief. As King, Solomon could surely say "this is the way it is," and

perhaps we could say his decision was just; but can we really say he ruled with an *understanding mind*, as he had asked from God?

Some have argued that God's blessing of riches and honor bestowed upon Solomon was not, in fact, a blessing, for these are the very things that corrupted Solomon and clouded his wisdom. Raj Raghunathan, in his book *If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Happy?* Reveals research that "being better educated, richer, or more accomplished doesn't do smooch to predict someone will be happy. In fact, it might mean that someone is less likely to be satisfied with life." Solomon surrounded himself with riches, paid through a burdensome tax on his people, and he also inscribed them into forced servitude-- in other words, slavery-- to accomplish his building dreams. Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages!" the prophet Jeremiah warned. His actions ended up stirring insurrection among his people, who felt exploited, and the kingdom God had brought together split into two-- the Northern Kingdom, and the Southern Kingdom. Also notable among his excesses, the Bible reports that Solomon had 700 wives, and 300 concubines, and these relationships also opened the doors to the many gods the women brought with them. He probably did not realize it, but Solomon still did not know how to go out, and how to come in.

I certainly feel like a resonance with our scriptures today. It feels like *this* country is split into two. We see leaders, just over state lines, whose excesses with and mistreatment of women have toppled the good work and legacy they tried to accomplish. I don't understand: why can't we just choose the banquet Wisdom sets, that we may all live?

The gospels point to another banquet people cannot understand. "How can this man give us flesh to eat?" asked those who could not understand. As Eugene Peterson wrote in his translation, *The Message*, "This is a tough teaching, too tough to swallow."

Rolf Jacobson says, "The more one attempts to explain the mystery of the Lord's presence in the bread and the wine, the less mystical the experience. It is like describing a kiss, rather than experiencing a kiss. It is like analyzing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony rather than hearing it. Like dissecting van Gogh's 'The Starry Night,' rather than beholding it."

Debie Thomas makes a comparison to her experience of nursing her two daughters when they were young.

"I realized with a kind of sacred bewilderment that I could sustain a human life with my own body. I glowed with pride and satisfaction when my babies' cheeks filled out, and their limbs grew strong, and their eyes sparkled, and their bellies swelled with my milk. In the early weeks, when they had to nurse around the clock, I dreaded being away from them, even for an hour. I worried about something terrible happening to me before they were weaned. My body grew so attuned to their needs that my milk let down at the first hint of their cries. I learned what it is to give myself away, to delight in a fullness other than my own, to be nourished by the act of nourishing. To become food."

But then, Debie Thomas reflects on the desperate experience when, 12 years later, her daughter refused to eat. She describes, "First, no desserts or sweets. Then, no carbs. Then, no between-meal snacks. Then, no meat. Eventually, no meals at all. Just pitiful little bites, scattered and useless. A single grape. One carrot stick. A tablespoon of plain yogurt or iceberg lettuce. Barely enough to sustain life. Wrecked by anxiety, perfectionism, and American culture's toxic obsession with thinness, our daughter had developed anorexia nervosa, one of the deadliest of all mental illnesses." Her daughter has been restored to health after a long struggle, but remembering everything Debie did in that time to coax food into her daughter, she reflects, "When she kept refusing, my heart broke, hardened, and broke again. Too many times to count. I panicked. I seethed. I grieved. I begged. I experienced a kind of powerlessness I hope never to experience again. I was her mother. The one who was supposed to nurture, nourish, feed, protect, and sustain my children. What was this monstrous sickness that made basic, elemental feeding impossible?"

Maybe this is how Jesus feels when we turn away from the sumptuous banquet he offers with outstretched hands, a table Sophia set first, long before, with her wisdom, and which Jesus set again as the word made flesh.

May we be mindful of how near and present this invitation is. And while mindful of all the other invitations out there which may or may not be for us-- like invitations for money, power, or notoriety-- may our primary hunger and thirst be for what is good, what is holy, and what is wise. This invitation-- it absolutely has your name on it.