

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Lectionary 20 (B)  
August 15, 2021  
Texts: Proverbs 9:1-6  
Ephesians 5:15-20

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Wisdom is a primary theme in our worship today. It's something like "practical advice on how to live your life." But the wisdom that God gives is really very different from the wisdom our world offers. When I think of the world's wisdom, I think of stories like this, from Aesop's Fables. Once, there was an ant and a grasshopper. It was summer and the weather was nice, and the grasshopper enjoyed playing in the sunshine. But the ant was working hard in the heat of the sun to stock food away for the winter. The grasshopper would, from time to time, invite the ant to join him in frolicking in the grass, but the ant never would. He was too busy. There was too much work to do. And so it went, through the summer the ant worked while the grasshopper played. Well, when winter came, the grasshopper wasn't prepared. So he went to the ant and asked if he might have some food to eat, since he didn't have any. The ant turned the grasshopper away, telling him he'd just have to fend for himself. And we all know what happened to the grasshopper. He died in the cold that winter because he hadn't worked during the summer. And the moral of the story is that we should all be like the wise little ant, and work hard so we're ready when winter comes.

I know the story is about the importance of work and being prepared, and maybe the value of delayed gratification too, but what a cruel, selfish, hard-hearted sort the industrious little ant turns out to be. No mercy, no pity for one of his fellow creatures. I end up feeling pretty much nothing like admiration for the ant, and I certainly don't want to be like him. I'm afraid the ant's wisdom winds up looking not only self-centered, but genuinely unattractive.

It reminds me of another story, from one of my favorite books, *The Stinky Cheese Man*. On the surface, it looks like a children's story book, but it's really for adults. It is an absurd, romping send-up of a whole lot of classic children's stories, like the story of the little red hen. You might remember the original story. It's known as a classic American fable, about the hen who tries to get some help to plant her wheat and bake her bread, but no one is available. But when she's ready to eat the bread, everyone is ready to help. But then the little red hen says, "Oh no! I planted and harvested the wheat. I baked the bread. All by myself! And now I'm going to eat the bread. All by myself!" The hen always struck me as just a little smug.

In this parody version, the little red hen bursts in, even before you get to the table of contents, trying to squawk out her story. So the narrator has to tell her to wait her turn. Then, during the middle of the story of Jack and the giant, just as the giant has drifted off the sleep and Jack is sneaking out of the giant's castle, in comes the little red hen, squawking about how she's waited so long, and she's not going to wait any more. She's going to tell about how she planted wheat and she baked the bread. And she wakes up the giant, who grabs the little red hen and makes a sandwich out of her between two slices of her own bread.

I think what strikes me as funny about the story is that it's poking at the ambivalence I feel about our culture's conventional wisdom about the value of hard work and being able to enjoy the fruit of your labor. Those are good things, but the conventional wisdom doesn't justify the profound inequalities that exist in our culture. Real life isn't so black and white, with industrious little ants or lazy grasshoppers. In real life, some people are born with every advantage, while others struggle their whole lives with the effects of racism, or abuse, or poverty, or living with mental or physical illness. At its core, our culture's conventional wisdom strikes me as profoundly selfish, and afraid that someone else might get something they didn't earn and don't deserve—which, when you think about it, is ridiculous. Who ever earned a beautiful planet that provides abundantly for everything we need to live—air, water, food, shelter? Who earned the gift of life, or the things that make life meaningful, like a community to belong to, loved ones to provide friendship and warmth, to celebrate with in times of joy and to give comfort in times of grief? All of these are gifts from our Creator.

That's why the only wisdom that appeals to me is Jesus' counter-cultural, upside-down wisdom. Jesus' wisdom is all about recognizing and receiving God's gifts, often found in surprising places. Jesus recognized that God has made us to belong to each other, to be a real human family together. So, in Jesus' wisdom, it's far better to share generously than to hoard your stockpile of things, not only because God gives generously and we thrive when we imitate God's goodness, but also because generosity builds community and helps those in need. In fact, who knows when we might become the one in need? In Jesus' wisdom, it's far better to forgive someone who has wronged us rather than retaliate or hold a grudge, not only because God has freely and graciously forgiven us, but also because forgiveness heals relationships and creates the possibility of a new future. In fact, Jesus calls on us to love our enemies and pray for them! In Jesus' wisdom, it is far better to be welcoming and inclusive rather than rigid and showing hospitality only to people like us, not only because God has welcomed us and every person is God's beloved child, but also because we are stronger together, and we have so much we can learn from each other. In Jesus' wisdom, it is better to be humble rather than constantly tooting our own horn, not only because everything we have is a gift from God, but also because arrogance and pride are corrosive to healthy community.

That's the heart of Jesus' wisdom—generosity, forgiveness, inclusive community and humility. It's the kind of living wisely that is encouraged by our reading from Ephesians, which calls us to live wisely, making the most of the time. The old King James translation is helpful here—"live wisely, redeeming the time," not just making the most of it because you only go around once in life. Jesus' wisdom is about redeeming this time we have to live, reclaiming it's value, even though it has been damaged, salvaging something precious that has been lost. That's what Jesus' counter-cultural wisdom means to do with us. God loves this damaged, lost alienated creation, and is unwilling to give up on us. So God came to us in the life of Jesus to embrace our limits and our pain, to heal us and set us right with God, and to show us how to live with God—live with peace and joy and contentment. That is Jesus' wisdom, and when we embrace that wisdom and make it part of our lives, we become not just recipients of God's love, but participants in God's healing, saving, redeeming work of love for all of God's creation.

As a way of living, Jesus' wisdom could hardly be more different than that of the industrious ant or the little red hen. Those symbols of conventional cultural wisdom exude a kind of prickly, punitive, self-righteous possessiveness, but from Jesus' way of life flows love and compassion. There's no question in my mind which is beautiful, and which is not. And just like in our reading from Proverbs, where Wisdom invites everyone to come eat and drink at her table, so also Jesus invites you to come feast at his table, to eat and drink and fill your heart with his wisdom. Thanks be to God. Amen.