

A Sermon for 13th Sunday after Pentecost

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[Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14, John 6:51-58, Hymn 335

Layers of meaning

Our Old Testament story now turns to King Solomon, son of David and Bathsheba. His ascension to the throne is not a pretty story -- Solomon and his mother schemed to get him there, knocking out all the opposition (such as other sons of David) until Solomon was the only candidate left. The description of his kingly style in today's reading is truly over the top, in terms of his riches, possessions and manner of extravagance. God came to Solomon in a dream and asked him what the Lord should give him. Solomon famously demurred, turned down more riches, and asked for wisdom to rule his people. God liked that answer and gave him wisdom and riches too. I've wondered what I would have said. God asks, "What do you want, Barbara?" Perhaps I would answer, "How about a Ferrari?"

Wisdom is actually a name for a whole body of biblical literature, including Ecclesiastes, Job, Proverbs, and the so-called Song of Solomon, a book of beautiful poetry, probably not written by Solomon. Wisdom is also sometimes seen as a manifestation of the Christ. Wisdom is personified in the Old Testament as a woman who is sought because of her wisdom.

There is a famous story about Solomon's wisdom recounted elsewhere, where he is asked to judge who is the true mother of a child. Picture a lone child, standing between two women, each of whom claims the child as her own. Solomon asks a guard to cut the child in half and give half to each woman. One of the women shrieks "No!" and withdraws her claim. Solomon judges that she is the real mother, for she could not bear to see her child harmed.

All the stories about Solomon seem to point to the many-layered meanings of his life. He is most famous for building the Temple in Jerusalem, and we will hear that story next week. It too reflects a wise ruler, invested in the meaning of the building and what it represents to the people.

Fast forward a thousand years, and we find Jesus talking to a crowd, trying to help them understand layers of meaning in the metaphor of bread and

wine, body and blood. The real gift is not literal bread, but symbolic bread that gives life, and he, Jesus, is this Bread of Life. The listeners get confused, as is often the case in the Gospel of John. They want to know how, literally, Jesus can give them his flesh to eat. Jesus continues speaking metaphorical language saying, "I am the Bread of Life. I am the living bread that came down out of heaven." Jesus insists that the people can embrace this mystical truth through ritual by eating bread and drinking wine, symbolically eating his flesh and drinking his blood. This is, of course, a major Eucharistic reference. Becoming a follower of Jesus by receiving the Eucharist will give the believers access to eternal life. Jesus says, "The one who eats this bread will live forever." Jesus explores this metaphor of Eternity and its layers of meaning.

Eternity is living in God's time, right now. When we participate in the Eucharist, we are suspended in time. We are not just remembering that Jesus offered his disciples bread and wine at the Last Supper, a long time ago. No, we are actually in that time, from long ago, and also now, and also in the future. Jesus presides at the Eucharistic feast. His presence was then, is now, and ever will be.

Today we will sing as our communion hymn the famous hymn, I am the bread of life. It contains many of these phrases from scripture, and as the words ride upon a memorable melody, they are inspirational. We are transformed while we sing it, and we find that we need not define the meaning too precisely – we just sing it, with our voices, and we sing it in our hearts. All layers of meaning are encompassed in our joyous singing.

The first four verses quote Jesus directly from our Gospel text in the sixth chapter of John. The final verse is an affirmation of our faith: "Yes, Lord, we believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who has come into the world." Between each verse is a powerful refrain, which many of us will sing with raised hands: Quoting Jesus, it proclaims boldly, "And I will raise them up, and I will raise them up, and I will raise them up on the last day." Singing this hymn right after receiving communion will bring the meaning full circle. Every layer of meaning will be in place. We will know: yes, Lord, we believe.