

When you hear those verses about Wisdom's banquet, how do they make you feel? Besides hungry, of course. The lavish meal and earnest invitation sound so appealing that one might wonder, why would anyone ever refuse an invitation to such a feast? And turning to the metaphor, one might wonder all the more, why would anyone ever refuse wisdom itself? Declining an invitation to a meal doesn't seem too serious to us, since food is not scarce in our world. [Why, we'll be giving food away at coffee hour! And yes, if you're here, you're invited.] But declining wisdom? Why would someone ever do that? The alternative is foolishness, and no one ever wants to be taken for a fool.

The answers become clear with a bit of reflection. I just went to the banquet celebrating the 45th anniversary of my friend and colleague, Fr. Hugh Chapman's, ordination. Although most of the work had been done by others, I had to make an effort, and I had to give up a certain amount of control. I had to dress appropriately and get myself there on time, and I had no idea with whom I would be seated, what foods were going to be served, or how long it would take. And of course, there are other things I could have been doing, many of which would have required less effort.

That event was a great celebration. I never considered skipping it, and I was so glad I went. But I can understand how making an effort or giving up control could put someone off. Indeed, I myself have declined invitations to events that didn't seem worth the effort, or that seemed to demand giving up just a bit too much control. Recognizing the cost of accepting an invitation is crucial for understanding why, when divine Wisdom is not only desirable and available but also proactive in seeking people out, so many people resist her call in favor of foolishness.

A lot of people feel threatened by the call of wisdom, and that's understandable, too. The Biblical text describes Wisdom sending her servants to "those without sense," and the invitation explicitly calls people "simple" and immature. It can be hard to accept that we need to grow. We like thinking that we are "all grown up," that we have all the knowledge, insight, and maturity we need. And we know that change is inherent to growth, and change, too, can be hard or scary. Moreover, for some people, this message is particularly threatening, because we had formative experiences that taught us that being wrong, expressing needs, or indeed demonstrating anything less than perfection is dangerous. Many of us were taught that approval, or even love, is conditioned on meeting standards, or at least appearing to.

But for the aspects of life that matter most, this attitude is utter foolishness! When we decline to learn and grow, no one is impressed; we only cheat ourselves out of wisdom that will make our lives better. And more importantly, God is not like those authority figures who taught us, implicitly or explicitly, that our worth is determined by how well we meet their standards. We often try to portray God as being like them, because they are familiar and it's easy to understand what they want. Concreteness and measurability are appealing to many people, as is the possibility of winning the game, and having one up on those who did not.

But the whole point of this passage of scripture, and I would say the whole point of our religion, is that God is gracious. God loves us before we even know what God wants from us, loves us before we try, loves us when we make half-hearted or insincere efforts, loves us when we inevitably fail at perfection. And more than that, we already know that God's love is not a passive emotion; divine Wisdom is proactive, ceaselessly calling us into closer, more mature relationship with God. In today's passage from Ephesians, St. Paul reflects this grace by not dwelling on what's wrong with the world or predicting horrible consequences for getting life wrong, but by encouraging God's people to devotion, gratitude, and joy.

God's ultimate grace for humanity is Jesus Christ. He is the Word of God, and the Wisdom of God, incarnate. Mysteriously transcending narrative and metaphor, he is both the host and the banquet itself. The Gospels talk about food and feeding so much that you would think the evangelists were obsessed with the topic. But I think they were portraying both the literal life of Jesus and conveying the early church's understanding of who he is in terms that made sense to an ancient audience, and still resonate today.

We all have to eat, today we have a wide range of choices of what we eat, and we understand that what we choose to eat will have serious consequences. So we are fortunate that the evangelists spoke in these terms, especially St. John. Preachers, myself included, have complained that the Bread of Life Discourse goes on so long, taking up three Sundays. But the more Scripture talks about something, the more important it was to the authors.

To the authors of the New Testament, a relationship with Jesus was literally a matter of life and death. They were trying to convey the importance of not only understanding who Jesus is, but also of the right way to be in relationship with him. The first three Gospels describe the institution of the Eucharist in detail. St. John, evidently, did not see a need to repeat that work, but rather wrote extensively about what the Eucharist means. Today, many Christians say they understand the Eucharist as strictly symbolic, or merely a reminder of what happened long ago, or an emotional exercise, but the words of Jesus make it abundantly clear that there is far more to the Eucharist than our own thoughts, feelings, or comprehension.

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me." These are not the words of someone encouraging a friend to tie a string around their finger so they won't forget! They are the words of Wisdom, urging all people to follow the way of life, to sustain ourselves on God's soul-nutrition rather than the world's soul-poison. And the early Church understood the profound, spiritual life-giving power of the Eucharist. John's disciple St. Ignatius of Antioch described the Eucharist as "the medicine of immortality."

Being in relationship with Jesus is not only for our own benefit, but also for the benefit of the world. Jesus calls all Christians to invite others to his banquet, taking on the role of wisdom for ourselves. By allowing ourselves to be transformed, by making our relationship with Jesus our highest priority, we make the world a more gracious place. God's wisdom shows us that giving in to our impulses of greed, fear, and anger — which the world encourages — destroys us and others. Whereas accepting the feast of grace turns us to live in a more gracious way, to practice grace even when it's hard, sustaining us and others.

Jesus has prepared the feast of life and wisdom and built the house, the Church, in which he offers them. He invites all the world to partake, but he does not compel anyone to do so. We must choose to join the feast, which requires effort, and the humility — the honesty — to admit that we are not satisfied with the way we are, that our own best efforts have left us hungry. Those who accept his invitation will find their effort repaid many times over. In the house of Wisdom we will be fed, and grateful, and after we eat our fill, we will get up eager to invite others to return with us and join the feast.