

Proper 15Bi – August 16, 2015
Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Wisdom's Seven Pillars of Love

Part of Jesus' teaching on his being the Bread of Life is found again in today's gospel reading. And it's no coincidence that our other appointed readings, from 1 Kings and from Proverbs and Ephesians, also appear today; for they add further insights into what we've been hearing in John's gospel. To know the wisdom of the Lord is like being invited to a feast at a table, as our reading from Proverbs states, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed." The New Testament proclaims that Christ is the Word, the Wisdom of God who has come to us in the flesh of human life. To know Christ, then, is to know God's Wisdom; and to live in Christ is to live wisely, as St. Paul writes in our reading from Ephesians. And to know and practice that divine wisdom is like being nourished at a banquet table.

Our first lesson from Proverbs invites us to look deeper at Wisdom's special house made of seven pillars and discern more about God's Wisdom from this home she has created (in Scripture wisdom is stated in the feminine). And the more we look, the more it may help us understand and follow Christ, who the New Testament testifies is God's Wisdom in the flesh.

The first insight from Proverbs is that *wisdom builds a house*. At first glance, it may seem that this is contrary to common sense. Isn't it better and wiser to be free to wander at will, to follow inspiration wherever it takes us, and not to be bound by anything, be it tradition or dogma, routine or custom? And isn't there, as well, a fear that if we commit to one place, or one way of looking at reality, we will lose others, limit ourselves, and foreshorten other possibilities? If I choose this, won't I miss that? If I am here, then I cannot be there! We know the anxiety that if we stay fixed in one place or perspective or routine, we may lose out on what might lie elsewhere.

Yet if there is fear associated with staying put, there is also danger in wandering too far. Sometimes waiting brings reward; sometimes waiting more than wandering brings reward. Even though wandering can enrich the waiting, even give us new eyes to see when we have finally settled, as T. S. Eliot wrote in his *Four Quartets*: "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."ⁱⁱ Another poet, Lal Ded, a 14th Century Kashmiri poet wrote the following, hinting that waiting sometimes more than wandering, brings reward: "I was passionate, filled with longing; I searched far and wide. But the day that the Truthful One found me, I was at home."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is why Wisdom builds a house: we cannot be found unless we are at home. So we must build that home. We must decide to plant ourselves here, and not there, and then wait. Yet many of us, spiritually speaking, know that much of our lives is spent looking for our real home, our real place of belonging. This longing for—this homesickness for—our

spiritual home gives our hearts a kind of homing device to seek and search. As St. Augustine stated in his prayer, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” Yet, even when we don’t feel at home, we can build home and seek the wellbeing of others wherever we are; and find that in doing so we have secured our own wellbeing. Thus the prophet Jeremiah counseled those who were forced out of their homes into exile after the sacking of Jerusalem by the forces of Babylon. He wrote to the exiles saying, “Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare [Jeremiah 29:5, 7].”

This points to the second insight: not only does Wisdom build a house, but she does so *in a definite place*. In another book of Biblical wisdom literature, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom speaks and says, “Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. The Creator said, ‘Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance.’ [24:8]” Now here is a paradox. Although Wisdom builds in one definite place according to the Biblical record, making herself part of one historical tradition, allying herself with a group of fallible human beings—the Israelites—following the Creator’s command; yet, she also chooses not to limit herself only to one place or one people. In reading through the rest of the book of Proverbs, for example, Wisdom is to be found in the street, in the public square, on the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads, beside the gates in front of the town, and at the entrance of the portals. What we see is that Wisdom does not secret herself exclusively into some quiet corner of the temple, or house of study, or some academy or university or monastery, or particular religious tradition or expression. Rather, she places Herself in the midst of all the bustle of human activity. And to the New Testament witnesses to Jesus as the Word and Wisdom of God in the flesh, this same paradox is revealed. In the letter to the Colossians, for example, Paul states of Jesus that, “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell [1:19]” – all of God contained in Jesus of Nazareth, yet paradoxically God simultaneously fully outside of Jesus, literally supporting and containing the whole universe.

Wisdom dwells and can be found, not apart from the everyday situations and concerns of people and their lives, but rather among them—in fact, as one of them. What Wisdom builds there, in the middle of the square, in the street, at the crossroads, seems rather odd at first, as our reading from Proverbs puts it. For Wisdom’s house consists only of *seven pillars*. We hear nothing about walls or roof. Wisdom’s house must be so, though, because, although rooted in the world, it must remain open to the movement of the Spirit which moves among us and all people everywhere. Wisdom’s house must be open because the Spirit of God blows where it chooses; and though we may hear the sound of it, we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with Wisdom. Wisdom’s house must neither wall in nor wall out. It must neither trap nor exclude, but be open to all who freely seek from whatever background they may be. As one observer put it,

“Of the many forms of architecture, the tall slender pillar or column comes closest to human body proportions...a monumental version of our own stance on the landscape. As part of a building, pillars are essential supports, the source of its stability. If they are compromised the building itself is in danger...And within the

body itself, the bony spine, known of course as the ‘spinal column,’ has the same function. Symbolically then, pillars have come to represent basic stability and strength. They support the building, the body, and the organization ([as] we speak of a person as ‘a pillar of the community’)...The upright pillar also carries the symbolism of an upward thrust toward the heavens, the realm of the Spirit [or of Wisdom]. Even the gods [or God] have been imagined in this form. Consider...Yahweh who, in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, led the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 13:21-22)...

Probably the origin of the pillar image lies in humankind’s experience of great trees—their overwhelming height, long lives, great strength, their rootedness in earth and apparent reach into the sky. In this way the pillar is symbolically related to the ‘world tree,’ the symbolic axis that connects earth and heaven and allows travel between the two realms.”^{iv}

Now, why *seven* pillars? From its occurrence in the Bible more than 500 times, the number seven has a variety of significant meanings.^v One interpretation from the rabbinic tradition [Midrash Mishleli – commentary on Proverbs] holds that the seven pillars is a reference to the seven lands—the seven continents, the whole world in other words—to be inherited by the one who has upheld Torah, the Law of Moses. I find this rabbinic interpretation compelling, as it seems to mean that the wise person, schooled in divine law of love and its practice, inherits the world, thus possessing so to speak, everything that is of value. With that in mind, let me recite a poem by a 13th century Flemish mystic named Hadewijch of Brabant, entitled “Love’s Seven Names.” It is not an easy poem, nor are the seven qualities of love to which she draws our attention, at all sentimental. Nonetheless, Hadewijch’s seven names for love fit perfectly on the seven pillars of the house of Wisdom, thus making it a structure without walls that exclude, but with seven pillars of love that invite and support, redeem and sustain everything. Bear with me—this may feel a bit obscure; but it’s very insightful—a wise poem. Hadewijch wrote:

“Love has seven names,
Which, as you know, are appropriate to her:
Chain, light, live coal, and fire –
These four names designate the awe Love inspires.
The other three names are great and strong –
Forever insufficient, but resonant of eternity:
They are dew, living spring, and pain.”

Chain, light, live coal, fire, dew, living spring, and pain - these seven names are remarkable! Hadewijch is saying that we are joined to those whom we love by bonds which are as unbreakable as though they were *chains* – the first name. Our love gives us the *light* to see in a world otherwise too often dark or in shadow; hence the second name. This love smolders within us like *live coal*, warming up and bursting forth into a *fire* – the third and fourth names. This love also comforts us with an oftentimes barely noticeable consolation, like the morning *dew* – hence the fifth name. At times love brings us to roaring tumultuous rapids of joy, like a *living spring* – the sixth name.

But then there is that seventh name for Love, the most difficult to appreciate, and which was softened to the word *pain* by the translator, even though Hadewijch herself actually called it “hell.” Love as hellish pain? How can that be? Yet how could we deny what we, I suspect nearly all of us, have experienced, or caused? Those whom we love, to whom we are or have been bound, who give or gave us life, who brighten our darkness and warm our cold, may also cause us such pain by their actions, their presence, or by our loss of them, that we don’t know how it can be borne. Then we can say with Jesus, Wisdom incarnate, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – and then it is only that same Love that can help us remain in faith.

So then why do we love when it causes such pain, or we cause such pain? Why do we struggle to build this house of the seven pillars of Love? Because as Wisdom says elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs, “whoever finds me finds life [8:35].” So we need to find her. And we need to build her house. Together we need to place ourselves in the midst of the world and its needs, in the midst of the square, in the streets, in the crossroads, rooted in our time and place, and with our traditions alongside others and their traditions, and open to all with whom the Spirit might bring us into relationship. We need to be founded and grounded on that holy awe which Scripture says is the beginning of wisdom [Proverbs 9:10]. We need to build not walls that exclude, but love that invites and supports – the seven pillars of Love that aren’t sentimental, but real and powerful. And in that house, this house, let us place the banquet of our common life, the Holy Eucharist of Christ the Living Bread. Let us offer it to all who come in search of Wisdom’s truth and love. Let the Truthful One find us in this home. Let us learn all the names of Love. Let us build Wisdom’s house.

ⁱ I am indebted to Fr. David Cotter (formerly OSB, of St. Anselm’s College and St. John’s College (Collegeville, MN)) for some of the ideas used in this sermon; especially from his homily preached at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association held at the University of San Diego.

ⁱⁱ T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” in Four Quartets ((1943) San Diego: Harvest Book/Harcourt, Inc., 1971).

ⁱⁱⁱ The essence of a house or home is containment and shelter. As one observer writes,

“A house is one embodiment of home; ‘home is where the heart is,’ a feeling [or] state of belonging, safety and contentment...Home is the...rituals of relationship, conjunction, [or] solitude...enacted in the house’s [living room,] kitchen, bedroom, bathroom. [And apart from one’s house, in] woods, desert...a ship at sea, [with] a beloved friend [or spiritual family], [in] a particular city, [or] a set of circumstances—is projected ‘home.’ These correspond...or contribute to something within—the experience of a vital [sense] of both fixity and freedom, rest after striving, being fully oneself...[of course,] home has been idealized...[for] home can be a prison or a haven of avoidance. One is homebound, or a homebody. In house and home are domestic harmony and domestic violence. Home can represent the nurturing of the self [and others], and also [their] violation. We escape home, outgrow home, return home, seek home. Home is the goal of epic odysseys, spiritual quests and psychic [and spiritual] transformation.” (Quoted in “House/Home” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 556).

^{iv} Quoted in “Pillar/Column” in The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images Ibid., p. 624.

^v Regarding this particular passage, some Biblical commentators say that seven pillars refer to the metaphoric pillars on which the earth was founded (as described in Job (9:6; 26:11) and Psalm 75 (v.3)).

Or the seven pillars refer in a metaphoric way to perfection as the number seven itself is seen in other places in Scripture.