

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY,
AUGUST 19, 2018,
AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE

There's a Christian who's hiking in the woods one day when he comes upon an angry bear.

The bear stood up on its hind legs and growled ferociously, clearly preparing to charge.

In panic, the Christian started to run, but the bear followed close on his heels.

Finally the hiker came to a cliff. So he dropped to his knees and asked God to please make this bear a good Christian bear.

To the hiker's amazement, the bear suddenly stopped growling, fell to his knees and folded his paws together in prayer!

"Thank you, Lord!" exclaimed the Christian.

"Thank you, Lord!" exclaimed the bear, "for this meal I'm about to receive!"ⁱ

Speaking of meals, at long last we have our fill of the feeding of the 5000 in John. It has taken us to both sides of the lake, up the mountain, to local homes, to hideaways for respite, to walking on the water and other big and small miracles. In 58 verses, this 6th chapter of John has tried to show us, early on, the mysterious ways of God and God's

unique relationship with the Christ, who is the Son. And because John has no Last Supper event (only a foot washing in chapter 13), we are left to develop our own theology of communion based on the final verses we are reading this morning. This is one of the few times the secondary lessons for the day can be and are helpful. The people who put together the lectionary have framed it in the context of divine Wisdom, so we get the chance this morning to learn about Wisdom and the Spirit and their relationship to our weekly communion. “One fruitful angle in these texts is the way worldly knowledge is not the same as divine wisdom.”ⁱⁱ The contrast between one and the other is so great

that it can seem like utter foolishness. The idea that one man's body can feed the entire world and has done so for 2000 years or so is something we struggle to embrace, but yet we do so constantly and it continues to embrace us. We show up each Sunday to this reality and are filled by its actuality. The body and blood Christ through-participation-in-a-community-meal fill us with new wisdoms and the life of the Spirit as well. And we need that to face the world as it is presenting itself these days. I can't imagine putting myself out there in cyberspace or walking or driving without some sort of worldly wisdom surrounding me. It'd be like swimming in deep murky waters without a life

preserver. (I feel as though I'm doing that enough already...) So what can Divine wisdom offer me?

First we look at its qualities: it is pure, it is gentle, it is full of mercy, it is full of good fruits, it is easy to be entreated.ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, appealing to it, that it be part of our being, part of our life, is a good thing. I don't know how often we pray for Divine Wisdom, Sacred Wisdom in our daily life, but it'd be a good practice even for our Sunday services together. And because of its qualities I listed before, it is unlike any other praying we are doing: soft, kind, full of grace, approachable. Adding that type of prayer to our daily list or weekly table will be transformative and unlike any

other prayer experience we are having. For instance, to ask by means of Divine Wisdom that the results of our communion together would make us purer, gentler, ready to do good works, and merciful would be nothing sure of amazing. If we were so moved, our faces would light up, our countenance would radiate, we'd be no longer who we once were. So let's add a prayer for Divine or Sacred wisdom to our plate and see where it takes us.

Second, when we are hosted by the Divine Spirit, this Spirit of wisdom, we are drawn into the mystery of God in all essences, and we are invited to take on its nature. I suggested before that we become gentler when we participate as

guests of Wisdom. When we are made into God's people by sitting around the holy table, we are led to become food for others^{iv}. That is to say, our experience, simply by being here and coming to communion can fill the folk who are likewise here. To think how this happens, let's say someone who is new to the congregation is pondering whether or not they should partake also. Your participation in coming to the Table might encourage them. In fact if you see someone who is new, do invite them to join you for communion. The invitation might put a few people off, but most folks I've spoken to have said that they came forward because they were invited. The Sacred Spirit has thankfully

provided us with the insight to invite everyone to communion, regardless of their denominational background or their faith. We call this “open communion,” and it is not practiced by all churches, I can tell you. Why given such an invitation, we should be full on Sundays, but there are other considerations that come into play here. Suffice it to say that the Spirit is alive here and we are at our best living in this kind of philosophy.

Heavy stuff, but necessary for us to understand how communion can be more than just a community meal. It’s meant to change our life weekly, and through us the lives of others. Even when we are not present, our gathering,

that includes prayers for those who are sick or absent or travelling or merely in our thoughts sends its Spirit to be with others, and through us and our invocation, make them whole. And these final verses which we hear today of the Bread of Life Discourse that we have been looking at these last five weeks have an interesting twist, I believe. We'll notice all throughout this gospel series about bread and wine that Jesus is not so interested in what they hear as he is that they eat! The words "flesh" and "blood" in these verses are a foreshadowing and point, not unsurprisingly, to the cross, where Jesus' flesh will be broken and his blood will be spilled.^v He wants those who hear them

to eat and drink the bread and blood so that they can be raised up on the last day regardless of what they believe. That is the interesting nature of communion. It can carry to us wholeness and healing and strength and belief regardless of what we personally bring to it. And you'll notice that Jesus promises rather than explains communion, because, with God there is not so much knowledge to be explained and understood as it is relationship to be trusted and embraced. It seems that there is a lot more going on at God's table than we could ask for or imagined, and certainly much more to take away for us from this Sunday expression of faith.

Doing life or having life; that's the issue Jesus is concerned about. That's the focus of today's gospel. It is important enough that it has been the subject of the last several Sundays of gospel readings. Each week has brought us closer to the unspoken question behind today's gospel: Is there life within you?

^{vi}The message or expression of it often appears in critical moments. I had some personal experiences with this during my time as a pastor in New Rochelle, NY. In the first case I was called to give last rites to a congregant who had been in a coma for several weeks. I went and said the usual words and laid my hands upon him with a prayer. He awoke quite startled, and though he could not speak

due to a stroke, he put his hands on me to let me know he was awake and aware. When his wife, Patty, arrived several hours later, she was amazed at the difference in him. He had been totally transformed. Though he was never fully cured of the stroke symptoms, he did live for another 5 ½ years in the same nursing home where he had been in hospice care (they moved him to another room soon after his miraculous recovery.) He went on doing life, having life and he was quite happy about it! In the second case, I was called to give last rites to the mother-in-law of the chief of police in the city. She had been in a coma for about three weeks, and her daughter

was concerned about her labored breathing. Like in the previous case, I laid hands on her and said a prayer at which she awakened, again startled, and seeing all the folks gathered around her she exclaimed “what are you all doing here?” She lived on about another three months, doing life, having life. Yet the most amazing occasion came with my friend, Tony, who had been sleeping without waking up for several days. His wife, Barbara, called and asked if I would come and be with her, say some final prayers, etc. I was glad to do so. Tony and I had been close friends in the theater group I had run for eight years, and he was a great guy with a good sense of humor. So I went reluctantly

went to say farewell to my friend, and when I got there, everyone in his small family had gathered. I began to say a prayer and I laid my hands on him, at which point he got up, pulled all the covers off, pulled all the tubes out of his arm, and started walking down the hall. Needless to say, it was quite disturbing, as it took several orderlies to bring him back to bed and several nurses to get him stable and hooked up again. When all was settled and we had barely recovered, his cousin looked me in the eye and said “Don’t do that again!” Tony died a few days later having life, doing life for just a bit longer, until he was ready for that last moment of this life and the start of life eternal,

whatever form that takes. I relate these stories because they are real but they also express the hunger we have to be with Christ, even and most at the end of life.

When I was working on my doctoral thesis I also began working on a book called *The Burning Question: Six Answers People Want to Know Before They Die*. There were the usual expected queries, like will I see my loved ones again, will I see my pets again, was the resurrection and eternal life a hoax, etc. However, one question in the list gave me pause as I had not expected it, and that was “did I do with my life what I should have? Did I do with my life what I was called to do? In other words, was their life in me?

Only we can answer that question. It takes an openness to Divine Spirit and Divine Wisdom; it requires a commitment to be present to others through communion; it entails faith that we do not know everything but that all things are complete in Christ. And in the end, it means that we must put our hands into a loving and omnipresent God whose love for us is the answer to the hunger within us.

Amen.

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ⁱ <http://www.jokes.net/christianhiking.ht>

ⁱⁱ *Sundays and Seasons Preaching Year B 2018*, 225.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/carpenter/divine_wisdom.htm

^{iv} *Sundays and Sermons*, 226.

^v http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2552

^{vi} <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2012/08/20/eat-me-drink-me-a-sermon-on-john-651-58-proper-15b/>