

Sermon: A Few Fries Short of a Happy Meal

Year B, Proper 15

[Proverbs 9:1-6](#); [Psalm 34:9-14](#); [Ephesians 5:15-20](#); [John 6:51-58](#)

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A few French fries short of a Happy Meal. Sharp as a marble. All foam, no beer. Donated their brain to science a little too early. If you gave them a penny for their thoughts, you'd get change. Do you guys have some other ones?

We know what we're talking about. It's not about someone who's developmentally disabled, or someone with Alzheimer's or some kind of brain injury. It's perfectly capable people who aren't thinking, who are just using their heads as a place to hang their ears (that was my grandmother's saying). We all have days when we're firing on all three cylinders. I've had to call Carol early on a snowy Sunday morning to report that I had locked myself out of the church, but not to worry because I had also left my car keys in the car, so I had a warm place to wait until she could rescue me.

We all do dumb things, maybe not all the time, but frequently enough that we recognize them. We shake our heads and are glad that there's someone with a sense of humor and a key lives five minutes away.

Those kind of sharp-as-a-marble things are crazy making, and past a certain age, they make you wonder if this is the first stage of dementia, but they're not unwise. Unwise things, that the passages from Proverbs and Ephesians, are the things we do when we act on an assumption that the world does not work the way it really does.

I got a call a month or so ago from the IRS. With two jobs, my tax situation is a little complicated and it didn't surprise me that I had made a mistake. The good news was that I could straighten this out over the phone and wouldn't get hit with a penalty. The guy was talking a little quickly and the line quality wasn't great. I was having trouble following what he said. For some reason, I said to the guy, "I just need to get my wallet from the other room. I'll be back in a second." I put the phone down and Googled "calls from the IRS". The first search result, from irs.gov, "scam phone calls continue". The IRS doesn't call you. The IRS only initiates issues with tax payers via the mail. I know that because I have had to sort out an issue with the IRS in the past and it started with a letter. Someone calling out of the blue from the IRS is a scam.

Because of my schedule, sometimes I'm home during the day on a weekday. The only thing that makes me particularly different from a lot of seniors at home during the day is that if I'm awake, my computer is pretty much on, so I could look up that kind of information quickly. But like many seniors, I live in a world where the IRS is an agency to be placated as quickly as possible, where the IRS might actually try to do you a favor of getting a problem sorted out and where I have tried incredibly hard to maintain good credit so that I have the ability to straighten out any mistakes I honestly make.

It's unwise to live in that world. Because that's not the way the world works. If that same contact had come via email, I would have marked it as spam and moved on. Heck, if it had come via email, it would have probably ended up in my spam folder and I would never have seen it. The thing is, I won't be caught by the IRS-on-the-phone scam again, but I'm not sure that some

other phone scam won't catch me. Because I'm not on my guard there. I'm unwise, at least in that portion of the world.

The ancient Israelites knew that to serve God, you needed to be wise and to grow in wisdom. They had a figure, who was feminine, called Wisdom with a capital W. She appears to have been there as long as God was there. It's not clear if God created her or if she is a part of God, but her role evolved with time as the Israelites became wiser and lived in the world as a people for longer.¹

In their first view of the world, God rewarded the good and punished the bad and did so immediately. That made complete sense. God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt into the land of milk and honey. They had flourished in their new land under David and Solomon. Over time, perhaps the Assyrians were a bit of a problem. They had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, after all. You could deal with them, though. Pay them a bit of tribute and all was well. And after all, clearly the guys in the Northern Kingdom were being punished for doing something wrong. At that point in their history, the Israelites thought of Wisdom as the innate sense we have of how to live in right relationship in the world. Sure, God had given them the Torah. Not just the big 10, but the 613 rules for living in faithful community. But all those laws need to be interpreted. So you need Wisdom to determine if it's ok to eat the meal you've been served or marry the stranger who's caught your heart.

Before the Babylonians came and conquered Jerusalem, that's the way they thought the world worked. God rewarded the good and punished the bad, did so immediately and Wisdom helped you figure out what was good and bad. We all have a bit of that world view left over. How many people do you know who have cancer and are shell shocked? "I never smoked. I was training for a triathlon. I drank tons of water." When something bad happens, like a factory blowing up in China, we want to know why. Because we want to live in a world where bad things happen for a reason.

But we actually live in a world where genes mutate randomly. We live in a world where the Babylonians come and destroy your temple, taking all the leaders of your people into exile. Not just the rascals and the scoundrels, not just the bad people who thought no one noticed they were breaking the rules, but the good people. And not just the people who put on a good outward show, but were bad in private. The Babylonians took everyone into exile.

So it was time for a new world view. The bad people flourish, the good people suffer, but God will intervene in the end. In that world, you have three choices. You can resist the bad people, and risk death. You can collaborate with the bad people and risk damnation. Or you can keep your head down as much as possible and maintain your identity as one of God's people. And even if you just try to maintain your identity, you're probably doing some small scale resisting and some small scale collaborating as you try to follow God's law. So in this upside down world, Wisdom takes on an even larger role helping you walk the path of righteousness. The world is just as clear as before, just reversed. Wisdom's role is larger, but not really different. She helps us recognize the bad and the good in other people so we respond correctly.

¹ Thomas R. Steagald, "Proper 15, Theological Perspective, Proverbs 9:1-6" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 340.

We have a little bit of this world view too, right. We know bad people prosper and we just hope that they get caught in the end. We teach our kids that the world isn't fair, sometimes people get away with things they shouldn't. But that doesn't mean that we choose to do something we know is wrong. Sometimes we almost take pleasure in watching someone set themselves up for a fall. At this point in the presidential primary, that may be all we're really doing.

Eventually, after a generation or two in exile, the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians. The Persians offered to let the Israelites go home, which many did. The world just couldn't be black and white anymore. Sometimes bad people prospered, sometimes good people did. God didn't appear to be stepping in very often to give people what they deserved. Wisdom was no longer just something you consulted, like an almanac, to see how to handle a specific combination of stars and weather. Wisdom became something that helped you deal with the ambiguities of living in the world.²

The Book of Proverbs has very few stories. It's a collection of sayings to help us live in an ambiguous world. The purpose of a proverb is to gain a hoped for result through a verbal medium. Think how much of what we say is in hopes for a particular result. We speak to our kids from ages 9 to 16 in hopes of all kinds of results. We may not see the results, but that doesn't stop us from cranking out more proverbs. From our own lives, we know that proverbs don't always work. Plus it's hard to tell which one to apply: be home by 10:00pm or don't leave a friend who needs you.

Wisdom knows it's hard to negotiate this ambiguous world. So she builds a house where we can gather. She prepares a lovely meal for us. She invites us in. We don't have to be clever. Those without sense are welcome. We can become more and better, we can become wiser by following her. How do we follow her? Through study of the Scriptures, certainly, but then by taking those Scriptures back out into the world.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians goes one better. Be aware of the evil in the world, be careful how you live. But stay on the right path through singing, by being grateful to God. Come to the Summer Revival Under the Trees next Sunday and we'll sing and be grateful together.

What are we grateful for? That we have the Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible that Jesus so loved and the writings that followed his ministry. We have those Scriptures and Jesus has asked us not only to listen to what they have to teach us, but to go and live them out in the world. We have the songs that we can sing together that can fill us with the Spirit, and then we can go out into the world and live out what the Spirit is teaching us to do.

The feast is abundant and we have been called to it. Perhaps especially on those days when our Happy Meals are a few fries short.

² Steagald