



Spring Homily 2008

Prov 3:13-18; John 8:31-38

As a child, I was blessed—or cursed depending on one’s perspective—with a love for reading and a lust to learn everything there was to know. Growing up in a small, deeply rural town in the 50s, my book selection was limited. Our small library, composed of books donated by the local homemaker’s club, featured an eclectic collection reflecting mostly what traveling salespersons had persuaded gullible customers to buy. Reading everything I could get my hands on, I naively believed that—in the words of our first lesson--I had found Wisdom and, in so doing, had found the way to the freedom of the tree of life.

Eclectically educated as I was, college was quite a shock to my system. Not only did I not know what I thought I knew, I also discovered that I lacked the skills necessary to access the depth of wisdom awaiting me in the university library. We didn’t have a card catalogue in my tiny home library. I didn’t know how to use one and was too embarrassed to ask. Surrounded by all the knowledge available in all those books, I wandered the stacks aimlessly lacking the key to access the wisdom awaiting me there.

Looking back, I realize that in many ways my insatiable quest for knowledge was a tool I used to allow me to flee rather than face my fears. Those fears were real—fears about a seemingly never-ending war in far off Vietnam, race riots only a few miles from my campus, the precarious financial situation of the deaconess association, the unknownness of where I would be sent on my first deaconess call. Trying to learn all there is to know was my way of fleeing those fears, of living in the illusion that my world and my life were totally under control.

Like that young college student, the Jewish believers Jesus addresses in today’s Gospel lust for knowledge and live in an illusion that allows them to flee their fears. Eclectically educated in their faith traditions, they assume that their genealogical tie to Abraham links them to Wisdom and makes them free. Knowledge of who they are in relation to Abraham is their form of control—their way of keeping at bay any fears and anxieties that might be swelling up in their depths.

To them, Jesus is an enigma, a shock to their systems. Portrayed by John as Wisdom incarnate, Jesus identifies himself rather than Abraham as the Wisdom that alone makes free. His hearers, assuming that their eclectic education has given them all they need to know, don't get it. Standing face to face with the way, the truth, the life—Wisdom incarnate—they lack the key to access who Jesus is and what Jesus' claims mean for them. They don't get it—and in their fears they flee.

Why, we might wonder, is it so hard for them to get it? Perhaps for the same kinds of reasons it often is so hard for us to get it as well. Confessing that Jesus is the way, the truth that makes free, the life is a risky endeavor. Risking to trust in Jesus as Wisdom Incarnate means letting go of any illusions that life is under our control, opening our hearts to the claims that Jesus makes on us. It involves facing our fears rather than using intellectual knowledge or lineage or whatever tools we use to flee them.

In John's Gospel, the key to accessing the tree of life lies in trust that through the crucifixion of Wisdom Incarnate on the tree of death God has unleashed on the world the healing, life-giving and sustaining powers of the Tree of Life through the ongoing presence of the Spirit among God's faithful people. Blowing like a wind that cannot be confined or controlled, the Spirit breathes into the faithful the life-giving and sustaining presence of the Risen One for service in that one's name. Shattering any illusions that life is under our control, that fleeing fears is a viable alternative to facing them, through the wind of the Spirit the Risen Christ offers to walk with us in our fears and anxieties, calming us when we hyper-ventilate, filling our lungs with fresh life-sustaining breath, inviting and equipping us to go with the Spirit's flow wherever the wind will take us. Our heads or whatever techniques we use to flee our fears won't get us there. Our hearts, pumping the life-giving oxygen only the Spirit breath can give, will. According to John's Gospel, this is the truth that sets us free.

The tree of death is empty. The Spirit is on the loose, unleashed on our world with healing power. Take a deep breath. Slowly exhale your fears and anxieties. Open your lungs and your heart to the life-giving and sustaining wind....to the truth that makes you free. The table is set. The guests have arrived. Come, inhale the presence of the One who is for you and for all the world the way, the truth, the life. AMEN