

I was on a road trip with my best friend when a song came on from our favorite band, Old Crow Medicine Show. The song is called "Let it Alone," and one part goes,  
"I'm gonna tell you  
What's the wisest plan  
When it comes to mixing in with things  
That you just don't understand,  
Let it alone, let it alone,  
If it don't concern you, let it alone,  
Don't go around putting on airs,  
And meddling in other folks' affairs,  
If you don't know, say so,  
Mind your own business and let it alone."

My friend said, "That's terrible advice. It's a great song, but terrible advice." The song wasn't even over yet.

I said, "No it's not, that's great advice."

It had been a long trip.

We were really talking about our own preferences, not a profound philosophical difference. Both of us knew that there are some situations where it's clearly best to intervene, and others are just the opposite. And on a deeper level, we knew that it's not always clear whether, or how, to get involved. If you've ever seen *Chinatown*, you know that trying to help someone can lead to disaster, but if you're listening to a sermon, you probably believe that helping people is a moral good and deeply satisfying. Knowing what to do in a murky or fraught situation is beyond the realm of preference or even philosophy; that is the domain of wisdom.

Early Christians were heirs to the profound writings and deep sacred traditions of Judaism, including its rich treasury of wisdom literature. The Old Testament has much to say about wisdom, its properties and examples. The authors describe wisdom with elevated, highly metaphorical and sometimes mystical poetry and prose, but they also treat wisdom much like a craft that can be learned and honed through dedicated, intentional study and practice. It is true that wisdom comes to us with experience and advancing years, but it is also true that wisdom can be earned and cultivated intentionally. And who among us couldn't do with more?

Intriguingly, the Hebrew writers often personified Wisdom, and early Christians readily identified the person of Wisdom with that of Christ. For the Christians, this was an intuitive connection to make, much like connecting the Spirit of the Lord with the Holy Spirit. They seem completely unconcerned that the Old Testament writers described Wisdom as female. Much more important to them was that Wisdom is portrayed as a direct expression of the divine nature, one that is intended for human consumption. We could, of course, describe Jesus in precisely the same words.

Jesus came into the world not only to redeem the world by his death and

resurrection, but also to enliven the world by revealing the deep wisdom of God. The purpose of this revelation was not only to show us that Jesus is divine and to place him at the head of the human lineage of prophets, but also to equip and enliven us, to change who we are by sharing that wisdom with us in ways we can use right now.

The Wisdom of God gives new life to the world, and not just in a metaphorical sense. Jesus's teachings brought the ethics of Judaism to a wider audience, eventually conquering the every-man-for-himself, winner-take-all values of pagan Rome with a more Godly, and therefore better, code of conduct. Because we live in a world that has been so thoroughly reshaped by the Wisdom of Jesus, we don't realize that compassion, humility, and forgiveness were not always broadly accepted as values and virtues.

Protecting the vulnerable was once considered a rare eccentricity, not the mark of a just and civilized society. Those who observed Christianity supplanting paganism in ancient Rome remarked that the once-common practice of abandoning unwanted children in the wilderness to die of exposure was itself dying out — from exposure to the Wisdom of God. And in our own day, we can think of examples of Wisdom keeping people alive, such as getting vaccinated against COVID.

Today's Gospel depicts Jesus intervening in another group's conversation. I guess that vindicates my best friend. If you read the text carefully, you notice that "the Jews" were not confronting Jesus, but rather "disputed among themselves." Specifically, they disputed what Jesus meant when he called himself "the living bread that came down from heaven," and what the implications of that might be. We might have some empathy for them, since people today are still debating those questions.

The situation might have looked like one that Jesus should have avoided, but Jesus loved them too much to withhold his wisdom from them. Jesus had been teaching about what all should believe about him, but now he begins to teach about what all should do. He reveals that his nature is to give life, and like bread, he will nourish all who have a relationship with him, whether they understand him, or how he sustains them, or even know his name. This was before anyone had heard of gluten intolerance, so work with me here.

This certainly means that Jesus nourishes us when we receive him in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, but also when we receive him in another way he makes himself available to the world: wisdom. When we seek out wisdom, and act wisely, we encounter Christ, and present him to the world. Like the Eucharist, wisdom is the birthright of every Christian, means of communion with God we are entitled to from the moment of our baptism. And like those sacraments, wisdom makes us better in order to make the world better.

It's true that hurt people hurt people, but it's not true that they always do. In my own experience, there have been times when an experience of suffering, disappointment, or injustice has inspired me to be more compassionate, rather than bitter or vindictive. Not every time, to be sure; we all have our raw nerves, blind spots,

and very pushable buttons. But Wisdom teaches that few situations are truly hopeless, few reactions are inevitable, and we don't have to resign ourselves to being captives of our own reflexes. God can bring good out of bad, so sometimes Jesus grants us the wisdom to look beyond ourselves, our pain and our fear, and to the needs of the world.

Jesus strengthens us to bring grace and redemption out of the worst the world can do, just as Jesus himself did for us on the Cross. Recognizing these opportunities, let alone acting upon them, takes great wisdom, but such is available to us in abundance, straight from the source. Just as Christians long for the nourishment of Christ in the Eucharist, and seek him there faithfully, intentionally, and regularly, so too should we seek him in the form of divine Wisdom, another feast to which all are invited. And like the Eucharist, the feast of Wisdom elevates all who partake, causing us to become what we receive.