

## *Two Lavish Banquets and One Rustic Breakfast*

*When they had gone ashore they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.*

*Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."*

*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter . . . "Feed my sheep."*

(John 21:9, 12, 15a, 17b)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Third Sunday of Easter, **April 15, 2018**

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*"Come and have breakfast,"* the risen Jesus said to his disciples, and I've looked forward this morning for the opportunity to say to you, *"Come, break bread with me,"* let me be your guide through time and space as we attend *Two Lavish Banquets and One Rustic Breakfast*. I hope you've brought a hearty appetite with you.

This morning we will attend a lavish banquet in the Hebrew Bible (a diplomatic affair hosted by King Solomon and attended by many dignitaries, including the Queen of Sheba, and no doubt paid for -- I might mention on this April 15 -- with tax dollars), and then a rustic breakfast with the risen Christ beside the Sea of Galilee. Before this homiletical journey takes us all the way back to the Bible, though, I want to set the table by inviting you to join me at a second lavish banquet taking place much more recently.

*"What should I wear?"* you ask. Formal attire only please, for at this most luxurious affair we will meet some extraordinarily debonair and sophisticated people. We'll just be warming our time capsule, traveling back only 25 years, to June 1993. Our destination is Cambridge University, where now we gather in an ornate banquet hall, just as the staff is beginning to serve an exotically prepared feast. We're in the company of some of the world's brightest mathematical geniuses, distinguished scholars who've gathered from their posts at major universities around the world to hear and test the wisdom of one of their own, Professor Andrew Wiles, a British mathematician who today will seek to take his place among the most prestigious names in the history of mathematics. He will attempt to explain a conundrum baffling mathematicians for nearly 400 years. Hearing he has discovered the key to this elusive mystery, scholars have gathered from around the world in curiosity. Is this man's much-heralded genius genuine? Or, merely hype?

Gathering, our breath is swept away at the sight of a virtual marble palace, wall murals rising fifty feet on all four sides. Excitement is in the air as Cambridge hosts one of the most mesmerizing math classes in the history of the sport, the chamber filling with brilliant scholars, each claiming their own impressive resume.

The spotlight is on Professor Wiles (who, by the way, just turned 65 years old this past week, so a mere 40 as we visit him in 1993). The fame of his accomplishment has spread, and his

conclusions will now be put to the test. Today, we will know if his wisdom truly surpasses all the rest. The sumptuous meal now ended, the whirl of conversation silenced, all are listening attentively as Professor Wiles embarks on three one-hour lectures titled, "*Modular Forms, Elliptic Curves, and Galois Representations.*" Breathe deep this rarefied air of higher math.

He is presenting the solution to a tantalizing mathematical problem, *Fermat's Last Theorem*, named for Pierre de Fermat, a Frenchman born in 1601. An attorney by occupation and a poet by passion, math was merely his hobby. Quite a hobby! He established the mathematical theory of probability, used today by industries ranging from casinos to insurance companies. He was the first to describe diffraction, the bending of light, and also established calculus as a mathematical discipline. He is best known, though, for establishing a theorem in 1637 that has become known as *Fermat's Last Theorem*, a mystery defying solution for nearly 400 years.

Those who have come to put him to the test are merciless as they seek to expose a weakness in Professor Wile's solution, some chink in the theoretical armor of his presentation. Many in attendance have sought themselves, but failed to discover the answer to this supreme riddle. Through four centuries no one has been able to solve the enigma, even with the aid of computers.

Until now. Evidence laid out, questions answered, Professor Wiles writes a final equation on the board. Turning to his astounded audience, he lays his chalk in its holder. An adorable grin breaks out on his face, an image captured and published around the world, including TIME, where I read of it. The audience breaks into applause at this breathtaking display of mathematical prowess. It is, as TIME reported, *Fini to Fermat's Last Theorem*. Professor Wiles, having changed the landscape of number theory, became Sir Andrew Wiles, since 2000 a Knight of the British Empire, having proven *Fermat's Last Theorem*, a quest he had begun thirty years earlier, in 1963, when he was but ten years old.



*Come . . . Break Bread with Me.* I invite you to join me for yet another lavish banquet, formal attire again required. We'll need to travel much further back in time in order to attend, not twent-five years merely, but 3,000. Our destination? Jerusalem. We'll be attending a banquet on the occasion of a royal visit by the Queen of Sheba, who had heard of Solomon's reputed wisdom. Here's how the writer of 1 Kings describe Solomon's *hokma* (wisdom), casting it in terms of sport, competition with sages from throughout the east. "*God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else . . . his fame spread throughout the surrounding nations . . . People came from all nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon.*" (1 Kings 4:29-31,34)

That's an impressive academic resume! And Solomon was wealthy! Quite a catch for the right woman. An easy catch, evidently! Seven hundred princess wives called him husband, and three hundred more concubines rounded out his much-coveted harem. Come, and perhaps some of those wives will welcome us at the grand doors of the palace, joined by the highest officials of the realm to receive us along with dignitaries from Sheba, the queen attending with *"a very great retinue, camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones."*

The queen's primary purpose seems to have been to administer her country's SAT test to Solomon. Was his celebrated genius genuine? Or, merely hype? *"She came to test him with hard questions."* The queen was merciless, seeking to expose any weakness, any chink in his intellectual armor.

*"Solomon answered all her questions, there was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her."* Imagine with what dignity and charm Solomon conducted himself, fielding every question.

When, at last, questions are ended, imagine Solomon turning to face his audience, placing the chalk in its holder with a grin, having vanquished all



others among the wise men of the east. Solomon has surpassed them all, and the audience breaks into applause.

The queen's applause was a fluttering of her heart, left breathless by Solomon's display of wisdom and wealth. *"When she observed all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his valets . . . there was no more spirit in her."* She was overwhelmed, breathless. *"The report was true that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments . . . but I did not believe the reports until I came and my own eyes had seen it. Not even half had been told me!"*

*Come . . . Break Bread with Me.* Enough of these lavish banquets, though. After two formal affairs, a rustic, campfire breakfast sounds just right. Casual clothing is acceptable and encouraged. No pomp. No ceremony. No princesses. No politicians. No ambassadors. No dance melodies from professional musicians. No fifty foot high murals. No beautiful marble. No exquisitely clad servants and valets.

Just a charcoal fire upon which some fish are frying. Several men, disciples of one whom they had supposed was the Messiah, had lost their teacher in a horrendous act of violence in Jerusalem. Peter, a prominent disciple of this one, had organized a fishing trip. Perhaps their heart wasn't in it. Or, perhaps the fish simply weren't biting. In any event, their nets were

empty. Just after daybreak they saw someone on the shore who offered a tip, a hint landing a load of fish. John solved the mystery, that this shoreline chef is Jesus. He whispers to the scantily clad Peter, who jumps in for a one hundred yard swim to shore.

The boat and other disciples finally arrive and find Jesus and Peter at a campfire. *“Come and break your fast,”* Jesus says. No RSVP needed. How relaxing after the intimidating atmosphere of two lavish banquets! Just breakfast. No hard questions from merciless inquisitors.

Well, actually, there is a time for questions, but not hard ones trying to trip somebody up. Three, to be precise, all directed to Simon Peter, the one who had, a few days before, boldly announced to Jesus, *“Though all others forsake you, I will not.”* Was his vaunted courage genuine? Or, merely hype? Jesus asks, *“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”*

Nothing complex. No equations need be scribbled on the board. Yes, but for the one being asked the question, the answer is anything but easy. *“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”* But do you hear in Peter’s reply, as I do, that he is not quite so bold as before? His answer doesn’t really address the heart of the question, does it? It’s a bit evasive. *“More than these?”* Jesus had asked. Peter’s reply takes competition off the table, refusing comparison with the others. Had he learned, perhaps, from his own embarrassing betrayal?

Jesus now asks a second question. *“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”* What a contrast! In our two courtly banquets at Cambridge and in Jerusalem the questions became harder and harder as the audience sought to expose weakness. Quite the contrary, at this breakfast Jesus’ questions grow easier and easier. Jesus now follows Peter’s lead in removing the competition, as if to say, *“Peter, if you are not now so bold as to assert your loyalty above the rest, I will meet you where you are. Will you at least affirm your love for me?”*

The period for questions is not over. As if to remind Peter of his three betrayals, Jesus poses a third question, *“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”* I need for you now to take note of something our English versions are incapable of making evident. In this third question, Jesus alters his wording, a transition necessarily, though regrettably, ignored in our English translations. In the first two questions Jesus had used a verbal form of the word *agape, love*. Peter affirms his love in each instance, not with *agape*, but rather uses *phileo*, thus not exactly responding to Jesus’ question. Now, in this third question, Jesus himself shifts and uses Peter’s preferred, *phileo*, again meeting Peter where he is.



Now, if you didn't follow my Greek analysis, that's okay. You will have no trouble following this simple summary, that the questions Jesus asks Peter are getting easier. With each question, Jesus is asking only what Peter has already affirmed! Peter's three denials are now counter-balanced by three confessions of love.

There is a distinct aroma of grace in this passage, not only found in the question-and-answer exchange, but also in the words of Jesus following each answer. With each answer Jesus responds by giving Peter a command and calling, *"Feed my sheep."*

*"Peter, it's okay that you cannot so boldly assert your allegiance as before. You needed to acknowledge that about yourself. But I do not want your knowledge of your own shortcomings to paralyze you for future service. I don't want you to stop serving me out of fear of failure. I want you to know that you still occupy a place of usefulness in my church. Your failure has not disqualified you for service. Feed my sheep."*

On the Sea of Galilee, there is a spot where, from very early Christian tradition, this breakfast is remembered. A fourth century church was built around a rock called *Mensa Christi*, the *Table of Christ*. Today a small Franciscan Chapel, called *The Church of the Primacy of St. Peter*, is nearby. It's one of my favorite images from the Holy Land, Jesus handing to Peter, the fisherman, the staff of the shepherd.

Sir Wiles and Solomon were asked hard questions. No matter how difficult the questions became, the knight and the king found them easy to answer.

Peter, in contrast, was asked an easy question which he found difficult to answer, demanding a searching of heart and soul. Jesus was seeking not to expose Peter's weakness, but to uncover a hidden strength in his spiritual core.

I've stood at this statue with many hundreds of pilgrims, as have many other millions. It always strikes me that those gathered, many accomplished professionals in their fields, can answer virtually all question, difficult questions, related to their field. But here, at this place, around this statue, they hear a very simple question. *"Do you love me?"* If their answer is *"Yes, Lord,"* they next hear words defining their calling. *"Feed my sheep."*

