

"Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds"

Readings from the New Testament: Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 11:19

Reading from the Old Testament: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

They are described by many names: aphorism, maxim, truism, axiom, bon mot, proverb. Moss-edged morsels of tru-ish wisdom collected from life experience over time and stored in some aunt's attic to be retrieved, dusted, and distributed to relatives, friends, acquaintances, and communities for purposes of comfort, problem solving, rationalization, advice, excuse, correction, and direction. Birds of a feather flock together. The pen is mightier than the sword. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

They come in forms familiar, funny, and sometimes, downright odd. Don't sell the skin until you have caught the bear. A peacock who sits on his tail is just another turkey.

They are frequently trite, never data confirmed or scientifically tested, seldom universal, typically debatable, rarely codified as law, and usually unenforceable. Yet often these adages carry helpful hints for navigating issues involving character, conundrum, behavior, and ethics; issues that benefit from the collective wisdom of lived experience.

The Canon of Scripture offers us its own collection of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs, along with the books of Ecclesiastes and Job form what is called Wisdom literature. These books lie outside of the larger narrative of salvation history in the Old Testament. The books of Moses, the royal histories of Joshua through 2 Chronicles, the Psalms, and the Prophets share the thread of God's history with Israel and form the foundation upon which the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament are set. The Wisdom writings, while written within that history, in a way sit aside that history because they represent neither doctrine, law, nor the framing or reforming of God's covenant with Israel.

What we do find in Proverbs is a reservoir of sayings and maxims collected by Israel's sages over time, some of them borrowed from separate cultural collections like the sayings of Amenemopet of Egypt. The Proverbs are neither ethical absolutes nor divine commands, but according to Leo Purdue, represent "an open, not a closed, system of understanding that invites engagement, testing, reformulation, and even negation." (Leo Purdue, *Proverbs*) Thus, reading through Proverbs you

will find proverbs that edify - "When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble."

Then there are those Proverbs that just don't work, particularly relating to parenting, ones that we now know perpetuate evil - "Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die." That is horrid advice.

You will also come upon those verses in Proverbs that are downright dangerous, and when uttered put one's life at risk - "A contentious wife is a continual dripping of rain." ... I value my life enough to never slip that into conversation.

In addition, there are those Proverbs that offer just enough truth to make you laugh. My favorite word in Proverbs is *sluggard*. What a great descriptor. Sluggard - refers to a lazy person. "The sluggard will not even raise his hand from the dish." Dude is so lazy that he can't even manage to transfer the food from the plate to his mouth. I confess that I may have employed those words a time or two as the boys were growing up. To such, Proverbs offers this counsel: "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!"

The Proverbs range from the sublime to the ridiculous, but there are themes and values to be gleaned from them that bear the worth of repeating and affirming. The three pairs of proverbs offered as our lesson today bear a common theme, a perspective about wealth and poverty that is consistently reaffirmed throughout Scripture.

"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all." That's a rather benign assertion that will not spark much protest and may even garner just enough affirmation to find it painted on a piece of shiplap decorating a kitchen wall. We'll even assent to its wisdom while continuing to ignore its implications in our pursuit for the cover of *House Beautiful* and the fantasy life of the magazine models. But what actually forges a good name? In your life experience, whose names would be included in the pantheon of goodness? What traits of their character, what consistent qualities are seen in their behavior and actions such that you would call them good?

Do you think it could be said that in the pursuit of riches, we are seeking to elevate our status above others, while those in pursuit of

goodness are seeking fellowship with others, offering respect to others, and showing concern for others? Could it be that in our pursuit of riches we are hoping to feel good about ourselves, while when pursuing decency we are seeing the good in others and pursuing the good for others? "The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all."

In 1946, during the height of the Jim Crow era, as black soldiers returning from war found so few of the freedoms they had been fighting for abroad, a legendary black singing group, The Golden Gate Quartet, courageously recorded a song about a place where freedom truly reigns and goodness is seen in everyone. Its title? *There Are No Restricted Signs In Heaven.*

Folks were knocking at the Pearly Gates  
Askin' `bout the rooms and `bout the rates.

Old St. Peter, official greeter,  
He was present to let them in;

A few looked down `cause their skin was brown

But Pete he hollered with a great big grin:

"Welcome! Welcome!

"There are NO RESTRICTED SIGNS UP UN HEAVEN

"And there no see-lected clientele."

Will our goodness be known in our privilege or in our hospitality?

A related Proverb says, "Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them." Those words struck me this week as an indictment on our persistent habit through history of defining our worth by excluding others and then blaming them for being excluded.

We know that India has struggled through its history to move beyond a formalized caste system, based on an ancient Hindu text, that preserved wealth, power, and privilege by assigning people to levels of status called castes, making it impossible for them to change their life situation, seek equality, or find justice.

The Brahmins, the highest caste, were the philosophers, sages, and priests who were deemed closest to the gods. The next highest were the Kshatriya, the warriors, protectors, and rulers. Below them were the Vaishya, the merchants, traders, and engineers. And the lowest of the 4 primary categories were the Shudra, the servants, laborers, and bearers of burdens.

Yet, there was another caste below all the others. "Living out the afflicted karma of the past, they were not to be touched, and some not even to be seen. Their very shadow was a pollutant. They were outside of the caste system and thus outcastes. These were the Untouchables who would later come to be known as Dalits."

Though laws have been instituted to remove the caste system, there are many ways in which the influence of caste persists. An Indian geologist working in London, born to the warrior/soldier caste, recalls the Dalit students whose exams went ungraded. "The tests were not marked because the teacher was upper caste and would not touch the paper touched by a Dalit." He also shared the memory of an upper-caste colleague in the office where he worked. "She would get up from her desk and walk the length of the office, down the hall and around the corner, to ask a Dalit to get her water ... 'The jug was there next to her desk,' he said. 'The Dalit had to come to where she was sitting and pour it for her. It was beneath her dignity to get the water herself from the desk beside her.'" (Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste*)

In her provocative work titled, *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson compares India's caste system to historic and current structures of caste in our

own culture, demonstrating the egregious ways the influence of racial caste has perpetuated the robbing of the poor for being poor, and then blaming them for their condition.

When America entered WWI, the French welcomed the reinforcement, and because of their battlefield experience, the French were given command of some American troops. However, trouble arose because the French were treating the soldiers according to their military rank rather than their race. They were treating black soldiers as they would white soldiers, having drinks with them, praising their accomplishments. So, the American military command informed the French that the black soldiers were to be seen as "inferior beings," and were to always be treated as inferior.

Thus, the French command was forced to instruct its officers with the following: "This indulgence and this familiarity (with the black Americans) are matters of grievous concern to the Americans ... We cannot deal with [the black officers] on the same plane as with the white American officers without deeply wounding the others ... We must not commend too highly the black American troops, particularly in the presence of (white) Americans."

Similarly, back in America from Reconstruction to the civil rights era, southern school boards spent as little as 1/10 the money on black schools as for white schools, openly starving them of resources that might afford them a chance to compete on level ground. School terms were made shorter in the black schools, giving them less time in class and more time in the field as laborers in the feudal sharecropping system. In ways no less subtle than the slaveholders' laws that forbade slaves from learning to read, there has been a consistent effort to hinder education in order to retain a form of caste structure. Hoke Smith, a leading southern official, made it a policy that in the hiring of black teachers for the segregated schools, if two Negro teachers applied to a school, the "less competent" teacher was to be selected. (Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste*) In ways both subtle and flagrant, societal efforts to "rob the poor for being poor" have persisted.

If a good name is a consequence of how well we treat one another, we must have the courage to examine the ways we fall short. The Proverb says, "Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor." We typically read that as a call to feed the hungry, and it certainly is that. Yet, isn't it more than that? "Those who are

generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor." Isn't it about sharing a table much like the table Jesus invites us to this day? Isn't it about removing the cloak of invisibility from the poor in order to truly see those we so easily have ignored? Isn't it about seeing the value in our neighbors regardless of their station in life, acknowledging our shared humanity, encouraging their dreams, breaking bread with them, welcoming them as God's beloved?

In Proverbs, it is written, "The rich is wise in self-esteem, but an intelligent poor person sees through the pose." "It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud."

Or, as Jesus said, using a proverb of his own, "the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." May such wisdom be our guide. Amen.