

Pastor's Message - 9/19/2021
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 21-23

As you may remember from last week, I already have a plan for our Sunday worship themes – all the way from now to Advent. We began with Proverbs last week, will move on to Esther in a couple Sundays, then Job, and finally Ruth, before the season of Advent begins at the end of November. Esther and Ruth are great stories and Proverbs and Job gives us much to ponder as we consider our lives in relation to our understanding of who God is, how God is active in our lives, and what God may be responsible for in our lives.

I mentioned last week that Proverbs is part of the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures which includes Job, Ecclesiastes, Esther, and some would say, the Song of Solomon. The Wisdom literature sought to probe the human experience and attempt to make sense of it, probe the human experience in its fullness, and find meaning, direction, and clues to righteousness.

The wisdom movement at the time these books were written was international. The sages sought wisdom from the surrounding civilizations. Hebrew wisdom literature has much in common with the literature of the Edomites and those from Phoenicia, the Egyptians and those from Mesopotamia.

The Book of Proverbs is a sourcebook of instructional material meant for use in school or private study, directed at young people, a textbook for the cultivation of personal morality and practical wisdom. The Book of Proverbs is an ancient "how to" book that became a bestseller and was subsequently included in the books of the Bible.

What is a proverb you might ask? It is a short, popular saying, usually of unknown or ancient origin, that expresses some commonplace truth or useful thought. What is a proverb? It is a pithy saying characterized by "its shortness, its sense, its salt." What is a proverb? It is an adage, easily remembered, that forms either an observation or a judgment. What is a proverb? It is a maxim that expresses simply and concretely a truth based on common sense and human experience. Many of our grandmothers had more proverbs up their sleeves than you could shake a stick at, so just for the fun of it, let's take a few moments and share favorite proverbs. Let's see how many we can name for the fun of it:

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

Birds of a feather flock together.

A stitch in time, saves nine.

Chickens come home to roost.

What goes around, comes around.

A new broom sweeps clean.

Out of sight, out of mind.

A rolling stone gathers no moss.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Don't borrow trouble.
 Dead men tell no tales.
 Angels go where wise men fear to tread.

From deep within folk wisdom, we find simple truths that are stated so aptly, that they become proverbs. These are insights into human behavior, norms, rules, right values, patterns that become proverbs when they are spoken again and again and again to illustrate a point, clinch an argument, lend authority to some admonition, or provide a warning. Proverbs also have a teaching function. They are a great way to transmit knowledge, and teaching was the intention of those who compiled and edited the collection that we know as The Book of Proverbs.

The Book of Proverbs itself falls into three sections and, in the three weeks we'll be focusing on the Book of Proverbs, we will have one sample from each section. Today's text is from the sayings of Solomon and the sayings of the sages. Solomon was the patron saint of the sages and the wisdom movement; Solomon, who was remembered for his intelligence and shrewdness, good sense, sound judgment, moral understanding, wisdom. The collection of proverbs under Solomon's name is the major portion of the Book of Proverbs and gives it its distinct tone: proverbs that teach how the good life is to be achieved.

Even though it is in the Bible, it may be quite odd to be reading from the Book of Proverbs in our Sunday worship because Proverbs is one of the most "secular" books in the Bible. The sayings in Proverbs were collected and written down during a period of Israel's history when religious practice was in decline, when it wasn't "cool" to appear overly pious. Prophets and priests in this period were not so much sought after as were so-called "wise men," learned men who could teach the practical side of religion without layering on much theology. Their teaching was not godless by any means, but it was belief system in which God was addressed not by sacrifice in the temple, but by cooperating with the order God had built into life.

For our purposes, our reading from Proverbs today, like much of the rest of Proverbs, reads more like common wisdom that even non-religious people would affirm than any specific Bible passage. Nonetheless, they were intended to teach the oncoming generations the common values of the people, and anytime we are talking about values, we are talking spiritually, even if in a roundabout way.

Values, you see, always arise in the spiritual part of our being. Any time we acknowledge that there is something outside of ourselves that has value, we are speaking out of our spiritual nature.

Some of the Book of Proverbs is thought to have been written by Solomon who was renowned for his wisdom, having asked God for the gift of wisdom when he started his kingship. But, as I said before, wisdom and the pursuit of wisdom was international and cross-cultural, and the ancient cultures borrowed from

each other and were dependent on each other. But the Israelite ancient wisdom literature is unique in that it sees wisdom as being closely linked to God.

This meant that much of the wisdom of the Old Testament equated health and wealth with God's favor. It's a logical position to take. God loves goodness and righteousness and justice and therefore rewards anyone who shows those traits by keeping them healthy, endowing them with healthy offspring and heaping wealth upon them. Therefore, so the argument ran, anyone who has poor health, who is unable to produce offspring, or who lives in poverty must be out of God's favor. Sin causes people to be out of God's favor, therefore the rich and healthy were good people, the poor and unhealthy were sinners.

However, even the ancient Israelites could see that this simplistic assessment didn't always fit the facts. Just like today, some good people became ill or poor, while some rich and healthy people were clearly villains. So, the Israelites made the facts fit the theory by claiming that if a good person suffered, he must have committed some unseen or unknown sin. And if even that didn't fit, then he was being punished for sin committed by his father or his grandfather or some unknown ancestor. Keep these thoughts in mind as we get into the Book of Job.

There are other difficulties with the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs are individual sayings which really should be considered separately. Someone has said, "To read through the sayings is like trying to have a conversation with someone who always replies with one liners. The first few may serve to amuse, but after a dozen or so, it gets boring." One stops listening. One stops reading. Proverbs is not designed for continuous reading.

Even our short text for today is a case in point:

Choose a good reputation over great riches; being held in high esteem is better than silver or gold.

The rich and poor have this in common: The LORD made them both. Those who plant injustice will harvest disaster, and their reign of terror will come to an end.

Had enough yet?

Blessed are those who are generous because they feed the poor.

Don't rob the poor just because you can or exploit the needy in court.

For the LORD is their defender. He will ruin anyone who ruins them.

And these are just verses from the short passage we read this morning. As you read further in the Book of Proverbs, you will find that many of the verses in the Book will actually contradict each other. That's like life.

As we search for wisdom in our life experience, as we seek to discover ourselves and what it means to be human, we will recognize that:

life is filled with contradictions, and so is Proverbs;

life is filled with ambiguity and so is Proverbs;

life is sometimes exaggerated, and so is Proverbs;

life is neither simple nor simplistic and when Proverbs appear to be, it's best to remain flexible, for the proverb will soon be deepened or be qualified or discounted altogether.

In spite of all that, the Book of Proverbs has shaped our cultural and individual morality. These sayings from Old Testament wisdom traditions take seriously the boundaries of wealth and poverty. Their urgings of justice for the sake of the poor come from the God who speaks and acts on behalf of those who are oppressed and lack access to justice. The six verses we read today say a great deal about God. God is the Creator of all people, the rich and the poor. What they have in common is the importance given to the poor and God's partiality toward them. But, unlike human beings, God does not make the social distinctions between the rich and the poor that humans do. "The Lord is maker of them all." As the champion of justice, God heaps calamity and anger upon those individuals who exploit and act unjustly towards other people, while God blesses those who are generous and "share their bread with the poor."

If this is the God in whom we believe and claim to follow, can we act any other way? That the church is supposed to care about and give attention to the poor is a no-brainer. We may debate the most proper, efficient, and beneficial ways of doing that... but do it we must in one way or another. Jesus told us to -- and if we are going to ignore Jesus, then why bother calling ourselves Christians at all?

The wisdom of caring for the poor is not just in Old Testament proverbs. Jesus offers a challenge in Mark 10:21, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same," Luke reports Jesus saying in 3:11. Jesus also offers a warning in Luke 16:24-25 like the one we hear from Proverbs, "So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.'"

The wealthy have a role and a responsibility in the church of Jesus Christ and while our wealth brings us many comforts and privileges, it also places upon us special demands and requirements. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). The wisdom of Proverbs is a reminder to us that it is our privilege, our joy, and our responsibility to provide for those in need, to give as we have been given and to bless as we have been blest.