

Blessed

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Parents are fond of offering bits of wisdom and little lessons for life that usually fall upon disinterested ears, but are not soon forgotten. We remember from childhood: "Honesty is the best policy," "A penny saved is a penny earned," "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Today's reading is a collection of proverbs that fall into the category of sayings our parents taught us. Wise and true, these proverbs offer ideas and "best practices" of how to live a life of honesty and integrity where honor, justice, and good reputation are prized. Growing up in homes where the Bible was one of the most often quoted (and misquoted) books, we learned that folk wisdom often came from Proverbs and other scriptural sources. It was only years later, in Sunday school, that most of us recognized how much of folk wisdom is scriptural wisdom.

Today's appointed proverbs offer wisdom on matters of relationships, generosity, and justice. They remind the gathered community of the significance of seeing, understanding, and relating to the poor. "The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all." In God there are no distinctions.

In contemporary culture in the United States, much of our language reflects categories of identity that connote "otherness": "the poor," "immigrants," "gays and lesbians," "rednecks," "men," and "women." Proverbs 22 says, "The LORD is the maker of them all," so the ways we divide ourselves are morally and ethically wrong. Thinking and acting that result in unjust treatment of others leads to calamity. Justice and care result in blessing. Injustice will bring

misfortune. Generosity issues blessing. The Lord will plead the cause of the poor and afflicted with consequences for the afflictors.

These proverbs are not only rules for ethical living but are also wise adages. "Do not rob the poor..., or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them" (vv. 22-23). Overt or covert exercise of power over others brings harm not only to the oppressed but equally to the oppressor.

As the United States engaged in wars, great damage can be done to the moral authority, the reputation, the credible voice, and the psyche of the United States. Sometimes we rationalize or justify the intent of wars, but it cost lives and damaged communities around the world. The once-prized reputation of the United States for its commitment to human and civil rights are being compromised. The prophetic wisdom of Proverbs 22 cannot be overlooked: "For the LORD pleads their [the afflicted] cause and despoils of life those who despoil them" (v. 23).

The Michael Radford film *1984* opens with a scene in which workers stand in front of a screen for an indoctrination session called the Two Minutes Hate. The patriotic narrator informs the crowd that their land is one of peace, harmony, and hope. Winston Smith works in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, where he changes the newspaper reports of the past to reflect the present policies of the administration. Writing secretly in his journal, he says, "There is truth and there is untruth. Freedom is freedom to say two plus two is four. If that is allowed, all else follows." Meanwhile, at work he continues to rewrite the past to make it fit with the present. When a turn of events has to be rewritten, he writes in his journal, "Past is erased, the erasure is forgotten. The lie becomes truth, and then becomes a lie again." One day Winston says to his

lover Julia, "It's not so much staying alive, but staying human that's important. We must not betray each other."

Our reading from Proverbs is a call not to betray the family of God. Such wisdom includes the admonition to act generously, reputably, honestly, and justly, both as persons and as citizens of a nation. **Susan T. Henry-Crowe**

These verses also aim at calling the rich to wise responsibility and stewardship of our wealth in our relationship to the poor, threatening them with poverty and loss by God's judgment if they foolishly disregard the wise counsel.

In contrast, the wisdom of proverbs also addresses the poor, not part of this reading. Verses in the Wise Sayings of Solomon (___Solomon___10:1-22:16) and in the Sayings of the Wise (22:17-24:34) counsel the poor to accept their state with confidence that God will provide, warning them against laziness and foolish practices of debt.

Understanding of this reading requires us to be aware of the central message of the moral vision of Proverbs, obvious to anyone who studies the whole collection. The prime candidate for sin in Proverbs is foolishness, which is self-defeating in everybody, both rich and poor. The world not only is created by God, but also incorporates rewards for righteousness and punishments for folly. So in Proverbs because we are rich, we are called to higher standing. The poor have the assurance that their fear of the Lord is better than riches. As we hear these words from Proverbs 22 we understand that as rich people and or as poor that the Lord takes the side of the poor in the court, threatening the rich who are unjust with loss. We are all a part of the covenant people of God, redeemed from oppressions and cared for by God.

We are all called to lived by the standards of the Covenant Code (Exod. 21-23), Deuteronomy, and the prophets, where find a different kind of moral vision, from that put forth by our society. In the Mosaic covenant at Sinai, the first four

of the Ten Commandments require exclusive loyalty to the singular God of Israel. These make up the Great Commandment, to love the Lord as God alone (Deut. 6:4-6). The fourth commandment, "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you" (Deut. 5:12), gives religious and institutional sanction to the worship of God alone and also to obeying the second table of the law, which requires the Lord's justice for the neighbor in the community.

This Mosaic covenant and its later prophetic interpretation understood that the Lord redeemed all of Israel from slavery in Pharaoh's Egypt and that all lived by God's gracious provision for their need. Out of this covenantal tradition with its first obligation to the Lord and its second obligation to the neighbor, both embodied in Sabbath observance, came such requirements as the sabbatical from slavery, the welcome of the resident alien, the sabbatical seventh year for the poor and the wild animals, and the jubilee, when ancestral lands were restored. In the Mosaic covenantal tradition of Torah and its prophetic interpretation and later application, the poor become incorporated into the Lord's benefits of sufficiency in the body politic of Israel.

In Proverbs in the New Testament readings; in James 2:1-17, "the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (v. 8, quoting Lev. 19:18) becomes the foundation for prohibiting favoritism for the rich within the bounds of the Christian community. The letter of James, like Proverbs, incorporates a wisdom tradition for its ethical teaching; based on the prophetic vision of a community in which rich and poor are united, where good works follow faith, and where rich oppressors of the community will be judged in the last days. Jesus gave birth to this vision of the community. Following the pattern of Elijah, ministering to the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs. 17:8-24), Jesus gave the Syrophenician woman not just the dog's crumbs under the table, but

the nourishing bread of life for her daughter (Mark 7:24-30). Jesus healed the deaf man, and the astounded followers found in the ministry of Jesus confirmation of Isaiah's announcement of the new community of God's people redeemed from exile in Babylon (Isa. 35). The Gospel writers envision a beloved community of compassion and sufficiency for the oppressed.

We are foolish if we do not address the widening gap between rich and poor. Terrorism will continue to exploit it, and military power alone will not quell it. The rich nations, as matters of wise policy, must come to address the injustice of the punishing gap between rich and poor. We know of the immigrant communities in the United States who come for their own betterment, and those from Northern Africa and the Middle East who are currently trapped in Hungary and trying to get to Germany... No fence will make our borders impermeable. Beyond mere prudence, the New Testament pushes the ethic of merit in Proverbs toward the prophetic tradition of a community in which the poor are already the blessed of God, and where all are members of the body of Christ.

Charles E. Raynal

According to Deuteronomy 28

1 If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth;

2 all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God:

3 Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.

4 Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.

5 Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

6 Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

We are blessed to participate in the annual CROP walk, worship and service at Carriage Town Ministries quarterly, give monthly to the South End Soup Kitchen, as well as give to Week of Compassion. These are good deeds toward the poor and commendable. However, we need to ask God how we can be a greater blessing – as we bless others, we, ourselves, are blessed! After all we are blessed to be a blessing.

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