

The Eyes of the Lord Keep Watch – September 6, 2015/LABOR DAY WEEKEND

Scripture: Proverbs 22:1-16 (12)

Proverbs 22:1-16

Unison: Psalm 125

Hymns: 1) 423 “Great is Your Faithfulness” 2) 379 “Come We Who Love God’s Name” 3) 529 “Now Let Us All, In Hymns of Praise”

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: God is here in this place, calling us to worship with our whole lives.

People: We come, bringing our faith made alive through works of love and justice and mercy.

L: We come, trusting that God will respond to our need.

P: We come, offering our faith and our deeds in trust and joy.

INVOCATION & LORD’S PRAYER

Creating, loving, healing God, we gather together today from different places and life experiences. In faith, we bow before you, decreeing to be fed with your love and healed through your grace. Fill us with wonder, O God, so that we may proclaim your good news for all to hear. In Jesus’ name we pray, “Our Father...”

SERMON

We have been looking this summer at wisdom literature, demonstrated in the book of proverbs. Based on the way we use proverbs, as little pithy nuggets, the temptation is to pull some out of here and go with them. But the book of Proverbs not just a bunch of smart statements. What gets it into the Bible is its REVEALED wisdom. This means that we need to look at the ethical basis of a passage like this one, and think how it fits with the whole Biblical story of what God is doing for people.

Over the summer we’ve been looking at some of the lesser-known parts of Proverbs. We’ve discovered ideas like wisdom as God’s first creation, springing from God’s own wisdom. It inhabits the earth. It is intended to guide people in the way they should go. But because we are choosing

creatures, we can reject it. Like Solomon, having Wisdom is a choice we must make.

Then there's the image of Lady Wisdom calling in the street. She goes out into the town square, with a loud voice. In the clamor she speaks with a distinctive and distinguishable tone, if we will listen! Wisdom is present, and insisting on being heard...but only those who are willing to acknowledge that they are "simple," childlike, will come to her table and accept what she offers. That sounds like something Jesus said, doesn't it? About how if we don't accept the Kingdom in the simplicity of a child, we'll never get it, and never find it?

Last week we thought about how God weighs our hearts. About the ways that we try to grab control of ourselves and our situation, a strategy that leads to frustration and even disaster. We justify ourselves—what we do is right in our own eyes, and we work to bend the situation so we can be right. But wisdom reminds us that instead we can rest in God's wisdom, in God's guidance. I illustrated those points with a couple of pieces of wisdom from my mother: "count to ten before you speak." And, "It doesn't cost you anything to be nice." She was big on thinking before you put something out into the world, and before you assumed you were right about everything!

Today, we wind up this series on wisdom with this collection of Solomon's little pieces of advice. It reads like an uncategorized list. A collection of two-line bits of wisdom from a man known for his Godly wisdom. Some have been picked out for greater emphasis: for example, "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." But there is a larger story here, I think, about the nature of wisdom, being wise, and acting wisely.

Many of Solomon's two-liner tidbits of wisdom serve to point out the contrast between the world as it is and the way it should be....the way WE should be. To rush to pluck one out without thinking of its context is just as wrong here as it is with any Biblical text. Instead, we need to see what theme there is in this passage, like solving a puzzle of finding the connection between seemingly unrelated objects or words. That's tricky—because by offering this list in this way, Solomon has made his wise statements themselves a kind of test of wisdom. Are we as readers and hearers willing to slow down enough to see what's there?

Let's hear that list again:

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.

The clever see danger and hide;
but the simple go on, and suffer for it.

The reward for humility and fear of the Lord
is riches and honor and life.

Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse;
the cautious will keep far from them.

Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray.

The rich rules over the poor,
and the borrower is the slave of the lender.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

Drive out a scoffer, and strife goes out;
quarrelling and abuse will cease.

Those who love a pure heart and are gracious in speech
will have the king as a friend.

The eyes of the Lord keep watch over knowledge,
but he overthrows the words of the faithless.

The lazy person says, 'There is a lion outside!
I shall be killed in the streets!'

The mouth of a loose woman is a deep pit;
he with whom the Lord is angry falls into it.

Folly is bound up in the heart of a boy,
but the rod of discipline drives it far away.

Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself,
and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.

So. Some are pretty opaque: the lazy person saying "there is a lion out there! I will be killed!" or idea that thorns and snares block the way of the perverse but the cautious one will avoid them. Which is it? What are they telling us? These seemingly random points make more sense when we recall that wisdom is the topic, guide, and key to this passage. Don't be over thrown by your

emotions, don't tell yourself dramatic things like lions are out there; look for what is really there, the thorns and the snares, and take action on them. So that streak of wise consideration is one thread in this tapestry.

Some other statements seem puzzling, and have been used against people. The borrower is the slave of the lender. Drive out a scoffer. The mouth of a loose woman is a deep pit, a kind of punishment....and speaking of punishment, folly in the heart of a boy is to be driven out by the rod of discipline. These have been used and adapted for human, not Godly, purposes: the subjugation of women, harsh punishment of children, and devaluation of people. But if, as Solomon says, the eyes of the Lord keep watch over knowledge, and he overthrows the words of the faithless, then perhaps these confusing passages come more into focus: they are not permission to do whatever we want—that is a faithless act. Don't let your emotions and your desire run your life, is the caution: don't be lazy. Don't be foolish. Don't be harsh. Don't run your mouth when you aren't even managing your own affairs. The characters in this story are just that: characters. They are not meant to single out certain ages or genders or intelligences, but to stand for qualities in a morality story. And the point is: don't give in to your human folly, be wise.

What it is to be wise is stitched through this whole passage in a master design. The characters who bring us the examples are the rich and the poor. The Lord is the maker of them all, their ruler, whether they realize it or not. Having wealth does not make a person better—a theme we hear in the teachings of Jesus too—they just have more. And they are charged, just as EVERY person is charged, with using all their resources wisely, with the guidance of God. Train up your children in the right way, Solomon advises, and then has a series of statements about what that right way might be:

“The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender.” True, but what is the point? Don't borrow money? Or is it a call for those with resources to be willing to give them without subjugating others because they needed the loan, and forcing them to pay back what they may not have. Look at the very next sentence:

“Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail.” So it's important to remember to do justice in every action, to respect the worth of every human being, so that God will not be angry, and so that God's justice will be served in wisdom, rather than ignored in folly. Then, just in case you haven't gotten it yet, comes the next statement:

“Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.” Be generous. Generous. With your bread, with your money, with your care. Practice and teach discipline: which is not slamming around with the rod, but instead is guiding, teaching, leading....the way Jesus led and taught his halting, foolish, selfish disciples. The way God STILL leads and teaches we who are also disciples, and who are sometimes halting, foolish, and selfish ourselves. Be

generous. Oppressing the poor to enrich oneself and giving to the rich, Solomon says, will only lead to loss. Or, to quote Jesus: if you want to save your life, you have to be willing to lose it, that is, to give it away, not hold on so tightly, to be generous, not stingy.

Or as my mother would say to me: cut out the drama, you do not have it that bad. Don't think about yourself so much—go out and do something for other people! That solution has always worked. It always got me out of my own selfish place, and put me to work doing things that lifted up – that VALUED – All of God's people. And in that, I found my own value, too.

So this passage, as it turns out, is pretty thematic when you read it together and take some time, isn't it? Don't think so highly of yourself that you abuse others to raise your own position. Share what you have, because people are more important than riches. Be generous in every way—Jesus reminded us that we should be generous with others just as God has been generous with us.

And God has been generous with us. Loving. Caring. Faithful, even, maybe especially, when we aren't. God sees us in wisdom, perceiving beneath our foolish self-involvement the goodness that lies within. God sends wisdom to us, calling out, hollering in the streets, working to lift her voice over the clamor of the world and summon us to a full life, one where we work for justice, one where we are kind and merciful, and most of all, one where we humbly walk with God.

Monday is Labor Day. It is a national holiday that honors not just work but also the labor movement. What ever your opinions are about it now, what is lifted up this weekend is a movement that had its origins in efforts to reduce the abuse of poor people who worked in deplorable conditions, the abuse of children who were locked in rooms for twelve or more hours, forced do hard work and paid next to nothing, the abuse of workers who were little more than indentured servants. What we can take away from that is in line with what Solomon has shared: we are all in this together. God is watching what we do. Be wise. God has viewed you with wisdom. Be generous. God has dealt generously with you. Be compassionate. God has judged you with mercy and calls you to judge others that way as well. Be faithful, trust in God, who watches over us, lives among and within us, loves and leads and guides us, and saves us in so many, many ways.

Oh, and have a tasty cookout with family and friends too! God loves a feast!