



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 16 – Proper 18 Year B

Learning from Proverbs

[RCL]: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10 (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

“A penny saved is a penny earned.” Is this in the Bible? I hope everyone is thinking—no! It’s a proverb, of course, but one of Benjamin Franklin’s, not from the Old Testament. However, it could have been one as the book of Proverbs is full of earthly and spiritual wisdom.

We may think of proverbs as clever sayings thought up by people like Ben Franklin, who was a master at crafting these sayings. Parents have a million of these sayings at their disposal. It must come with becoming a parent. Sayings such as, “Don’t make that face, it will stick that way.” “Don’t go out with a wet head, you’ll catch cold.” “Little pitchers have big ears.” I’m sure you could add many, many more, and aren’t they fun! For the next three weeks we will be treated to a different type of proverb, these are focused on wisdom – words that are not just clever clichés, but rather those that make us think seriously about how we live in our world and interrelate with each other.

Today, in a very concise and clear set of verses, we consider justice and poverty, which is very topical considering what’s happening in the world around us. As with most proverbs, these get quickly to the point, which makes them very memorable. “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity...” “Those who are generous are blessed ...” When we think about the former, we should be reminded that not only do those who sow injustice eventually reap the punishment of calamity upon themselves, but sadly, they also reap calamity immediately upon those they persecute. We might usually think about the justice that will be dealt upon those who do wrong when we read scripture verses like these. But don’t we also wonder sometimes why punishment doesn’t seem to come quickly enough (according to us!) to those who deliberately do evil to others. It doesn’t seem fair that those who are unjust seem to get away with their crime against God’s people. People often say things like, “Why did God allow those young girls in Nigeria get kidnapped and tortured by the Boko Haram?” We may even say things like that ourselves. Why isn’t God’s justice immediate and complete?

Why, indeed, but we must remember one of the great gifts God gave to us as human beings is free will. If God had a finger in everything we do, if God pushed and manipulated us as a puppet maker can manipulate the strings of a wooden puppet, then perhaps the world would be full of nice people going about their business like – well, like puppets. We wouldn’t have to think. God would never cause us to do

evil if God was the puppet maker. So we have to remember that we live in a very natural world. We live in a world full of human beings who are all made in God's image and likeness, but all with the free will to behave as they choose. Too many people today forget that most wonderful section of Genesis where God says, "Let us make humankind in our image and likeness." Part of that is remembering that within God is ultimate and perfect freedom and so we have the freedom to choose to do good or do evil.

Justice will come, but we may not know how those who do evil will be judged or what the outcome will be. It must be enough that we trust God and know that God loves all of us, good, bad, or indifferent. God also hopes that we who try to do good will pray for those who do evil. We will work however we can to show the world that love can overcome hate, generosity can overcome greed, the mystery of prayer can overcome evil.

But, it's not all grim. We aren't always faced with evil that we must suffer under or overcome. There is a very positive side to the proverbs. Parents also have those positive proverbs like, "You will always be my baby" or "You'll understand when you're older." In our reading today, we find the proverb that says, "Those who are generous are blessed..." Yes, the generous themselves are blessed by grace, but also those who are the recipients of our generosity are blessed. There is a beautiful interaction there of blessedness. A woman therapist wrote in a blog that as she was waiting in a grocery checkout line one day, she made eye contact with another woman. They didn't know each other, but they both smiled and, in that moment, the therapist wrote, "I felt such love for her as a fellow human being. There was something beautiful in our acknowledgement of each other."

We also must know many people who have touched our own lives with love and blessing. So many people touch our lives with their kindness, with the little things that have "made our day" as we so often say. Teachers often are the ones who help us change our lives. Many fall in love with those who have kindled a spark of something special within us. There is so much good in the world if we can only turn away from the news headlines and look into the eyes of our fellow human beings.

The Jewish people use the word *mitzvah*, which is often translated good deed. And rabbis will tell you that it means more—it comes from the root word *tzavta*, which means connection or commandment. Connection is a lovely translation. Whenever we share with the poor, speak out against injustice (especially when the injustice is right in front of our eyes), or respond with love to another, we are establishing a connection. That connection is not only between us and another person, but also between ourselves and God.

"The Lord is the maker of us all..." We dare not forget this, but isn't it a much better mitzvah for us all to look on each other with the same love with which God looks on each one of us!

This sermon, written by the Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz, originally ran in 2015.