

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
James 2:1-17
Mark 7:24-37

16th Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
September 9, 2018

A Good Name

The Old Testament Lesson

All the verses in our Lesson from Proverbs 22 have a common stance of caution toward riches and sympathy for the poor. One's reputation is more important than one's wealth. Though both rich and poor have their origin in God, the Lord takes special note of the poor, and brings judgment on those who exploit them. Listen to these words from Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, and 22-23...

The Epistle Lesson

Our Epistle Lesson from James 2 expresses a warning to those who favor the rich and ignore the poor. Indifference to human need reveals one's faith to be in vain. Listen to these words from James 2:1-17...

Sermon

There was once a cobbler who was a happy and contented man. People who passed his shop laughed and waved when they saw him singing at the top of his voice while repairing shoes. Many people stopped in his shop just to bask in the warmth of his smile.

One of the people who observed the cobbler was a banker who sang little, smiled less, and seldom slept well. At first he was irritated by the constant good humor of the cobbler, but as the days passed, he was attracted to the man. Finally he decided to visit the cobbler and discover his secret of happiness.

After the two men talked for a while, the banker inquired, "Are you wealthy? Pardon me for asking, but how much money do you make each year?"

“My family is seldom in want,” the cobbler answered. “Some days I only fix shoes; no one buys. The shop is closed on holy days, so there is no income at all when we celebrate the witness of a saint. I simply cannot give you an accurate sum.”

“How wonderfully simple,” the banker said. “Since you have so openly shared your life story with me, I have decided to eliminate your financial problems for the immediate future. Take this gift of 300 gold coins and use them whenever you have need.”

Overjoyed, the cobbler quickly went home and buried the gold in a corner of his house. The succeeding days brought many changes. He often left the shop to go home when the family was absent, afraid that someone might come when they were gone and steal his wealth. He began to lose sleep at night because he feared that people were plotting to steal the gold. Old friends noticed that he did not sing with the same cheer, and he often seemed suspicious when someone stopped in the shop just to chat.

Finally the cobbler visited the banker with the bag of gold in his hands. “Thank you for your generous gift,” he began, “but I cannot really afford to be the owner of these gold coins. Please take your money back so that I may again enjoy music, sleep, and my friends. It seems that when I buried the money, I buried happiness at the same time.” (*Stories for Telling*, by William R. White)

As noted in the introduction, Proverbs 22 offers a word of caution when it comes to riches. The story of “Three Hundred Gold Coins” is just one example of how wealth does not guarantee happiness. Or that wealth is good, in and of itself. Given the choice between a good name and riches, wisdom would indicate a good name. For true wealth does not consist of silver and gold. It is rather to be found in the precious possession of a reputation for honor, integrity, trustworthiness, and fairness.

On a shelf in our home is a gift that was given to me upon the occasion of graduating from high school. It is a verse written in cursive on a ceramic open Bible with Proverbs 22:1 cited. It reads, “Johnny, A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favor rather than silver and gold.” When you stop to think of it, it’s truly amazing. Your good name is more valuable than great riches.

Growing up, most of us heard such bits of wisdom that may mean more to us today than they did back then. Offerings such as, “A penny saved is a penny earned;” “A stitch in time saves nine;” “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush;” “An apple a day keeps the doctor away;” and, “All’s well that ends well.” Well, our proverb today provides similar wisdom. “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.” And how important is such wisdom today as we recognize the dearth of character formation in many young people. But be clear, biblical wisdom understood such principles not simply for the edification of the individual, but also for the formation of a wise community. And how we need that in our country today!

Furthermore, the wisdom offered by scripture is not simply to convey moralisms, about which most would agree. It provides theological grounding for our daily lives—best practices of how to live a life that God blesses, and that in turn blesses the wider community. It does not condemn wealth, but suggests a better goal for our lives. “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.”

The Pirke Aboth, or Chapters of the Fathers, was a collection of ethical teachings and fundamental principles passed down to the Rabbis, beginning with Moses. In it we read:

There are three crowns: the crown of the Torah, the crown of the priesthood, and the crown of friendship, but the crown of a good name excels them all. (4:17)

Yes, one's reputation is of more value than most appreciate. No, the wealthy are not condemned for their riches. In fact, it's acknowledged that the poor and rich have it in common that, "the Lord is the maker of them all."

In many ways the rich and poor have little in common. They don't live in the same kind of houses, drive the same kind of cars, or eat at the same restaurants. Their children don't prepare for the same careers. But they do have the same Creator, and thus they share a common humanity. They both will die and their bodies return to dust. And the poor are just as valuable to God as the wealthy.

What is condemned by God is sowing injustice. And what is commended by God is the sharing of bread with the poor. Those who have positions of authority have a special responsibility before God to care for the weaker members of society.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provides an example of the wealthy using their riches to help the weak. Formed in the year 2000 it holds over \$50 billion in assets. And the primary aim is to globally enhance healthcare and reduce extreme poverty, and in America to expand educational opportunities and access to information technology.

Ray Kroc was the founder of McDonald's. In 2003 his widow, Joan Kroc, gave the Salvation Army \$1.5 billion of matching funds for the construction of Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Centers across the United States. In 2011 Kroc Greenville opened its doors as a center for recreation, education and worship to members of all ages, races, backgrounds, and economic means. I've enjoyed being a member now for over six years.

Finally, verses 22 and 23 proclaim that actions have consequences, and those who rob, humiliate, or ignore the poor and afflicted should know this: God is the champion of the poor

and afflicted. “The Lord will argue their lawsuit.” In other words, no shrewd misapplication of the law in order to gain advantage over “the least of these” will be tolerated by the Lord.

It was not just the Old Testament prophets who were the voices of the downtrodden. The same voice can be heard in words of wisdom from the Book of Proverbs. And the same voice is found in the New Testament as well, as heard in our Epistle Lesson from James 2:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? (vv 1-4)

And the Gospel Lesson for this Sunday includes two stories of Jesus’ compassion in healing outsiders—the daughter of the Syrophenician, and the deaf man from the Decapolis.

And so in summary my friends, it is wise for us to recognize the great value of a good name. And to reflect God’s care and compassion for those in need. It’s good for us and for our world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.