

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
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The Rev. Dr Mark W. Jennings

“Is it better to be silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

“If it is your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first.”

“If you can reduce a problem to an either/or answer, then you didn't understand the question.”

“If you speak with confidence, like you know what you're talking about, people will believe you.”

“If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.”

“Happiness is not a destination at which you arrive, but rather a manner of traveling.”

“There are three things important in life: the first is to be kind, the second is to be kind, and the third is to be kind.”

Words to live by. Proverbs. Wise sayings. Things your parents taught you. The ones I just quoted are from a lot of different people, including Aristotle, Mark Twain, Maya Angelou, Bill Hubbard, and my father. Words to remember because they build your character.

Words to live by. What did your parents teach you? What sayings do you live by? When that little voice in your head speaks those great truths, what does it say? Parents are fond of saying things like these and they often fall on ears that seem to be quite disinterested until in later years you hear your children saying the same things you said. That can be a bit scary. When we give them our rules for how to live, we'd better be careful what we say. Susan Henry-Crowe, the Dean of the Chapel at Emory University in Atlanta says that a friend of hers tried one summer to have her children write up the rules for how to live hoping that if the children made the rules, they might actually follow them. “They wrote dutifully, replicating both the tone and the intent of the rules of their parents:

You shall not wear flip-flops in the pool.
You shall sweep the floor after supper.
You shall only buy Mister Softee from the ice cream truck once a week.¹

1 Henry-Crowe, Susan. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 4, pp. 26-28.*

I was amazed that they had to have a rule about no flip-flops in the pool. That would seem like common sense to me. But buying Mister Softee only once a week, that's discipline!

Today we read some selections from the Book of Proverbs which has lots of sayings like these, rules to live by. Tradition says that the book of Proverbs was written by King Solomon, the wisest person in antiquity, but we don't really know. This is obviously a collection of sayings, not meant to be read all at the same time, but like all proverbs, all rules by which to live, they are meant to be taken and used one by one. "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches." Sounds like something that parents would teach their children. According to the teaching of the rabbis, Solomon wrote three of the books that we now have in the Bible. Supposedly he wrote the Song of Solomon when he was young and in love, and then he wrote Proverbs when he was middle aged and had children of his own and wanted to teach them, and he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes when he was an old man and had become cynical about whether anyone really listened to him—All is vanity. Along with the book of Job, these books are what scholars refer to as Wisdom Literature.

But today we are talking about Proverbs. This is a collection of sayings about how to live one's life. But there is something different about the Proverbs in the Bible. It seems to be that the typical rules to live by, the typical proverb, is really about building one's character, becoming a good person, cultivating one's common sense. But the Proverbs in the Bible have a different concern: "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity; those who are generous are blessed, do not rob the poor because they are poor, the rich and the poor have this in common; the Lord is the maker of them all." The concern in the biblical proverbs is not building up the individual's character, it is not just about raising one's children so they will turn out to be good people. The biblical proverb is about the community. Stephen Johnson says that Proverbs "requires us to consider the ways in which our lives as people of God belong to the larger social fabric of our world."² It requires us to remember that it is God who made each of us.

J. Philip Newell in his book, *A New Harmony*, tells about a monk named Roland Walls and his modern

2 Johnson, Stephen C. *Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 4. pp. 27-29.*

monastery, The Community of the Transfiguration, near Edinburgh in Scotland. It is a small and simple community. Each of the brothers live in a garden hut and their chapel consists of two huts joined together. They also have a little house in which to eat together and to receive guests. One never knew who would be gathered around the table there. On one side there might be a bishop, Oxford educated and aristocratic sounding. On the other side, a convict who had just been released from prison. The day Newell was there Roland told the story of the beginnings of their community. He and his brothers went on a preparatory retreat to a more established monastery nearby. It was a three-day preparation in which a wise old monk would guide them into all the essentials of community life together and all the things they would have to do in order to have a successful spiritual community. On the first day, the old monk shuffled into the room, sat down and said to them, "Today I have just one thing to say to you, 'God loves you.' Now go away and think about that." So off they went in their discipline of silence for the day, waking the monastic gardens and reflecting in their individual cells on the great mystery of God's love for us.

On the second morning, the old monk again shuffled into the room, sat down, and said, "Today I have just one thing to say to you, 'You can love God.' Now go away and think about that." So off they wandered for their second day of silence, pondering the great truth that God not only loves us but also longs for our love. Not only are we the recipients of love, we are the beloved partners in an eternal love affair.

On the third morning Roland wondered what could possibly be added to the essential teachings of the first two days. God loves us, and we can love God. Was there anything to add to this completeness? The old monk again shuffled into the room, sat down, and said to them, "Today I have just one thing to say to you, 'You are to love one another.' Now go away and live this truth as a community."

Living together in love, with God and each other. It requires wisdom, and wisdom is not just about building character, but building community. And it's not an easy way, it's not what we want to hear. It is the way of the cross, but it is the way of the Christ, and he bids us follow him on it.