

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18) – Year B – September 9, 2009 - Homily
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37
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“Benchmarks” and “best practices” are terms frequently used in business. Benchmarks are used to compare a company’s performance with the very best, and to determine how big the gap is. Best practices are exactly what they sound like. In any given industry or service there are leading companies that have developed the most efficient, most effective, and probably the most profitable ways of doing their particular business well. These are the types of business practices that other companies love to copy, and yet, because each company is different, best practices do not always translate to similar great results in other situations. The Book of Proverbs is also a bit like benchmarks and best practices. Proverbs are brief figures of speech, often using word play and structured a little like poetry with parallelisms that emphasize the point being made. They are concrete assertions that embody a general truth and have diverse application in our lives. However, they are not inflexible rules without exceptions, nor are the Proverbs promises. In other words, they are not meant to be taken literally. As Christians, unless we have some understanding of our Judeo-Christian heritage and how God still speaks to us today through the Proverbs, we may miss out on these pearls of wisdom and how they still apply in our lives.

Tonight’s selection from the Book of Proverbs, gives us taste of the types of best practices you and I are called to in order to live a Godly life, with honesty and integrity. The reading is a compilation of great wisdom in three crucial areas of our lives: relationships, generosity, and justice. The context for all that we are and all that we do is described for us in verse two: “The rich and poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.” In fact, each of the three areas are interwoven, just as you and I are intimately connected as members of Christ’s Body, and by our common humanity. Since relationship, generosity and justice are characteristics of God, they also have a holistic form. Similarly, there is a certain holistic aspect to The Book of Proverbs. Taken as a whole, the Proverbs outline a popular Scriptural viewpoint: rewards for righteousness and punishments for foolishness. The primary problem of all humanity being addressed is our foolishness. The Biblical worldview of ‘rewards and punishments’ is quite explicit in the Hebrew scriptures, although our thinking about God in those terms has become more fluid since the coming of Jesus. While the understanding of God has changed, there is no change in God’s desire for relationship with His children, God’s incredible generosity and provision for all our needs, and God’s justice.

Scripture points repeatedly to God’s justice – that is, how God will always plead the case of the poor and stand with, and for, those who are marginalized or in need. Even while the Israelites’ ancient tradition favored the thinking that worldly riches were rewards to the righteous, the Book of Proverbs is quite ambivalent about both poverty and riches. For example, the first verse of tonight’s reading tells us that “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,” and strongly implies that the wealthy are fools if they do nothing to alleviate poverty. The world tells us that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, and evidence suggests that there is a link between poverty and violence. That link is mostly frequently seen through increased crime rates. If that is true, then the opposite is probably also true: a more equitable and just world is likely to be a more peaceful, non-violent one. That said, the focus of these verses from the Book of Proverbs is the wealthy – and that means you and I.

We have been looking closely at behaviors and attitudes over the last couple of weeks.

The theme of these selections from Proverbs is the behavior and attitudes of the wealthy. God's justice demands our accountability for the responsible use of all our riches. In this respect, we cannot disconnect our generosity from our relationships or from God's justice. Both the Hebrew and New Testament Scriptures always come back to the great commandment to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In other words, being good stewards means that we exercise our generosity in relationship, with the imperative of closing the poverty gap. Being members of Christ's Body means that you, me, and all Christians, are vital in implementing God's justice in the world. In reality, that is doing whatever we can to work for justice and equality, even if the systems we are working in and with appear immovable and determined to maintain the status quo of power and inequality. Yet, even knowing all this, for some reason, we still struggle.

One of the issues that we all face is the barriers that we must break down in order to get beyond ourselves and to put God and others first. Interestingly enough, God has already shown us the way. The way is Jesus Christ, and not just for the most obvious of reasons, but also through the relational element, and the generosity of God. The issue is our attitude to 'otherness'. God is essentially wholly other, with one major exception. In the perfect language of God, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, closed the gap between humanity and divinity. We call ourselves disciples of the Word, and yet still use words like "illegal aliens" or just "illegals", pejorative differentiators like "rednecks", or "fundies" to describe our neighbors. By the number of jokes you can find or hear almost anywhere, even a word as innocent sounding as "blondes" has cultural connotations way beyond hair color. These words and phrases define an otherness that we have all used to distance ourselves from our neighbors, perhaps out of fear, dislike, or to make ourselves feel better, and to rationalize our inaction. I am certainly not innocent in using and abusing some or all of these phrases in jokes or snide comments. What we are forgetting is that the whole human family is equal in God's sight. It takes a lot of wisdom to see others as God sees us. Nevertheless, as one commentator put it, "In a theology of equality pejorative labels of suspicion about otherness are morally and ethically wrong." Like every word that comes out of our mouths, it matters because it betrays the true condition of our hearts. There is truly no excuse to be biased, laugh at the injustice and inequalities of the world, and most seriously, limit our generosity in a way that God never does.

The beautiful poem of Philippians extols the generosity of God in Christ Jesus who became human for my sake, your sake, and for the sake of the whole world. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, ... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection bring the history of salvation into sharp focus, helping us to see clearly God's desire for reconciliation in our relationships, the abundance of God's endless generosity, and the power of God's love to defeat sin and death in our lives through faith in our Lord Jesus. God's commandments are our benchmark. Jesus lived out every best practice we could ever need to show us the way. May the Lord bless us all with the wisdom and the will to live our lives of faith with honesty and integrity.

Amen.