

*The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.*

Proverbs 22:2

The Wisdom tradition refers primarily to three books of the Bible: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs is what we teach our children about how to navigate their way in the world. We teach them to eat their veggies and floss their teeth, to look both ways before they cross the road, to mind their manners and to respect their elders and pay their taxes. The root word (in Hebrew, *hkm*) means something like “street smarts” – i.e. the ability to navigate one’s way through the world. It’s not rocket science but common sense. Yet the older I get the more I appreciate common sense. It gets us pretty far.

Job is about a guy who clearly read Proverbs and bought into it hook, line, and sinker. He played by the rules. He expected his life to therefore go well. And yet tragedy strikes. Job is the guy who drinks a glass of red wine in moderation, never smokes cigarettes, gets to the gym four times a week and hasn’t had bacon in decades—and yet the doctor says to him, “I’m sorry but you have cancer.” Proverbs says the world makes sense; Job says “not always it doesn’t.” Proverbs says, “you reap what you sow.” Job says, “yeah, but sometimes you reap what somebody else sowed...”

Ecclesiastes is in some ways the most interesting of the three wisdom books because it takes Job even a step further. Job is about one man’s struggle. But the writer of Ecclesiastes reflects on what it’s like to live in a *world* gone mad. It seems to be a world whirling out of control with no sense of justice: a world where Job isn’t the exception but the rule and you look around and the good die young and the wicked prosper. Or at least it seems that way. Qoheleth, the Preacher, sees a world where evil goes unpunished and where good is unnoticed. Hence the apparent cynicism and maybe even almost despair of Ecclesiastes: all is vanity—all is a chasing after wind.

Well, as Qoheleth says, there is a time and a season for everything under the sun. The time for Job and Ecclesiastes will come. This is the season for Proverbs. I mention Job and Ecclesiastes today only because as our journey with Proverbs begins we should know that it isn’t “the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” But then again maybe we shouldn’t expect that of any single book of the Bible. We take the Scriptures as a whole—and I think that perhaps the best way of thinking about the Bible is that it invites us to enter into a community that is willing to risk the conversation. A community that is willing to live with the questions. Indeed one could argue that the language of faith is always “yes, but...” and “maybe this, but also that.” The Bible helps us to frame the conversation; but it raises at least as many questions as it provides answers. And this is actually, I believe, a very good thing.

So we do well, I think, to understand that Proverbs isn’t the last word—it’s more like the *first* word. It is unfortunately a too often neglected source of wisdom that I want us to try to tend to at least over the course of these three weeks. Proverbs makes very good material for basic formation: it’s the kind of stuff we want our kids to have a grasp of when they finish church school. And in fact that is how this material originated. Proverbs is the wisdom of the sages passed on to the next generation. There isn’t much “god-talk”—and in fact it can sound like

Confucious and other far eastern writers as much as the Bible at times. You can almost add to the Proverbs, “you must learn, grasshopper...” and you get a feel for the eastern worldview it takes for granted.

Today’s reading is a series of these little gems. The teacher tells the student that “a good name” is better than having all the money in the world. That you reap what you sow. That the generous are blessed. I want to focus on just one verse, however, today—the one printed on the cover of your bulletin: Proverbs 22:2: “The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.”

Now you can tell you aren’t reading the prophet Amos here—who loved to thunder “thus saith the Lord” and to chastise the idle rich “who sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and trample the poor into the dust.” (Amos 2:6b-7a) Sometimes we need that kind of voice, especially in a society where the gap between the very rich and the very poor continues to expand into an ever-widening chasm. As Flannery O’Conner put it, sometimes in a world where people are hard of hearing you need to shout.

But the approach of the sage in *this* text is different. The teacher is simply taking note—making an observation. What the student does with that is up to him or her. It is a deceptively simple observation that leads to an invitation to ponder these things, to consider and to reflect.

I use Yahoo as my home page and get more and more of my news from the Internet. This past week perhaps some of you also saw the article on the jet set’s shopping list unmasked. It was about the spending habits of private jet owners with an average annual income of \$9.2 million a year. On average this group is 57 years old and male. The researchers found out that on average this group spends \$30,000/year on alcohol, \$98,000/year on “experiential travel” (including safaris and eco-tours in the rainforest and hikes to Machu Picchu) and \$107,000/year at spas around the world. I wish that I was making this up. I am not.

I decided to check out another website while I was on-line reading all of this and ended up on a site some of you may know about, called The Hunger Site. I was reading, among other things about Darfur in the Sudan where 180,000 people have died through violence, hunger, and disease since February 2003. More than 2 million have been forced to flee their homes. Today, more than half of Darfur’s population needs food. They literally know what it is to pray for daily bread. The resource in your bulletins today reminds us that one billion people on this planet live on less than \$1 a day. That is one in six.

*The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.* Just consider. No shouting, just an observation. That we all belong to God. That we are connected.

If anyone in this congregation is in the \$9 million dollar annual salary range I can definitely tell you that they are not yet tithing! And while some of us may feel no small amount of anxiety around money at times in our lives, I think it’s safe to say that none of us are literally worried about where our next meal is coming from or whether it is malaria or dysentery that will kill us. Here we are, somewhere in between those two extremes. I guess one difference between those

who live lives of gratitude verses those who live with envy has everything to do with which direction we tend to be looking in—toward the jet setters or toward the impoverished.

But it also means that our lives are some ways more complex—in terms of how we discern what to save, what to give, what to spend. This isn't meant to be a guilt-trip; I try not to do guilt-trips. Nor is it even Amos, which as a pastor I find I don't do very well either. I admire the prophets who yell and shout, for justice, for action, and for change in a world that truly is so hard of hearing. I'm just not a very good prophet.

But the wisdom of the sage speaks to me in a way that I must confess pierces my soul in a more profound way. It's more like a whisper. By recalling our hearts and minds to those first verses of Genesis it reminds us that we are all mortal: or as we say each Ash Wednesday, we are dust, and to dust we shall return. The rich and the poor alike are molded of the earth, and created in the image of God.

By linking the rich and poor to the one God who has created us all, any attentive student will be quick to ask: how it can be that in a world of incredible wealth there can also be such insane poverty. Why do we still not share our bread—our gifts—our lives with one another? How can we inflict any further damage on the poor when so much hurt as already been inflicted? How can we be part of the transformation that leads to life for the planet, and reveals the Kingdom of God?

If I had easy answers to those questions I'd run for elected office, or try to get myself elected Secretary General of the United Nations. I am under no illusion that I have the answers. But my job here—now—with all of you is to explore the questions that reveal to us the Gospel of Jesus Christ. My job as your pastor and priest—as your friend in Christ—is to call us back to that alternative narrative, rooted in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. The culture we live in suggests at every turn that we aspire to be jet-setters, that we too live the surreal life. Jesus calls us back to *real life*—to the simple truths that connect us to our vocation to love God and neighbor.

*The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.* We begin a new year together after a summer where most of us have the great privilege and opportunity to find rest. Today we recommit ourselves to do the work God has given us to do. There is more than enough work for all of us. It begins with each of us finding ways to live more generous and simple lives—that others may simply live. May we find it in our hearts to respond in love and to share in this work, for the sake of Him who died and rose again—Jesus Christ, our Lord.