

As You Love Yourself

Most of you who are listening this morning already know what I'm about to say but for the sake of those who may be joining us for the first time this morning on Zoom or on Facebook Live, I feel compelled to point out that for the past several months I have been following a course of Scripture readings suggested by Brian McLaren in his book, We Make the Road by Walking. Some weeks, I have stuck very close to McLaren's suggestions of themes and readings. Some weeks, the readings he suggests have taken me to a very different place. On occasion, it's his theme that I've followed, only using different Scriptures. This is one of those weeks.

On the heels of reminding us that Jesus has called us to love our neighbors, McLaren shifts his focus ever so slightly in the chapter for this week to the second half of that commandment from Leviticus which is repeated by Jesus in the Gospels according to Mark and Matthew and by one of his questioners in the Gospel According to Luke: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." As McLaren and many other scholars and preachers smarter than me have noted, this means that in order to truly love our neighbors, we must also and first love ourselves. But what does this mean? In a time of great societal stress when systemic change and fear of pandemic consume our waking hours – and perhaps hours when we would normally be asleep as well – self-care is a hot topic. What can we learn from the Bible about loving ourselves?

McLaren points to three passages in the Bible for his answers, including one in Proverbs. Headstrong as I am, I've chosen a different passage in Proverbs for focus this morning and, as you just heard, paired it with a passage from Ecclesiastes. Both of these books are from the section of the Old Testament known to our Jewish sisters and brothers as Ketuvim, "The Writings," and to Christian scholars as "Wisdom Literature." (Those two categories, by the way, are not the same, but that's a different sermon.) In the Christian tradition, both books, alas, are little preached on. There are only seven passages out of 31 chapters in Proverbs in the Revised Common Lectionary and only two from the twelve chapters of Ecclesiastes. Even your iconoclastic pastor has only preached from Proverbs four times and Ecclesiastes once in fifteen years. That's startling given my affection for Qoheleth, as Ecclesiastes is known in Hebrew. Less so for Proverbs.

Time for a true confession. I've always found the Book of Proverbs to be a drag. Although it's traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, the wise son of King David, most of the book is set up as the advice of a father to a son. As many of you know, my relationship with my own father, difficult since I turned 13 and nearly completely broken by the time I was 25, makes me prickly in the extreme toward "parental advice." I've also been put off by the structure of Proverbs. Rather than a coherent story or even a thematic arrangement, most of the book is simply individual sayings strung together, higgledy-piggledy. Chapters 1-9 and 31 do present their teachings in clumps of verses that are thematic, but the rest of the book is a free-for-all.

However, I've been rereading Proverbs, little bit by little bit, in the recent translation by Robert Alter and have found, to borrow a phrase from John Wesley, that "my heart was strangely warmed." The deliberate pace with which I've approached the book has done me a lot of good. In her commentary on Proverbs, the Episcopal scholar and distinguished professor at Duke Divinity, Dr. Ellen F. Davis, gives us a clue as to why this might be so: "For the proverbs are little poems, each about the length of a haiku or a Zen koan... Read straight through, they are tedious and tend to run together in the mind, for there is no plot, no consistent development of a

logical argument or a moral theme. But it is a quite different thing when one encounters them as they are meant to be heard (and not, in the first instance, read). Proverbs are meant to be pondered, one at a time. Medieval monks spoke of “chewing” the words of scripture, like grains of spice, until they yield their full savor. That is how the proverbs shall be learned. Memorize a single saying... Let it sit in what the ancient Egyptian sages called “the casket of your belly” for a day or a week or so...” I’m not yet to the point of memorizing these “koans,” but I’m beginning to feel their value for the first time in a long while. As Dr. Davis writes, “The proverbs are spiritual guides for ordinary people, on an ordinary day, when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch.”

The Book of Proverbs is best understood as a collection of the “common sense” sayings of a traditional, oral culture, drawn from centuries of agriculturally-based life in the Middle East. It is certain that many of the sayings recorded in the Jewish book actually originated in Mesopotamia or Egypt rather than in Israel or Judah. Generations before us in this country lived their lives by this sort of “received wisdom.” Think of the “Farmer’s Almanac” or, historically, “Poor Richard’s Almanac.” My Granny had a few proverbs she would trot out from time to time. I still remember her hard-won advice from the Depression: “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” We still share proverbial wisdom from time to time, usually delivered by those we admire from more recent history. Think of John Kennedy’s “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,” or “the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans,” or, a personal favorite of mine, “...why climb the highest mountain? Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas? ...We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard...” Or there’s Bobby Kennedy’s “Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not.” That’s a slight rephrasing from George Bernard Shaw, by the way. And, in today’s internet-reliant world, we even have a new word for proverbs – we call them “memes.”

But the point of the Book of Proverbs, as well as our more modern versions, is to provide us with memorable nuggets of practical wisdom – “How then shall we live?” For Brian McLaren, and for me, that is the first step in self-care and, therefore, loving oneself. The Biblical proverbs are a part of the wisdom we must internalize for a healthy life. Ellen Davis writes that wisdom, for the Biblical writers, means “living in the world in such a way that God, and God’s intentions for the world, are acknowledged in all that we do.” For those Old Testament sages, wisdom is the path to “peace of heart and peace with God and neighbor,” as is written in Proverbs 3:17. Dr. Davis writes, “One might sum up all the teachings of Proverbs by saying that wisdom means holding two things always together: discerning knowledge of the world plus obedience to God... This is what the sages mean when they say that wisdom begins with (revering) the Lord.”

Wisdom, then, brings peace, which is something we all need in these tumultuous times. But that is not the only element necessary for loving oneself and for the next component, I’ll turn to the book found immediately after Proverbs in our Christian Bibles: Ecclesiastes. People seem to be of two minds about this book: they either love it or hate it. When I mentioned on Facebook that I was preaching out of Ecclesiastes, a friend responded negatively. “...not my fave,” she wrote, “I can’t get past him being a downer.”

As You Love Yourselves

I disagree with my Rice classmate on both points. Qoheleth is one of my faves and I don't think he's a downer. My lived experience, after all, tells me that wisdom and righteousness don't always win the day. That's another one of the reasons I've been wary of the Book of Proverbs, which seems to sally forth with such confidence on that subject, although my current re-reading has revealed that this is not always the case. Qoheleth, as Ellen Davis mentions in her treatment of Ecclesiastes, recognizes that "Alienation and despair are... one moment, at least, in the journey toward faith... Martin Luther said we should read 'this noble little book' every day, precisely because it so firmly rejects sentimental religiosity." In defense of Qoheleth, Davis writes, "the most acute spiritual vision belongs to the person who loves the world, recognizes that it proceeds from God, and yet can smile at its limits and especially at human limitations in understanding the world." On this, I can agree.

Before I go further, let me read again part of the passage from chapter nine which I selected for this morning. After observing that all people, regardless of faith and behavior, end up in the grave, Qoheleth gives his solution to this aspect of the human condition. This is verses 7-10 in Eugene Peterson's translation, The Message:

"Seize life! Eat bread with gusto,
Drink wine with a robust heart.
Oh yes—God takes pleasure in your pleasure!
Dress festively every morning.
Don't skimp on colors and scarves.
Relish life with the spouse you love
Each and every day of your precarious life.
Each day is God's gift. It's all you get in exchange
For the hard work of staying alive.
Make the most of each one!
Whatever turns up, grab it and do it. And heartily!
This is your last and only chance at it,
For there's neither work to do nor thoughts to think
In the company of the dead, where you're most certainly headed."

Now, it's certainly possible to take this as a "downer," as my friend does. But I hear something quite different here. I hear the admonition to enjoy the gifts of God regardless of what life throws at us. Yes, because we live in a broken world, enmeshed in systemic evil, life can be cruel. But God is good and there are many beautiful moments in life, all gifts from God who loves us. One can, of course, dwell on the negatives but that leads to a mighty unhealthy life, devoid of, or at least devaluing, love and life itself. Can one act towards a neighbor in love if one does not find the joy in life? I'm not sure it's possible. I know it's not for me. To balance a mind full of wisdom, one must have a heart full of joy.

I was first stunned and then delighted when I went in the late winter of 2000 to see a film that either had just or was about to win several major Academy Awards, "American Beauty." My surprise and delight came when I heard the final monologue of the movie – the dying thoughts of protagonist Lester Burnham, played brilliantly by Kevin Spacey. I still consider Spacey one of the finest actors of our generation, though he is obviously a troubled human being to say the least. Perhaps some day we should have a discussion about the dichotomy between the artist and

their work. But I digress... The words which struck me that evening came straight out of the spirit of Qoheleth: "...it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst... And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life..." In screenwriter Alan Ball's vision, the bumbling, unhappy Burnham finally discovers the joy of life he's been searching for just as he departs life. Far better to find it while it can yet be enjoyed – though we, unlike Qoheleth, certainly have the promise of a future where a place is prepared for us and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

I'd originally intended to stop right here in my thoughts about loving oneself. Cultivate a wise and discerning mind and a joyful and grateful heart; that's a pretty good lesson right there. But then I picked up this month's edition of *Sojourners* and read the article by Lisa Sharon Harper entitled "How I Left My Body" and realized I'd omitted something crucial. In the article, Ms. Harper describes her experiences as one of the Black leaders of the 2017 demonstrations in Charlottesville, VA, during which White Supremacists had attacked the peaceful protestors, including one neo-Nazi using his car to mow people down. I hope we will all remember the name of Heather Heyer, who was killed in that incident. Ms. Harper describes how her psychological wounds manifested themselves in uncontrollable weeping, weight gain, and sciatica. It was the latter condition, she writes, that "got me back into my body. I had no other choice. I had to stretch. I had to feel again. For the past two years I have been on a journey home... to myself."

"Our bodies," she writes, "hold our trauma. If we listen, they will tell us where God wants to heal our souls. Body and soul: They hurt and heal together. Don't forget your body, lest you lose your soul." As a diabetic, with hypertension and heart disease, I can testify to the truth of her statement. I have to work harder than many to stay healthy in my body but I can feel the results, not only in my blood sugar, blood pressure, and a consistently clear cardiologist's report, but also in my state of mind. When I take the time to exercise, eat well, and get as much sleep as I need, my mind is clearer and my heart, metaphorically, is lighter. I have easier access to that wisdom and joy which I've been talking about. Our Jewish and Christian forebears understood this, too. Body and soul are deeply connected. It was the breath of God that made the clay body of Adam into a living soul, human from humus. The earliest followers of Jesus taught bodily resurrection, not only because they had seen the truth of it in Our Lord but because it was the only way that a new life made sense to them. Paul taught that our bodies are God's temple and that we should treat them accordingly. In order to love our neighbors, we must love ourselves, and to love ourselves, we must love all of our selves.

To become what God has always meant us to be, we must seek God's wisdom, the ability to know what will be acceptable in God's sight, and do it. We must accept with gratitude the joyful things that God puts in our lives: relationships, work, and play. And we must care for our bodies, recognizing that they are the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, "Jesus in our hearts" in the good old Baptist phrase. The times we live in have been made even more stressful by the pandemic and by the clash of righteousness and evil, but it was ever so. To survive, to thrive, we have been shown the way by the Scriptures and given wisdom, joy, and life by our Loving Creator. Thanks be to God! Amen.