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VALUES FOR PREACHING

FROM PROVERBS

Ragnar C. Teigen

How much use is made of the book of Proverbs in the preaching ministry of the church? I have the impression that it is not used a great deal. It is a long time since I have heard any sermons based on passages from this book.

Of course, sermon texts are not the whole story. There may be more sermons stemming from Proverbs than one suspects. There could be more use of Proverbs as supportive materials for preaching than we know. The misgivings, however, are not mine alone. Others have also observed that the book of Proverbs no longer enjoys the popularity in Christian tradition which it once did.¹

My impression of the non-use of Proverbs in preaching is supported by a look at the new lectionary. The three-year lectionary, *Contemporary Worship 6*, page 214, lists seven Wisdom texts, five from Proverbs, one each from Job and Ecclesiastes. In contrast to the numerous and rich selections, e.g., from Isaiah, these offerings seem a bit sparse. The Wisdom writings should not be allowed to disappear from sight inadvertently or otherwise as we continue to envision the task of Christian proclamation. These books are exceedingly rich commentaries on both faith and life. They address us not only on the practicalities of daily existence; they speak to us on the very frontiers of that existence. They serve as companions to the New Testament statements; they probe those same profundities to which the New Testament gives testimonials of faith. Thus, the Wisdom books deserve our attention. Sloyan's comments on Job and Ecclesiastes, referring to their low profile in the lectionary, seem more than appropriate in our time: "Even though the teachings of the Gospel provide Christians with an answer in faith to life's insoluble mystery, that does

1. John Mark Thompson, *The Form and Function of Proverbs in Ancient Israel* (The Hague: Mouton & Company, N.V. Publishers, 1974), p. 13. Thompson does note the renewed scholarly interest in Wisdom writings since 1965, p. 8.

not seem reason enough to silence almost completely the two biblical authors who discuss the mystery most perceptively.”²

The book of Proverbs does not explore the profundity of suffering as does Job; nor does it express as obviously the quiet struggles of faith and doubt as we find in Ecclesiastes. But it does have its own theological depths,³ while it certainly expresses much about practical experience.

WISDOM IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

When we reflect on sermonic values in Proverbs one feature should be mentioned immediately. The *family* and *community* are resources for practical wisdom (and theological reflection for that matter). They are living sources for wisdom in practice. Native intelligence, decision-making ability, good judgement, exercising “common sense,” practising courtesy, are features, so much emphasized in Proverbs, which are still bastions of family and community life.

The Wisdom teachers of Israel were well aware of these family values and emphasized them in their time. Listen to this instruction from Proverbs 1:8-9:

“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction,
and reject not your mother’s teaching;
for they are a fair garland for your head,
and pendants for your neck.”

Parents and home! McKane observes: “The home is a primary educational agency, and it is there that the foundations of civilized behaviour and general excellence are laid.”⁴

To be sure, one could visualize this family instruction as a stern and forbidding process overlaid with legalisms. But, as I read this passage, I am impressed with its charm. The Wisdom teacher is benevolently concerned about family instruction. He views the training passed on from parent to child as an essential contributor toward home and family welfare. Yet he does not, at least in this passage, view it in the light of some stern puritanism. Rather, he describes it in such pleasant figures as “fair garlands” or “pendants,” adornments in the life of a child. There should be a sermon or two in this

2. Gerard S. Sloyan, “The Lectionary as a Context for Interpretation,” *Interpretation* (Vol. XXXI, No. 2, April, 1977), p. 137. As a matter of information, this whole issue of *Interpretation* is devoted to articles on the three-year lectionary, a timely and pertinent topic. I find the articles informative and of much value for myself.
3. cf. Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, tr. by D.M.G. Stalker (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), pp. 418 ff; see especially his *Wisdom In Israel*, tr. by J.D. Martin from the German, *Weisheit in Israel* (London: SCM Press Ltd.) In both works Von Rad discusses the practical and also the theological depth matters of Proverbs.
4. William McKane, *Proverbs, The Old Testament Library*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 268. McKane calls his commentary “A New Approach.” The book reflects a vast amount of thought and work by McKane and represents, as well, trends in studies on Proverbs which are increasingly recognized today. As far as I know, it is the most comprehensive work on Proverbs in English and I recommend it for anyone wishing to probe this area of biblical studies.

passage, and others like it, for occasions such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, or quite possibly, Education Sunday.

Wisdom teachers in Israel were involved with character development beyond the boundaries of family. With keenness of interest, they looked at affairs of community and state as well. Integrity of character was, of all places, needed in these wider areas; for such a basic reason the wise teachers were intent on training the young men.

When we see such expressions as "My son . . . hear! Receive my words," etc. in Chapters 1-9 and 10-22:16⁵ we must look behind that language and imaginatively reconstruct a scene occurring in some community setting such as the town square, city gate, some public building, or perhaps the teacher's own dwelling.⁶ The teacher gathers with his pupils and the session begins. Kindly, perhaps solemnly, he opens with "My son(s)!" This is a very apt expression! They are his spiritual sons -- his educational children, now undergoing training toward personal growth and character development which will take them to leadership posts in community, maybe nation!

Remember the rebellion of Absalom against his father, David (2 Samuel 15-18)? Advisors to the Court had crucial roles in those events. Two key figures in such a capacity are involved in the narration. Ahithophel, originally David's counsellor, turned traitor by joining the insurrection forces to become Absalom's mentor. Hushai emerges as David's "friend at Court" while the royal family and supporters flee eastward from Jerusalem. David, however, tells Hushai to join Absalom as the king's "secret agent." He was to pass on strategic information but also to attempt to sabotage the revolt by offering counter-advice to Absalom. Hushai succeeds. The revolt fails and Absalom is slain. These events, reminiscent of some in Shakespearean tragedy, illustrate the singularly fateful importance advisors sometimes exercised in national affairs.⁷

Joseph, in the family of Jacob (Genesis 37, 39-50) is a sterling example of wisdom at work in a government foreign to his own upbringing, or at least different in setting from that of his youth. The story of Joseph takes the pompous young man through many tough experiences from those days in Canaan to his mature leadership roles in the court of Egypt. Through it all Joseph turns out to be a fine portrait of an honourable wise man exemplary in his diligence and decision-making sagacity within upper echelons of a pharaoh's government. He displays many of those traits so valued by the sages of Israel as they are expressed for posterity in the book of Proverbs.⁸

Wisdom, then, was essential for family, community and state in Israel (and other countries); it is equally important in those respects for us today. I want to emphasize the latter with a few autobiographical notes. One feature, among

5. cf. 2:1, 4:10, 5:1,7, 6:1, 20, etc.

6. cf. The settings in 8:1ff., streets, gates, or 8:34, the gates and doors to the teacher's home.

7. cf. McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London:SCM Press Ltd.), pp. 17-18. McKane notes Ahithophel and Hushai "were leading statesmen in the reign of David" with reference to the important roles they have in these narratives.

8. cf. Gerhard Von Rad's treatment in his *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, tr. by E.W.T. Dicken (London-Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), pp. 292ff.

others, impressed itself on me in younger days (and sometimes depressed me as well). These feelings derived from the wisdom exercised by elders and kin. They seemed so wise -- most of the time. They were temperate to one another for the most part, though not always -- we cannot be perfectionist about human prevarications! My elders were not beyond gossiping now and then, even while they were aware enough of the old adage, "He who belittles his neighbour lacks sense." Yet they practised as often the second line, "but a man of understanding remains silent" (Proverbs 11:12, but note related sentences in Proverbs). We are talking about an underlying lifestyle here more than anything else. Such features as native intelligence, shrewdness in decision making, and keen insight into human nature, all belonged to the heritage of wisdom, as I observed it lived out. Many remember similar values. For those I encountered I am grateful.

To be sure, sometimes applied sagacity hurt. Not least when some elder remarked, "You might have shown better judgement that time!" The one that really bothered me was the old catch-all, "You have a lot to learn!" This rebuke left me in the valley of frustration each time it was said. It usually brought a silent question to my consciousness, "How long and how far is it to wisdom?" But, whether it left mellowness or pain in its wake, that heritage represents a large bundle of values which I remember well. The point is, there is a context of wisdom for preaching. Our congregations represent an ongoing process of practical wisdom in which sermons from Proverbs would find a ready and listening audience.

VALUES OF WISDOM IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE

We have already indicated some of the qualities of wisdom which are integral to people in community. Now we must look further at a few of the values articulated in the book of Proverbs. We cannot possibly cover the whole spectrum of concerns in these writings. That fact becomes clear when one looks at Proverbs 10:1-22:16, a large collection of sentence sayings which are traditionally credited to Solomon. Many of these proverbs have their own complete thought. Some have relatives but they are scattered through the chapters so that one would need to pick them like apples from a tree in order to get similar proverbs in one basket. We are limited here to random samplings of the apple tree and readers may feel a bit victimized by the subjectivity of my choices. I find the following saying a very poignant one:

"The memory of the righteous is a blessing
but the name of the wicked will rot." (10:7)

Both lines have poignancy in different ways. The first gives me a sensation of sadness mixed with a deep contentment, a sentiment of grief but one intermingled with appreciation. We are "in memoriam" here. I could see a sign post, a tombstone or a cenotaph with this line: "The memory of the righteous is a blessing." We almost take for granted the memorial of righteousness

which great humans, Christians or others, have left to their respective cultures.

Who can properly measure the blessings left by the memories of some people in community that they persisted through their children but also in the memory of a good name (cf. e.g. Proverbs 21:1). These compensated for lack of a fuller teaching on existence after death which emerged only near New Testament times.

The second line of this Proverb has a tragic ring to it as do many others in the book. Such lines jar me. How can I preach on them? "The wicked will rot." This is not a very welcome declaration! It signifies exile, alienation, non-remembrance in community, a death pervaded by meaninglessness. Such a thing is incredibly sad!

History is too cluttered with such human wreckage! Are the wise men too pudgily moralistic? Are they guilty of over-simplifying human experience? I suppose we could accuse them of that. However, before we do, let us remember one important matter. The sages were struggling thoughtfully not only with individual behaviourisms; they were also concerned with some societal (maybe universal) ordering of experience to which they felt people needed to conform if society was to exist at all. But again, the wise teachers were also aware of relative values in some situations:

"Better is a man of humble standing who works for himself
than one who plays the great man but lacks bread."

(12:9; cf. 11:31)

Rather than stark contrast (often for didactic purposes!), here we are looking at something we could daub, "better-worse."

Another proverb which catches my fancy, but is far from a fanciful saying, is the following one:

"The heart knows its own bitterness
and no stranger shares its joy." (14:10)

This one contains deep pathos, as it strikes me, and has an insight all but subject to obliteration in our time when talk styles abound. On media talk shows, souls are all but disclosed. Dynamic therapy groupings are current forums for airing emotional complexities. Private counselling sessions promote self-knowledge leading to marked personal improvements, at least for some people.

In no way do I want to knock these efforts, public or private. But there is a profundity expressed in this proverb of which I will wager effective counsellors are well aware.

Some joys and some sorrows, some emotional dynamics, are so private and inward they defy communication. Counsellors can probe deeply into the human personality in the therapeutic process. There is, however, an inner sanctuary of the self which is very difficult, if not impossible, to share in total. At most it might be revealed to a close associate or friend but even there the threshold may exist beyond which another human cannot go. (On divine

scrutiny of the human being, see Genesis 3, Psalm 139, Hebrews 4:12-13 and Jesus' insight to people and persons in the Gospels.)

If this is a reasonably correct interpretation of the proverb, it is more than some esoteric luxury. The personality needs its own protection. Not every encounter between humans has the gracious touch of the one in the Garden of Eden where God, after probing Adam and Eve, immediately provided them with covering. Brainwashings in the modern world's political laboratories are radical examples of how some humans can virtually kill the emotions and mentalities of others. We need mantles over our inmost selves in order to live sanely and in balance within a human society. That means we may need to carry some of our deepest joys and sorrows privately and live with them.

I stumble at saying much more about this vital aspect of our human beingness. Our reflections could take us farther, into the vast fields of current therapeutic psychology or it could cluster our thoughts around the meanings of Christian devotion and prayer and the possible relationships of these approaches on behalf of human growth. That could mean we are either loading the one little proverb too much or attributing proper generative powers to the wise saying.

We should say a few things about the concept of work in Proverbs. The section we are in (10-22) but also others (1-9, 22-24) have basic reflections on the subject. As you might suspect, work is viewed through the eye-glasses of moral values in compacted observations extolling industry and criticizing sloth. The latter causes poverty (10:4, 13:4, 21:5, 5:6-11); it is likened to a sleepiness which brings not only want but shame (10:5, 20:13).

Remember the proverbial question: "Are you going to sleep your life away?" There is a large ethic behind that one today. Sluggishness is destructive. "He who is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys." (18:9) We could think of many types of work imbalances today which have destructive effects on our total economy! Slackness is a way of life overgrown with thorns (15:19). Literally! Deserted farms, neglected fields, unoccupied urban residences -- we know them. Israel's sages also did in their time. The picture is vividly drawn in Proverbs 24:30-34, a well-told little story-poem. The owner of the run-down vineyard slept too much and worked too little.

We cannot leave this subject without referring to the well-known "ant passage" in 5:6-11. Behold the small, well-organized but mighty ant! "Consider her (working) ways" and "be (industriously) wise." The sages should have smiled a little when they related this fable-like example to their pupils. Maybe they did. They ought to be permitted some tongue-in-cheek when, in the task of preparing some of their proteges for statecraft were observant enough to note that the ant world did its thing "without having any chief, officer or ruler." (5:7)

But, if the sages held that sloth was injurious, they also affirmed work as a positive matter. Knowing their teaching methodology of opposites, we might expect them to make some observations about the constructive nature of industry. They do. Work is judicious. "A son who gathers in summer (i.e. the proper season) is prudent." (10:5) Work not only keeps want away, it creates wealth: "The hand of the diligent makes rich." (10:4; cf. 13:4, 21:5, 28:19-20)

Sayings like these may have influenced views on poverty and wealth in the centuries after they originated. It was likely basic ideas like these which contributed to theories from which western capitalistic enterprises emerged.

Today work is a commonplace phenomenon in our western societies, though it is not restricted to this area of the world by any means. Work is in fact so obvious that its commonness is overlooked until and when unemployment or work-stoppages assume the proportion of abnormal disruptions. The latter features today become epidemic threats involving international interests, so closely tied is work with global economics.

One could go on reflecting about this huge concept of work. Possibilities are endless! Hosts of questions emerge. Is work today constructive or is it alienating to the human spirit? There are many replies to that question. Is it work or is it the kind and quality of work that concerns us today? Again a variety of responses are possible.

What about leisure time? We have said nothing about that. The wise men did not tackle that sophisticated concept, as far as I can tell, though the Bible as a whole is big on rest. More could be said but we must go on to some further thoughts.

I do, however, want to quote one passage which expresses the wise men's understanding of the primary motivations for any work or wealth we produce. It sounds like something we might read in church for a Stewardship Sunday, for instance.

Honour the Lord with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty
and your vats will be bursting with wine. (3:9-10)

CONCERN ABOUT FAITH IN PROVERBS

To this point, we have emphasized human values in Proverbs 10:1-22:16. But this passage is also deeply religious or, should we say, theological. In classes on Wisdom writings, an occasional student will ask about the relationship of those proverbs, so human in character, to the theological concerns of Christians -- of the relationship between daily life and faith in God. This is a valid question. After all, a number of the sentence sayings and or paragraph formations do not have the name of God in them. This is especially noticeable in the sections comprising Chapter 22:17-31, where the divine names, "Lord" and "God," show up relatively seldom.

How then can one respond to the question above? Two responses occur to me, though there are likely others in the hermeneutical spectrum. First of all, the human concerns in Proverbs are not only not foreign to Christian life and faith but are vital to it. To be industrious, to be precocious about managing wealth, to be courteous, tactful, given to sound judgement about daily matters, etc. are integral expressions of Christian faith. One wonders how it could be otherwise. Secondly, the sages themselves worked thoughtfully with the

question of how theology and the human concerns should be related in wisdom expressions for their own day. Notice, God may be “sparser” but he *does appear* in those latter sections of Proverbs. It is not as though he is absent.

When one looks at the Proverbs 1-9, 10:1-22 and 16, “God” not only appears prominently but he is integral to the thought development. This is especially true in Proverbs 1-9. In Proverbs 10-15 the words “righteous” and “wicked” occur in a profusion of contrasts. Such words are already profoundly theological -- a vital expression of Israel’s faith implying a relationship, or lack of it, to the God who is creator and redeemer.

Again, the sages concerned about faith and theology in wisdom not only reflect on the relationship between the divine and human economies involved; some of them make very strong affirmations about God as the ultimate source of wisdom. An intriguing expression, which occurs in Proverbs and elsewhere, is one whose significance is apt to slip by us on first reading for whatever reasons. The expression goes like this: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Proverbs 1:7, cf. also 9:10 and similar statements in Proverbs 14:27, 15:33; Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10) This short sentence represents more than a simple declaration about reverence for God. It does that, to be sure. But it also points to a significant development in Israel’s Wisdom writings.

Wisdom is more than human skills, character, behaviourisms or education. It actually has its origins in God and human reverence for him. Without this basic stuff there is no real wisdom possible. If that is what this little sentence means, it is a rather primary theological statement! Standing as it does in the introductory paragraph to Proverbs 1-9, it can be visualized as a theme intended to reverberate quietly throughout those chapters.

But again, if true wisdom rests in “fear of God,” then God himself is wise but also operates with wisdom in the larger universal order:

“The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps broke forth
and the clouds drop down the dew.” (3:19-20)

This is where the sages came in their understanding of the revelation given by God to Israel. God himself is the wise creator and sustainer of all that exists and he did so through wisdom at the very beginning!

If one, then, wanted to preach on the book of Proverbs and found the hermeneutical “jump” from human sayings to Christian declarations too formidable, one has plenty of justification for beginning with the theology in Proverbs as companionable to New Testament passages where pertinent. I would find either approach congenial. It’s possible when much else is said and done that the distinctions between “human” and “theological,” “religious” and “secular” in Proverbs are not as hard and fast as they might seem to us, plagued as we are by our many dichotomies today. Roland Murphy finds such distinctions non-existent in Wisdom writings: “This distinction is simply not

applicable to the wisdom tradition; the Israelite did not feel that his experiential insights were other than God-given wisdom.”⁹

Proverbs is an invaluable source for preaching values, not to mention private reading pleasure. It is a thoughtful and thought provoking book. It is earthy, human, experience-oriented but it is universal, cosmic in a benign way as it brings us its profound reflections on God, the sagacious creator and redeemptor.

9. Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., “The Interpretation of Old Testament Wisdom Literature,” *Interpretation* (Vol. XXIII, No. 3, July, 1969), p. 293. But I would recommend Murphy’s whole essay for careful study and thought.