

“Wise Living: Equity”

Proverbs 2:6-11, 29:13-14, 14:20-21,31,  
17:5 19:1 22:1-2, 24:23, 29:12-14,  
Luke 10:25-37

October 2, 2016  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

We've been talking a lot about wisdom and wise living. I wondered if we were to try to convict somebody of having wisdom or wise living, how would we do that? If somebody were going to convict us of being wise, what would be the criteria they would use?

It feels like at the beginning of the book of Proverbs, it's giving us the broad scope of what we might look at. We find in the second verse, “For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity.” Again in the second chapter it talks about righteousness, justice, and equity and calls them the good paths. We have talked about righteousness and justice, and today we talk about equity and what that might mean. It's not one of those words that is used as much in the Old Testament. Righteousness and justice, those are words that are found throughout, but I think there's a sense of equity throughout scripture.

Proverbs 24:23 says, “These also are the sayings of the wise: partiality in judging is not good.” So what is equity about? It's that idea that partiality is not good in judging. Another way to think about it is, if you think about righteousness and justice being straight instead of being crooked, we have that sense of the crooked being those who don't do things right. We even get the idea of a crook. (Does crook come from crooked?) What equity might be more about is about an evenness. When things are uneven, how do we bring up that which is out of balance? How do we make it possible for things to be more even? How do we think about having a more level playing field?

I don't know if you have ever played on an un-level playing field, but it probably would be pretty tough. We think about that in our general lives, don't we? What's a level playing field and what's not a level playing field? If you're a teacher and you have a classroom of students and there's a group that's popular and there's one person who is really popular, and then there are others who aren't very popular, you're supposed to give A's to the popular people and F's to the not-popular people, right? We don't do it that way. That's partiality. In fact, I have had a number of people who have told me over time, “It was that one teacher that took a special interest in me. My life was rough. I came from a family that was struggling, and it was the teacher who made the difference.” We don't expect there to be partiality in the classroom over people who are struggling and people who aren't, but rather that each are expected to be treated well and given the opportunity to learn.

I think Proverbs talks about partiality in terms of the rich and the poor. It says in Proverbs 14:31, “Those who oppress the poor insult their maker, but those who are kind

to the needy honor him.” I find that a pretty strong statement about what God might feel about it and what Proverbs is beginning to identify in terms of partiality.

Proverbs is not saying that we should all be poor and not do anything. Proverbs 14:23 says, “In all toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.” I don’t always like to think about toil as a good thing, but there is the idea that we’re to put effort into our lives and if things are just, then our effort should produce something good. Proverbs recognizes that, but it also recognizes, “The field of the poor may yield much food but it is swept away through injustice.” The idea is the guy worked hard, he did what he was supposed to, he grew the food, but then he was cheated out of it. He was cheated out of the profits; cheated out of the ability to trade it for what he needed. Swept away.

I think we have a sense of that. There was a program on TV, a cartoon that was a take-off on some of those melodramas that you might see at a little theater. There was the Snidely Whiplash character twirling his mustache, and there would be the damsel in distress. He would be trying to steal her land by trying to make her marry him or sign it over in some way. She won’t do it, so finally he ties her up and puts her on the railroad track. What happens? Dudley Do-right always comes and saves the day.

That’s a caricature of injustice. That’s a caricature of the idea that there are some folks who are greedy enough to try to steal from another. There are ways in which our world is not always structured in a way where everybody has the same opportunity. Proverbs recognizes that there is injustice.

The problem gets compounded, I think, because we struggle with looking at one another and how to do that. Here’s what Proverbs 21:4 says about that, “The haughty eyes and the proud heart (the lamp of the wicked) are sin.” There’s this sense that when we see someone else not doing as well, we want to blame them and say we’re better. It’s their fault. There’s something wrong and we’re better. Those haughty eyes and proud heart. It’s so easy to do.

I don’t know about you, but reading Proverbs always knocks some of the wind out of my sails because it points out things in me that I didn’t want to acknowledge. Proverbs wants us to remember, “The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.” (Proverbs 22:2) Really, that’s the whole basis of the impartiality of faith. The Lord God is the maker of us all. But it’s so easy to try to make distinctions.

Proverbs goes on in Chapter 14, verses 20-21, “The poor are disliked even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends. Those who despise their neighbors are sinners but happy are those who are kind to the poor.”

I think somebody a little later had something to say about neighbors. We read that piece from Luke. “Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer asks Jesus. “I know loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength is the first commandment, and to love my neighbor as myself is the second. But who is my neighbor?” I want to be able to distinguish who

I have to love and who I don't. That's what it feels like he's saying. And this parable seems like it has so many different layers to it, but one of the pieces is not only is the person who is considered to be the neighbor to someone else someone who's not considered to be a neighbor—Samaritans and Jews just didn't get along—he showed what it meant to be a neighbor. Kind of a double-whammy. Jesus was inviting us to love our neighbors and not make those distinctions about who the neighbor is. It makes me think about coming to the table.

What's the distinction? Who gets to come? He invites everyone. You see, when Jesus sets the table, it is set for all of us, for everyone. It's not a distinction between rich and poor, black and white, male and female, Jew and gentile. It's perhaps the reason he often talks about us being part of a family, because at least in a family brothers and sisters aren't supposed to have a pecking order. There's an equality, an equity.

The table is an invitation to us all to come and be part of the family of God, to recognize that we're all children of God and we can come. We are all sustained by the one living God. We are invited to be part of that family. God doesn't judge us with partiality and he invites us not to judge each other, but to love one another – to love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.