

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

August 19, 2012 *The Lives We Lead*

Proverbs 9:1-6 Rev. Adrienne Carr

I am reading a book called *The Presidents' Club* by Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy. Perhaps some of you are reading it also. The first few chapters describe the club's founding that came about through an unlikely relationship between Harry Truman and Herbert Hoover. The period of time at the conclusion of the Second World War and the critical years following that devastating event took on personal meaning for me through what I read from the book.

Among my earliest childhood memories are those supper times when I was told to eat all of my food because children were starving in Europe or China. Honestly, to me, they were just words meant to force me to eat my peas, but as I was reading the book, those words came back to me. In becoming president, Harry Truman inherited the stark reality of war's aftermath that included European cities bombed into rubble and the spectre of death by starvation of 100 million people all over Europe. Truman knew that such a catastrophe was unthinkable but also knew that he needed an expert to head a massive relief effort. He called on Herbert Hoover, the Republican president who had been reviled by Democrats for his unfortunate timing of serving as President as America fell into the Great Depression. But Hoover had also been the creator of a relief effort following World War I that saved millions of lives in Europe and Asia.

Overcoming mistrust and the antagonism of political leaders on both sides of the aisle, Truman appointed Hoover the director of a newly formed agency under the Department of Agriculture that found ways to get food where it was needed. The effort also required the cooperation of the American people. Just coming out of the imposed war rationing, people did not want to be asked to sacrifice yet again. They wanted to forget war and get on with normal life. Nevertheless, the two Presidents separately asked the American people to accept the need to cut back for four months so that wheat and other commodities could be sent to Europe. Through having meatless days and flourless days each week, our people would be participants in saving countless lives. The people agreed and I heard that Compassionate response filtered down to the level of understanding of a 3 or 4 year old.

We did it. In that critical year following the end of the war, we saved the lives of all those millions. We did it because two politicians let go of the party lines and called us to be caring sisters and brothers of people we would never meet but they would feel our touch through the gift of a loaf of bread.

I encourage you to read, if not the whole book, at least the first chapters. Those of you who are a few years older than I might also want to share your memories of that post war period.

Last year, our early morning Bible Study spent the year studying, reflecting on, hotly discussing and sometimes, laughing over the Book of Proverbs. In those ancient words, we did, indeed, find some anachronistic material that was highly suitable for the mores of an ancient society but grating on our contemporary way of

life. Nevertheless, we discovered a multitude of wise and/or pithy saying that have as much relevance today as they did eons ago.

I share a few of those droplets of wisdom:

The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. 8:13-14

Hatred stirs up strife but love covers all offenses. 10:12

*The field of the poor man may yield much food,
But it is swept away through injustice. 13:23*

*The poor are disliked even by their neighbors,
but the rich have many friends. 14:20*

*One who forgives an affront fosters friendship,
But one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend. 17:9*

There are many such gems in the book. There are others that one might call cynical:

*When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you.
And put a knife to your throat if you have a big appetite. 23:1-2*

*The lazy person buries a hand in the dish,
and is too tired to bring it back to the mouth. 26:15*

The passage from this morning's lectionary selections is a tribute to Sophia, Wisdom, Ruah – the spirit of God known by several names that desires all people to grow into the fullness of wisdom. Wisdom, in this passage, has built a house into which she invites all those who desire wisdom. They come to the banquet in their ignorance and are filled with understanding and knowledge. All are welcome. None who seek to have their minds and hearts opened to the full meaning of being human are denied entrance.

This passage resonated with the Truman-Hoover relationship. Two individuals who were absolutely loyal to their own party, their own sense of what was right for the country were able to forego the rhetoric and work together to save lives. In their growing respect for each other, those two men absorbed and practiced wisdom. The result of their unified wisdom saved not only Europe, but the world from total chaos.

Wisdom – do we know if we have it? In ancient times, there were hard and fast rules and hard and fast mistaken ideas. The rules were simple.

Follow God's rule.

Live by the commandments.

Work hard.
Be compassionate and generous.
Raise children who will be observant of God's law.
Do so by not sparing the rod.

Those mistaken ideas continue to echo within human society today.
Be righteous and wealth will follow.
Sinners will lose wealth and suffer.
Wealth is a proof of righteousness.
Poverty is proof of sin or stupidity.

How do we live our lives? What is the guiding rule in our daily activities, in the world of work, in our home life and in the many decisions that we make daily, weekly or yearly. For the most part, we have built a society of rules. For the most part, we abide by those rules; with the possible exception of speeding. I speak only for myself in that regard. Most parents raise children to be observant of rules, to be able to share and to be both considerate and caring; and they do so without the rod.

We don't do so well with poverty. At some level, we blame individuals and families for the situation in which they live. Perhaps there is some legitimacy in that assumption but as the old Native American adage states, "*We cannot know someone unless we have walked in that person's moccasins.*" However, someone on public assistance must not be doing something right. Generational poverty or bad choices or lack of education or simple laziness often are what we see when we notice a person using food stamps or living in Section 8 housing. What we don't see is the mother with a Seventh grade education working at McDonalds to keep her children clothed and fed. We don't see the refugee father who works two jobs and takes courses at Community College so that his children will have an education and a profession. And we do not see the fifteen year old pregnant child living with her 30 year old mother and her 45 year old grandmother because that is all she knows of life.

Poverty was a fact of life in ancient times just as it is now; however, there were frequent references in Proverbs to justice or lack of it for the poor. Within the law, it was a requirement for the community to be generous to the widow, the orphan, the sick, the stranger. Laziness, on the other hand, was not tolerated. Work hard and be rewarded. Be lazy and suffer the consequences.

Those mistaken ideas that took hold and still have an influence today are difficult to pin down because they are deeply imbedded in the human psyche. Persons with great wealth hold sway over others simply because of the wealth. None of us would say that a person of great wealth achieved riches as a reward for righteousness but there is that almost invisible desire to trust that individual with a kind of awe precisely because the wealth.

I drive my husband to distraction as I watch programs that feature the Queen's Jubilee. He declares me to be a monarchist. I really am not but I want to understand how that white haired little grandmother who always wears a hat and carries a purse can have such influence, not only in England but also around the

world. Should I be in awe at her charisma or should I question the relevance of that innately archaic system? Or is it simply my reverting to childhood fairy tales?

One portion of Proverbs is dedicated to extolling the qualities of a righteous king. Seldom was righteousness the trait of a ruler. Rather, many, if not most of the rulers of Judah and Israel were arrogant and lethal. They received their wealth on the backs of the people through crippling taxes. And often, lived long and well, convinced that they were the hand of God. Even as they sent young men off to wars, solely to gain more wealth, they offered sacrifices in the temple to keep God or gods happy.

It is natural for us to aspire to greater power. What kind of sacrifices do we make to achieve our goals? Do we sacrifice our family on the altar of greater power and a hefty pay increase? Or is it a sacrifice to the greater good? When I had young children and a part time job, I enrolled in Seminary and spent four years attempting to keep all my balls in the air. It was a difficult time and though I thought I was doing a great job, it was not the perspective of the children. One of my children asked me to volunteer for a field trip. I said that I had a class. In angry disappointment, he told me just how far from perfect I was. "You never volunteer like the other parents. You never go on field trips. You never attend the PTA." I was shocked and my son was correct. But I was doing it all for the greater good, wasn't I?

In some way, The Book of Proverbs holds a mirror to our contemporary life. Take out the sections on slaves, the caning of children and the sometimes cold analysis of poverty and we are given insight into our core humanness. What amazing qualities we humans have to be caring and generous; yet what hard heartedness we sometimes reveal in our treatment of others.

Again, how do we lead our lives? The letter to the Ephesians teaches the readers to: *Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise...5:15.* Wisdom is learned slowly by experience. If I am able to hold myself open to all the good and bad experiences I encounter, and if I am humble enough to learn from them, I begin to acquire wisdom, a wisdom that permeates my relations with family, friends, colleagues and especially those whom I do not like. I begin to accept my own imperfections even as I see the imperfection of others in a new light. I see! I see the good in others more clearly and I let go of the animosities or jealousy that has held me back from the other. I begin to understand that righteousness is not a mindless following of rules but a commitment to love.

And I gladly enter the home of Wisdom and fill myself with her nourishing meal of clarity, compassion and insight. I look around and I see my family, friends, colleagues and those I do not like all sharing the meal and being nourished in wisdom and we are at peace. Amen.