

Christian Wisdom

Year C – Season after Pentecost, Proper 17

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, 28 August 2022

Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

There was once a pastor who moved to a small mountain town in Oregon for an appointment to a new church. Upon arrival, the pastor set himself to getting to know the people in the town and it wasn't long before he observed pervasive stealing in the community. Apparently, the townspeople had gotten into the habit of stealing logs out of the river that had been harvested upstream and sent downriver for sale. The pastor knew just what to do, so that Sunday, he preached on loving your neighbor as yourself.

The congregation loved it. They were effusive in their praise. "Thank you so much, preacher, I really needed to hear that." You can imagine the pastor's surprise when the very next day, he watched his congregants continue their log stealing at the river. Emboldened, the pastor went into the pulpit the next Sunday and preached *thou shalt not steal*. Again, the church was full of affirmation. "Thank you, pastor, I felt like you were speaking directly to me today." The very next day, the pastor was beside himself when he saw the log stealing continue without a moment's delay. That Sunday, the preacher preached on loving your neighbor by not stealing your neighbor's logs. After the service the board chair told the pastor his services were no longer needed.

Seminarians are told this story as a cautionary tale about the risk in the application move in the sermon. It's the application of Scripture that'll get you fired.

Each of today's lessons are making the application move. Hebrews is regarded by many biblical scholars as an extended sermon and today's passage is at the conclusion of the sermon, in the application move. Here the preacher gets concrete: show hospitality to strangers; remember those in prison; let marriage be held in honor by all; and keep your lives free from money. These aren't generic applications to be more loving. They're specific, practical, and demanding. They're the kind of applications that can get you fired.

Today I'd like to explore how the applications in our lessons today reveal the difference Christ makes for how we live. I'd like to suggest that Christian wisdom makes demands on our lives such that if we follow them, our lives will be in danger, different, and divine. Let's start with Hebrews since I've already mentioned it.

In my eLetter this week, I cited the first two verses from Hebrews to underline how love is risky. Mutual love is the foundation of these applications of the preacher in Hebrews, and showing hospitality to strangers can be downright dangerous. Showing hospitality to a stranger named Dylann Roof got nine Christians murdered at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, just seven years ago. Showing hospitality to strangers takes courage.

The reason why showing hospitality to strangers is an act of courage rather than recklessness is because we trust in God rather than fear the worst the world can do to us. This is what it means to fear the Lord, as the psalmist helped us pray today. Fearing the Lord means believing that God sees all things, is the arbiter of justice, and trusting that God will make things beautiful in the end. Such trust in God means that we can be generous, we can lend our money, we can give to the poor, we can be just, and we can live without fear because our hearts are “secure” in God (Ps. 112:7).

Trusting in God in this way, what the psalmist calls fearing God, is what establishes us as a people of mutual love who can dare to live without fear in a dangerous world. Such dangerous living would certainly extend to visiting those in prison, especially when such persons were imprisoned for claiming Jesus as Lord. Visiting the prisoner was a risky venture at a time when such visitation could get you imprisoned and tortured too. So showing hospitality to strangers and visiting prisoners only make sense if we live in a world where angels exist and God can be trusted.

Christian wisdom operates on *this* logic, and it’s this view of reality that makes it possible for us to live differently in this world. Holding marriage in honor is an application of Christian wisdom that shows our lives to be different. In many respects marriage doesn’t make sense outside an understanding of how Christ loves the church. Marriage, contrary to popular belief, is not a private affair, but showcases what Christ makes possible. As Christian sisters and brothers, it’s our business to support each other’s marriages. It’s a church affair. Marriage is difficult, and we need each other to keep our promises to remain faithful in good times and bad, in wealth or poverty, in sickness and health, until we die.

Our lives also look different in the way we handle money and share what we have. The author of Hebrews says it this way, “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have” (Hebrews 13:5). Christians live like this because God is with us. God will not leave or forsake us. Because God has us, we can be free from money’s grip, content with what we have.

Yet another difference can be found in the counsel from Proverbs, which Jesus reiterates and then deepens. Don’t take the best seat at the table, both Proverbs and Jesus agree. But Jesus goes a step beyond saving face when he names such seat selection as a reality of the kingdom: “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Lk 14:11). The kingdom of God reverses the status of this world. It’s all reversal. For careful readers of Luke’s gospel, we’ve been onto this reversal from the start when Mary sang her song about the mighty being cast down from their thrones and the lowly being lifted up. In the kingdom, humility is the posture of the King.

So far we’ve seen how the applications in our lessons today are applications that stick because they are expressions of Christian wisdom. Namely, these applications make sense because of who God is and how God wants us to live in this world. We’ve seen how these applications can

put us in danger and make us different. But the good news is to be found in how these applications make us divine.

Years ago, Greenville College adopted the slogan, "Different is good." We were on to something, kind of like the counsel from Proverbs, but we really needed to go further with it. It's really not that different is good. I can think of many ways of being different that are certainly not good. But what was right about this slogan is that it was on the scent of how following Jesus makes us different. The point, after all, is not that we would be different for the sake of being different; but rather, that we would be different because God is different, and God invites us to be like God, which brings us to our last application.

Jesus says to his host, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Lk 14:12-13). Of all of the applications we've explored, this is the one that makes me the most uncomfortable. If Jesus got kicked out of the Pharisee's power lunch, I'd understand.

Jesus gives this counsel on the heels of his parable of the wedding banquet. Parables give us snapshots of the kingdom. And Jesus is showing us what the kingdom of God is like. It's like a wedding banquet that's full of people who are poor, crippled, lame, and blind. It's full of strangers. It's loaded with unclean people, with people who have been unseen and unheard by the church. This wedding banquet parable shows us God's heart and what God's kingdom is all about.

The picture Jesus gives us of God's kingdom is a specific, practical, and demanding vision about what it means to live as God's friends. And what we learn today is that living as God's friends means we need to learn to enjoy the people God enjoys because these are the people who will be with God for all eternity.

The applications we get today are ones that come from Christian wisdom. Rejecting status, embracing humility, showing hospitality to strangers, visiting prisoners, honoring marriage, sharing our money, being content, and eating with outcasts make all the sense in the world if this is what God does. And God *does*. Christian morality is about becoming divine, about becoming like God. The reason why we take the risks, the reason why our lives look different, is because God is making us divine. God is making us into people fit for friendship with God.

The parables we read in the Bible, like the wedding banquet one today, are upsetting if you take them seriously and apply them to your life as given you by the world. Jesus's applications are the kinds of applications that would get him fired from many a church. And it was these applications that got him killed. As Luke tells us, Jesus got killed because the people *did not recognize the time of their visitation from God* (Lk 19:44).

Today we are invited to recognize God and God's will for us in these applications. Rather than become upset or take offense at these specific, practical, and demanding applications, I wonder what it would look like for us to receive them as gifts for enjoying life with God for ever. May we have eyes to see and courage to embrace different and dangerous lives, so that we might become people fit for friendship with God. Amen.