

Proverbs 22

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.

²The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.

⁸Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

⁹Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

²²Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;

²³for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

The Tradition of the Elders

7 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands,^[a] thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it;^[b] and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.^[c]) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live^[d] according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" ⁶He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

⁹Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, 'Honor your father

and your mother'; and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.'¹¹ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban' (that is, an offering to God^[e])—¹² then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this."

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."^[f]

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile,¹⁹ since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.^[g] He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir,^[h] even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

“If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that He commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don't want to do it.” – Stephen Colbert becomes host of the Late Show this week

September 6, 2015

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Mark 7: 1-30 (CHANGE FROM THE BULLETIN)

May God Bless You with Anger!

I know this *probably* hasn't happened to you, but... Have you ever gone on a tirade about how incensed you are over a particular bad behavior, like gossip, or lying, or talking bad about other people, and THEN, you turn around and see yourself doing the very same thing you were on your soapbox about just a few days before? I know that *you've* never done that, but I will admit that I have. I want to be committed to truth telling, and positive reinforcement, and not sharing the personal things that others have asked me not to share, but sometimes I break my own rules, I trip on my own tongue, and when I realize what I've done and feel my own guilt, I pray to God to do better. When it's really bad, I sometimes even have to apologize to those who were injured in my wake. It's not fun, but I find that admitting my faults can go a long way toward mending bruised relationships.

Unfortunately, in this read from Mark's gospel, we can see Jesus get caught by the very same bind. He's been preaching against those hypocritical Pharisees. And who doesn't like to point out hypocrisy in others? It feels good to know that we're superior to the likes of them. Jesus is letting them have it for criticizing his disciples. He fires back at them for getting on their case for not washing their hands before they eat. They broke the tradition of the elders, but Jesus thought that their critique had gone too far. Well, as gross as that might be for us that they were eating without washing their hands, Jesus tells them that they do things one step grosser. The words that come out of their mouths are full of hate and condescension. That's what defiles a

person, he says: harsh critique, and standing behind the law, and using “God” language to justify being mean to others.

I do not disagree. Jesus is right. He knows that he’s right. His anger is fully justified. We want to have a touch of that prophetic anger that keeps us humble in our own judgments and reminds us that God is merciful, even to the likes of our enemies.

But sometimes the anger doesn’t quite go away. We’re good at harboring it, nursing it, giving it *way* more attention than it deserves. Anger can simmer inside even after we think we’ve gotten over it. Maybe that’s what happened to Jesus in the next scene. His anger at the Pharisees wasn’t quite done yet.

He’s makes the journey to Tyre after this episode and he doesn’t want anyone to know he’s there. Arguing with the Pharisees is hefty emotional work. It causes trouble and conflict and physically pushes that negative adrenalin rush that can spike blood pressure and make us crave French fries and a chocolate frosty. He’s drained and it shows. A woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit comes to him and asks for his help. Some might call this compassion fatigue. Perhaps he was tired of helping, they say. It happens. But this time, I’m not so sure. I think he was filled with that residual muck that comes from stirring up conflict. He brushes her off. In fact, listen to how he brushes her off. “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Harsh words? Check. Standing behind the law against “her kind?” Check. Invoking the privilege of the children of the house of Israel as God’s only children? Check. He just did that thing that he busted on the Pharisees for doing. He did. And Mark not only allows, but maybe even encourages us to see this very human side of Jesus.

The Syrophenician woman, though, is bold in her love for her daughter and her insistence on getting the help that she needs. “Sir, even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” I wonder if Jesus heard his own words echoing back to his ears, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’” His heart was drawn back to helping, to making this situation right. “For saying that, you may go, the demon has left your daughter.”

There’s a problem with calling out a negative behavior in others. If we aren’t 100% pure in our own avoidance of that behavior, the charge that will be leveled against us is hypocrisy. That word gets thrown around a lot about Christians these days, but it has been an accusation haunting the religiously devout of just about every tradition, seemingly since the dawn of time. I learned just this morning that the word hypocrite originally meant actor. Basically, being a hypocrite means that you’ve been play-acting at being good, but maybe haven’t been quite as good as you seem.

Jesus calls out the Pharisees. The Syrophenician woman calls out Jesus. And in both of these cases it’s a matter of comparing the crimes. The Pharisees are upset that the disciples eat without washing their hands, but Jesus is angered that they say such things without watching their mouths. Jesus refuses to help a woman who is “not of his tribe,” and she reminds him that his compassion, that God’s compassion isn’t limited to one “kind of person.” It’s judicial one-upsmanship. If you’re going to point out what’s bad in me, I might point out what’s worse in you. Sometimes it works to open eyes, but mostly it just enrages the other person.

Our culture is exceedingly good at playing “my cause is better than your cause.” I’ve been sucked into that game more often than I’d like to admit. We also like to play “I’m better than you because your sin is worse than my sin.” And what was it Jesus also once said? It’s better to take the log out of your own eye before you point out the speck in someone else’s eye. We do know that he *usually* gets it and he’s incredibly good at managing to call folks to repentance in such a gentle, non-judgmental way. So if Jesus can make this mistake of missing his own mark, I think we can safely assume that we’re going to as well. But it’s also true that he had a change of heart. So what has the power and the ability to offer us a new perspective? Maybe it was because he had a good teacher in this woman. We all need teachers like that sometimes, the ones that don’t mean to necessarily catch us at our worst, but when they do it makes us rethink our own actions and become better people.

Well, here’s the thing though... **EVEN THOUGH** we are not going to be 100% perfect in our own lives, **EVEN THOUGH** we will make the same mistakes that we call out in others, it is important in the life of faith to know when to get angry. Anger can be destructive, certainly, we all know about that. Anger can also be motivating, cleansing, and spur us to compassionate action. The benediction that most of you have heard me use by now that comes from people living in monastic communities states, “May you be blessed with anger. May you be blessed with anger at injustice, oppression, and the exploitation of people!” We desperately need this kind of anger. The kind of anger and loss we feel when we see the videos and images of the Syrian refugees, especially of the little boy found washed ashore. Or the kind of impatient anger we feel at the systems that keep the poor struggling for food, and medicine, and housing. Or the kind of anger that makes us cringe at racist and sexist jokes, or even at our silent judgment of others that only serves to judge our own prejudicial thoughts.

It helps to know that the woman who brought Jesus' thinking to a different place was a mixed-race woman, not of his tribe, not of his religion, and she begged help for a daughter who was being lost to a demon. His disciples and followers probably wouldn't have thought twice about him actually dismissing her. But he wakes up when he checks his own internal reading on the situation. It is a wake-up call when we face our own prejudices and assumptions with the willingness to make a change. Blessed anger can do this for us.

So I leave you with some questions for thought:

How is God blessing you with anger – at hypocrisy?

How is God blessing you with anger – at injustice?

How is God blessing you with anger - at oppression?

How is God blessing you with anger - at the exploitation of people?

Because when we are blessed with such anger, it will give us the courage to work for justice, freedom, and peace. Amen.

<<<<**FLAG THE BULLETIN**>>>>

**May God bless you with anger at injustice, OPPRESSION, and the exploitation of people so you will work for justice, freedom, and peace.*