

September 6, 2015

TEXT: Proverbs 22:1–11, 16

TITLE: Preventing Identity Theft

Another age-old ritual took place recently as parents packed up bags and delivered their children to college. For college freshmen, there were orientation sessions to be attended and dorm rooms to be furnished. But at some point, the nervous sons and daughters and nervous parents had to take their leave from one another. Likely some last bit of advice was passed between them before they went their separate ways. Back in Shakespeare's time, a famous version of this scene was described in Hamlet, when Polonius gave a wealth of advice to his son departing for college—including the famous lines: *Neither a borrower nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend and borrowing dulls the edge of [honest work]; and this above all [else]: to thine own self be true.*

Giving advice on how to live one's life well has been a part of every culture from the dawn of time. It was there in the teachings of Plato (*The unexamined life is not worth living*), in the wisdom of Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* (Cleanliness is next to godliness), and in the advice of Dear Abby (*When a reader complained that a gay couple had moved in across the street and he wanted to know what could be done to improve the quality of the neighborhood, Abby wrote back 'You could move.'*) Giving advice on how to live one's life well has also been part of every religion from the dawn of time—from the teachings of Confucius and the sayings of Buddha to the wisdom of the book of Proverbs.

Moral advice often comes in small doses. No one has time to review a Wikipedia of information before one acts; what works best are the short pearls of wisdom passed on to us by parents and grandparents: *Measure twice, cut once. Don't cry over spilled milk. Better to be silent and thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.* Short moral teachings are easy to remember, and if remembered, easier to apply.

On a different level, words of moral advice are often short because life is short. We want to pass on some of the things we've learned in our brief existence—especially if it will help our children avoid some of the mistakes we've made. Harpo Marx—the Marx brother who never spoke in the movies—wrote a memoir in which he described trying to pass on wisdom to his children. He always wanted them to have fun and enjoy life. But the first item on his list of House Rules was this: *Life has been created for you to enjoy, but you won't enjoy it unless you pay for it with some good, hard work. This is one price that will never be marked down.*¹ A similar motivation about passing on life lessons is at the heart of the book of Proverbs, the supposed wisdom of King Solomon, one of the wisest men who ever lived.

Yet here's the challenge I face: How do I preach on Proverbs without sounding preachy? How do I talk about morals without sounding moralistic? I can easily

quote the proverbs back to you: *A good name is to be chosen over great riches, for a favored reputation is better than silver of gold*—and almost no one will argue with this logic. But if we want to expand on the message, some speakers are tempted to go a step further and give examples about folks who have bad reputations, how “those people” do terrible things while congratulating all the people in the pews who are not at all like “them.” That approach is hypocritical, since all of us sin and mess up and don’t live up to our best reputations. So how can we get words of moral advice to truly take root in our souls?

I read a surprising article last week that asked which common diseases of aging were considered the ones that most robbed us of our core identity. As we grow older, we all run the risk of certain types of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis/Lou Gehrig’s disease, or frontotemporal dementia. Some involve significant losses in our motor systems, making it hard to walk and talk. Some involve losses in our memory systems, eroding our reservoir of memories and making it hard to form new ones. Some, like frontotemporal dementia, affect our moral behavior. This condition has been described as one that scrambles our moral compass, making patients prone to outbursts, pathological lying, stealing, and sexual infidelity.² In one study, family members who had a loved one battling these diseases were asked “Do you feel like you still know the patient? Does the patient ever seem like a stranger to you?” The researchers found that a sense of identity was not significantly impaired when people had Alzheimer’s or ALS. The mobility or memory losses did not keep loved ones from seeing the persons as the family members they’d always been. My mother had a type of dementia near the end of her life. And while her memory loss, forgetfulness and impulsiveness were often a challenge to deal with, she was always Suzi Bush. She always came across as fundamentally the same person. But the researchers found that when a person’s moral faculty was affected, it was then that family members remarked that someone had stolen their loved one’s true identity—that their former parent or spouse would never have done these acts and they’d be horrified if they realized they were now guilty of such behavior. The last two sentences of the article said it best: *What makes us recognizable to others resides almost entirely within a relatively narrow band of cognitive functioning. It is only when our grip on the moral universe loosens that our identity slips away with it.*

When our grip on the moral universe slips away, identity theft happens. In the church we teach about morality in many ways. We stress the Ten Commandments, the ethics of Jesus, the ways of true justice and peace. We do so, not to be holier-than-thou and moralistic, but so that people have the chance to be fully themselves—moral children of God. We hold one another to standards of behavior, to do what is right, so that we might have a faithful, moral identity in this world. A moral identity has two parts to it. First, we are inexorably connected to one another. The Disney movie *The Lion King* sang about the “circle of life” when in reality the better metaphor is the “web of life.” We are connected one to another. Forest fires and droughts, ebola and Avian flu, immigrant crises on

European borders are never just regional problems. Climate change, disease outbreaks, and mass migrations are global issues now—which makes them personal issues as well. The shooting death of a reporter is not a news event from far away, but something that could well have happened in Pittsburgh, but only coincidentally happened somewhere else. A Ferguson, MO or Baltimore, MD riot is not restricted to their location as much as it holds up a mirror to our city's failings in the exact same ways. Black lives matter is a national movement, not just a slogan for someone else's regional rally. So long as we have breath in our bodies, we are connected to others in a moral web of life.

Second, we are time-bound, moral creatures. What you do today will bear fruit tomorrow: a harvest of virtue or a crop of thorns. You shall reap what you sow, says the "good book." This quality is less about individual acts and more about the time-bound, character of the life God has given us to live. The violinist Isaac Stern was asked to define music and he responded, "Music is what happens between the notes." In a similar way, the novelist Iris Murdoch commented that "the moral life is something that goes on continually. It is not something that is switched off in between the [various] moral choices we make. What happens between such choices is what is crucial."³ The moral life is a continuous life. We do not turn on and off our moral selves like light switches on our souls. Morality is always on—always a part of us—and thus to lose this constant moral compass is to lose ourselves. To stop doing what is right is to stop being recognizable to others, to suffer a dementia of the soul.

In reminding us about the importance of morals, I need to add one final word into this conversation—the phrase "God's grace." We don't always do what is right, hence the need to be taught how to be moral—taught to remember to protect our honor, to share with the needy, to teach children by what we say and do now so that they will not stray when they are old. We don't always do what is right, but God knows this about us. God gives the law to guide us – gives us Proverbs and prayer to encourage us in the ways of righteousness—and gives us loving grace that picks us up when we forget, when we lie, cheat, hate, fear, covet, lust, and doubt. Why? Because we are meant to be moral children of God. That's our identity. It is lived out in our interconnected lives. It is made real in the in-between moments of our lives. It is more precious than silver or gold. For to lose this sense of being God's moral agents in the world—salt that has lost its flavor, light hidden under a bushel instead of set out on a stand for all to see—is to be victims of true identity theft. By grace we are made by God—redeemed by Christ—and daily re-made by the caring, shaping hands of the Holy Spirit. Remembering that spiritual good news and acting on that moral good news is how we best protect ourselves and those we love from identity theft. Thanks be to God.

¹ Harpo Marx, Harpo Speaks, p. 434.

² Nina Strohming and Shaun Nichols, "Your Brain, Your Disease, Your Self," *New York Times*, August 30, 2015.

³ Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good, p. 37.