

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**September 6, 2015; the 15th Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings:** Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37.

### **Wisdom for Life, Justice for the Poor**

The Book of Proverbs provides wisdom of life, and on this Labor Day weekend, we are given words of wisdom about money, what it means for us, and what our responsibilities are to those who are poor.

Based on the cost of living, there are many working poor at work right now in the businesses within walking distance of our church.

Proverbs is wisdom literature, as is the Song of Songs, which we considered last week.

Ellen Davis in her commentary on Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and The Song of Songs, notes that Solomon is credited with authorship of these three books: “the Song of Songs in lusty youth, Proverbs in sober middle age, and Ecclesiastes in disillusioned (and disgruntled?) old age.”<sup>1</sup>

Davis states, while scholars are sure that Solomon did not personally write these books, this way of understanding their different tones, while each deals with what it means to live wisely before God, is helpful.

Verse 7, of the first chapter, is key to understand the point of the Book of Proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

All that this book has to teach will reach its full effect when a person seeks wisdom because the person is aware of God, stands in awe of God,

---

<sup>1</sup> Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, Epub., Loc 143 of 6431.

and seeks to live life to God's glory.

Fear, in this case, is better understood as awe.

This is wisdom for us who seek to serve God through the lives we live; much of this would not be wisdom for one who seeks only his or her own good.

Having wisdom is not the same as being smart or having a good education. As Davis states, when people "live their lives day by day, even moment by moment, in a way that honors and glorifies God...that is what 'wisdom' meant to the biblical writers: living in the world in such a way that God, and God's intentions for the world, are acknowledged in all we do."<sup>2</sup>

Wisdom is so to be desired-- that Wisdom is to be sought; and Wisdom is personified to add focus---we are to seek Lady Wisdom, who cries out in the street, cries out for our attention, promises to pour out her thoughts to us, and make known her words.<sup>3</sup>

That Wisdom cries out to us in the streets, makes me think of the words on the back of my Richmond Hill T-shirt from Jeremiah, "Seek the welfare of the city to which I have sent you."<sup>4</sup>

When we seek to honor and glorify God in our city of Richmond, what does that look like?

That Wisdom cries out to us in the streets, also makes me think of the woman I talked with in Target a few days ago.

We were talking about how expensive it is to buy what is needed.

What is my response to this woman working at Target as a cashier, who makes perhaps \$8 dollars an hour, a national average for a Target cashier, but perhaps only \$7.25, the national minimum wage...what do I say, as she tells me that she may soon not be able to afford her apartment, that the average person can't do it...she says.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Loc 151 or 6431.

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 1:20-23.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 29:7.

You know, if Labor Day had not been made a national holiday in 1884, there is a good chance we wouldn't be celebrating it here in Virginia. Labor, Unions, have not been a feature of our life in the Commonwealth. Other states adopted the holiday to honor those who Labor to make our country great, that's how they thought about it back then, but Virginia was not one of those.

Virginia acted then, much as Virginia is acting now regarding a national movement to raise the minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$15.00. Polls say 75% of Americans support an increase of the minimum wage to \$12.50 ...and some cities and states are requiring local increases, and planning for increases in the future...

Virginia is not among those.<sup>5</sup>

West Virginia's is up to \$8, with another increase coming in December to \$8.75.

In May of this year, Los Angeles became the largest city to adopt \$15 dollars as the minimum wage, which will be phased in, and reach \$15 by 2020.

The New York Times called this the, "perhaps the most significant victory so far for labor groups and their allies who are engaged in a national push to raise the minimum wage."<sup>6</sup>

But we are not doing that here in Virginia, or in Richmond, and yes, I'm not an economist, and I'm not a politician, but I am a priest...and as we have discussed before...in the Episcopal Church we do not see our faith as something we do inside this building on Sunday only, but we see our faith as calling us to be about the world, our world, and certainly our neighborhood.

Wisdom calls to us in the street...what do we see as we go about our streets?

---

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.raisetheminimumwage.com/;](http://www.raisetheminimumwage.com/)

<http://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/state-minimum-wage-chart.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/20/us/los-angeles-expected-to-raise-minimum-wage-to-15-an-hour.html>

What did I say to that woman checking me out of Target?

What could I say?

Yeah, it's wrong; it's not fair; I'm a pastor of a church and we try to help with our food pantry, but we also want to help make structural changes. We have been working through the political process as is possible, being part of the Virginia Interfaith Public Policy group.

Other than voting and being involved in the political process, which I, we, take very seriously, what can I do, what can we say?

Well, we can remind each other, and those who may listen to us, what we as the Church want to be about...what we believe God calls us to be and to do.

We hear in our lesson from Proverbs for today that we are all one family, one community, the rich and poor:

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

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

We are all God's children...brothers and sisters...humanity, one family. This does not seem to be an easy concept to get and to put into practice. Even Jesus grew in wisdom around the issue of who belonged to his family...a woman in the street helped him to grow, and in his humanity, he did learn and grew...he heard God speak through her---”even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the master's table.”

A good name in this context refers to, “reputation, long-standing evidence of a faithful life, honoring God by fulfilling one's responsibilities to household and community, including giving support to the

poor.”<sup>7</sup>

Favor, that we are to desire more than riches, refers to chapter 3 of Proverbs, “which notes that ‘favor’ with the community results from expressing loyalty (*hesed*).<sup>8</sup>

Favor is bound up with how we relate to our community outside these walls.

How can we be loyal to our community?

How can we seek the welfare of the city, the neighborhood to which we have been sent, here at the corner of Monument and Staples Mill, and just a short walk to all those businesses on Broad St?

How can we be a community center?

We already are in some ways...when the food pantry is open, and the community meal is happening...we see people who are members of our community, who do not come to church here for the most part.

The new 4:30pm service on Sundays starting in October, is in part, an effort to reach members of our community who cannot, for whatever reason, come to church on Sunday mornings...and to support families with young children.

But maybe there is more; your vestry and I during our retreat two weeks ago, named our desire to listen to our neighbors...to discern how we can be loyal to them.

This is something that we all can do...listen, and pray about what we hear, so as to discern what we are called to do.

What does Labor Day even mean here in Richmond Virginia?

What could we offer to our neighbors who labor so hard for so little?

From my quick search online, I didn’t see much happening on Labor Day

---

<sup>7</sup> Ronald J. Allen & Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Old Testament, A Lectionary Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

for the working poor...we know most of them will be working so that those with money to spend can shop on Monday.

Labor Day has really become just another day for those who labor to labor more.

It made me think, wouldn't be nice next year to do something here at church that would really be for those who labor on Labor Day?

What can we offer our neighbors who labor so hard for so little?

We can proclaim that it is God's will that all experience economic justice.

For we hear in Proverbs ---

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

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

*Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate;  
for the LORD pleads their cause  
and despoils of life those who despoil them.*

Does a minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour fit into the concept of robbing the poor because they are poor?

We do not want to crush those who struggle so hard, identified as the afflicted at the gate.

Our sense of love and compassion moves us to seek justice, as does our knowledge that the "LORD pleads their cause" to us and to all.

Amen.