

Row, Row, Row Our Boat

Proverbs 1, 10, 30

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It's said a rower catches a crab, but actually it's the whole boat that does. To "catch a crab" is to get your oar blade caught in the water during the recovery. When you're supposed to be heading back up the slide toward the catch of the next stroke, when your blade is supposed to be feathered and so parallel to the surface of the water and about eight inches above it, you might instead catch a crab, if the water's rough or the boat is in check, rocking from side to side. Then the blade can get hooked back under the water, and your oar handle would come rushing toward you, and if the boat's moving fast enough, you could even get thrown from it. Novice rowers catch crabs all the time. But the more practiced you are at rowing, the less frequently you do it, until you nearly never do.

At Nationals last month, a woman on my team, though not someone I rowed with in the same event, caught a crab during a race. A long-experienced rower, she wasn't thrown from the boat; she recovered her oar handle and got back to helping move the boat. An 8+, it even finished with a respectable time. Nevertheless, she was ashamed. While she told the story to me back at the dock ("I caught a crab," she admitted), someone interrupted her. "Rowers don't catch crabs. Boats do."

This is to say something has gone wrong with the whole system of the boat. It could have been something as small as someone not keeping her weight over the oar handle once on the recovery, and someone else then responding to that slight heaviness in the hull with diving too deep with her blade on the next catch, and the coxswain then having to make a course correction to recover the line. This could then set the boat into a slight check and make that one blade somewhere among the eight vulnerable to catching a crab—none of which could be detected except maybe in watching it after the fact, and in slow-motion and several times over.

Rowers don't catch crabs—or not experienced rowers anyway. Boats do. This is to say, there's a certain level of personal responsibility in rowing with a crew, but it's always thickly tied into the movement of the whole boat, each rower, the coxswain and steering, and the water and wind.

This is one thing I love about rowing crew boats—the thick relationships. And in my experience, crews excel with consistency and sustainably when each member understands the quality of such thick interrelatedness. When they forget this though, when their innate competitiveness and all that adrenaline have them in an attitude of rowing against members of their same boat, then what could be awesome about the experience becomes punishing.

The book of Proverbs, I'll admit, is not my favorite of the Bible. It might even rank among my least favorites. There are some gems here, to be certain, among these many, many proverbs. But there are also some that feel retrograde—at least until you do a lot of work to reimagine and re-hear.

One of the things we need to reimagine and re-hear in order for this collection of aphorisms to mean much is their original context of thick community relations, thick

neighborly inter-relations. This is the thing that I think we people of biblical faith these days have the most difficulty wrapping our minds around. We are so situated in a cultural context of individualism. We are so enculturated into a framework that we imagine the human being as essentially individual and into a value system that places the fully individuated person as the most mature and highly developed. What's more, we live in a huge society, so that whatever offence I might cause my neighbor will have little impact. Really, we are so steeped in such atomized thinking that we utterly fail to consider ourselves as also (and perhaps more so) thickly intertwined.

And this, I suspect, is one thing that makes the biblical faith untenable these days to so many people. I think this is one quality of the faith called forth in the stories of scripture that makes it all land so heavily on so many. The notion that such commandments as to love and to forgive and to offer sustaining food and drink to those who persecute you, the assumption that each and every commandment—those overt and those suggested—is to be fulfilled by each individual person, and (worse) the notion that not to do so results in something dreadful, I imagine, would land heavily on any one person as onerous if not overwhelming, enervating. Who among us can truly fulfill all the implicit commandments of the Sermon on the Mount, for example? No one, that's who. So why bother even trying? And who was Jesus anyway? He probably never said all that, you know. Who knows? He might never have existed. There's no proof that he did. So, let's just live and let live.

Here's the thing though: it's not every *one* who must fulfill these commandments; it's *everyone*—the entirety. It's not each of us on our own who must embody the whole of Christian faithfulness; it's all of us, working together to build a dynamic blessedness, a beloved community. Truly, biblical injunctions aren't to be heard as implicating only the individual person or even primarily the individual person—this because the imagination behind the stories, poems, and commandments of the Bible is an imagination that takes for granted deeply lived community. So this book that would land heavily on any *one* of us is actually speaking to all of us, with the assumption that this is what it is to be human: it's to be deeply and thickly bound up with one another.

To be certain, there's enormous risk in being so thickly bound up. When things get bad, they can get very bad very quickly. Systems that have little slack tend to die quick, certain deaths. But when things are good, when things have been infused with the intention for good and there's a clear imaging as to what the good is, I imagine it can be pretty good. Not that I've ever seen it. . . .

This all presents a particular challenge when it comes to the book of Proverbs, these aphorisms that seem very much aimed at the individual. But it serves quite well when it comes to what the book of Proverbs has to say about money. It serves us quite well—what is apparently proverbial wisdom when it comes to wealth, to our wealth, to my wealth. Really, if we fail to hear the thick social context of the book of Proverbs, we who are wealthy can be served quite well.

Walter Brueggemann's latest book is a contribution to the series called *Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church*. A trusted mainstay in the mainline church, *Interpretation* is a series that has a volume of commentary for each of the sixty-six books of the Bible. Lately, though, the series has been branching out into themes, considering a biblical theme and featuring a chapter for each book of the Bible to examine how that book addressed that theme. Brueggemann's

volume is *Money and Possessions*. And in it he reminds us in no uncertain terms that “everywhere the Bible is preoccupied with bodily existence,” and this naturally “in turn means the Bible talks relentlessly about economics, about the management and distribution of life resources, so that all the neighbors can live an ‘abundant life.’”

This is no less true about the book we’re considering today. Ostensibly a teaching tool, considered part of the Wisdom tradition of the Israelites and to be in the Bible among the other books of Wisdom (Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Solomon, and Proverbs), a somewhat hodge-podge collection of how best to live, it wastes no time in getting around to the question of money, the *problem* of money and wealth and possessions. Indeed, a mere 16 verses into it, we read, “For in vain is the net baited while the bird is looking on; yet they lie in wait—to kill themselves! And set an ambush—for their own lives! Such is the end for all who are greedy for gain; it takes away the life of all its possessors.” This should be heard as laying down the philosophical groundwork for everything regarding wealth that follows—which is a lot:

“A slack hand causes poverty; but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”

“Those who till their land will have plenty of food, but those who follow worthless pursuits have no sense.”

“Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread.”

Whether these statements assure you or trouble you says a lot about you.

I suppose you know about the Prosperity Gospel. Preached by televangelists such as Creflo Dollar and by mega-church pastors such as Joel Osteen, it would have us understand that “if you think positively and make affirmations, God will reward you with financial success and good health. If you don’t, you may face unemployment, or sickness.” This is according to Professor of Religious Studies Anthea Butler, writing recently for the *New York Times* and explaining that this teaching has been popular for decades in the American Church, and problematically so.

Problematic indeed. Some blame it at least in part for the financial crisis of 2008, when people of meager means were pursued for mortgages that would, in more prudent times, have been considered wildly out of their reach. Such people, seeing this not as predatory lending but as a sign of God’s blessings, bought in eagerly, gratefully. But all too soon many, most, found themselves “underwater” financially, owing more to the bank than their homes were worth and owing more than they could ever pay.

And speaking of underwater, in recent weeks, the cheapness of the prosperity gospel has been revealed anew. Joel Osteen, that so-called smiling preacher whom I used to love picking on, is pastor to a mega-church in Houston. Housed in a vast building that was once the stadium for the Houston Rockets, it might have been a perfect refuge for those seeking shelter from Hurricane Harvey. But, no, the doors remained shut through the earliest days of the storm. Osteen tweeted encouragement, though, so that’s something. “God’s got this,” he testified, likely from someplace safe. “Don’t drift into doubt and fear,” he exhorted his Twitter followers. “Stay anchored in hope,” as if the storm were a spiritual symbol rather than an all too real terror.

This got a lot of people thinking, though, not least Ms. Butler, who had this to say: “So while the storm churns through Texas and Louisiana, causing floods, death, and

misery, it is time to consider the damage the prosperity gospel has done to America, ... its ugly underbelly [revealed anew]: the smugness, the self-aggrandizing posturing.” But that smugness, that self-aggrandizing, sounds downright proverbial, don’t you think? It sounds like some of the Proverbs: “Misfortune pursues sinners, but prosperity rewards the righteous.” What are we to do with these? Or shall we do what I’ve long done: ignore them?

Brueggemann found a third way. To be sure, as he set about the task before him—examining how each book, or at least each section, of the Bible understood money and possessions—he was cautious about proof-texting. He didn’t aim to come at the Bible with an agenda, a previously established thesis that he’d then look for specific passages to prove as right. He’s not a bleeding-heart liberal on some commie mission. He’s a biblical scholar, one who takes the Bible too seriously to see it as yet another volume of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. As such, he aimed simply to report on what he found.

What he found is that the Bible itself seems to have an agenda when it comes to material wealth, and it’s an agenda rooted in its thoroughgoing assumption that people exist in thick and deep interrelations within a community, that people live and move and have their being in ways that are inseparable from their neighbors and neighborhood, their relationships and community. This means that wealth and money aren’t the private, individual matter they’re considered among many people in our society to be (and not coincidentally usually among those who have, *we* who have it). Money and possessions aren’t some privatized thing. They are instead a matter of public concern, of neighborly concern. Really, the voices of the proverbs, according to Brueggemann, “clearly mean to interrupt and contradict any sense that money is a private thing for one’s self alone. With their sense of community solidarity, the wisdom teachers understood that we are all in this together and that peace, order, and well-being depend upon social attentiveness to every element of the community.”

So, you see, it’s a terrible challenge we face—we who mean to be faithful yet are also in the United States and live in a society where we’re not so evidently bound up with one another. No, we in this country, with our enormous land-mass, our enormous economy, our social framework of liberalism, and our holding as a highest value the freedom of individual choice, don’t actually have to buy into the notion that we’re so thickly and intimately bound up together. Really, I can go the length of my life without ever feeling the consequences of my having cheated on that math test in 7th grade and my having stolen shampoo one summer when I was in college, to say nothing of lending practices that have long been rigged to benefit people like me. The question is then for us, who are Americans but also people who take the Bible seriously for its vision of justice and abundant life, which is it gonna be?

A few years ago we Goodmans visited the Dominican Republic, a country that shares the island Hispaniola with Haiti—two impoverished republics on one tiny island in the Caribbean Sea. There’s very little opportunity to make money there. You can earn it, if you’re lucky, if you land a job at one of the many resorts catering to wealthy visitors from the global West. There you can *earn* some money. But there’s little opportunity to *make* money, to create wealth. There’s little industry, there’s not much land, and what farming’s done on it is under the auspices of transnational corporations. There’s no higher education that leads to entrepreneurial success on a scale any larger than cottage industry. Really, everyone there is poor—has been, is

now, and will be poor. But when we Goodmans landed back in Miami, I noticed a man sleeping on the heating grate of the escalator we four had just come up in the airport. Now there's something we didn't see in the Dominican Republic—a poor person alone. So, I wonder, which is the better way?

I figured that I'd rather be a middle class American than a poor Dominican, but I'd rather be a poor Dominican than a poor American. (I'm leaving race out of this, though I should point out that race is an enormous factor here.) And Jesus tells us that the poor will always be with us—which isn't him shrugging his shoulders or throwing up his arms. It's Jesus pointing out that every society will have the poor in its midst, and one aspect for evaluating the goodness of any given society, the *wisdom* of any given society, is how the poor are held in its midst, how they're taken into account and given the things that make human beings good—dignity, access to resources, kindness, hope.

This is what is surprisingly lovely, not to mention courageous, about how money and possessions are topics in the book of Proverbs. Those who declared such seemingly puritanical, utilitarian aphorisms (“In toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.”), those who said and taught such things, weren't doing so from the safeguarded position of someone situated as I am. They weren't doing so from a safe distance from those who found themselves impoverished. They were doing so from the intimacy of a small society that could really suffer hardship if things went even slightly wrong. And so such sayings aren't as punitive as they might sound to us. Instead, they're said from a position wherein all are implicated when something goes wrong—all are potentially at risk while also within the promise of reward. In small societies, when one person falters, the whole society falters. So, of the teachers of these proverbs, Brueggemann points out, “They could not have imagined that anyone would ever become wealthy or powerful enough to construct a privatized world apart from the community.”

But now we can imagine such a thing. What's more, now some of us can *do* it. And I'm not just talking about the Trumps among us or the Koch brothers. I'm not even just talking about the financial wizards of Wall Street. I'm talking about all of us. I'm talking about me. Now that we can imagine constructing a privatized world apart from the community that undergirds us, and now that I, for one, have managed to construct such a place for me and the people I hold dear, do I really mean to risk giving that up? After all, the society we'd construct in its place might fail. On the other hand, the society we might construct in its place could succeed, and then maybe no one would be left to find a damned heating grate to get some sleep on.

There's not much blessing to be found in Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose, and Maria. Harvey brought Houston to its knees, and Houston is the fourth largest city in our country, not to mention a huge economic engine. Irma did God knows how much damage to the state of Florida, which has become a population center in recent decades on a scale that you'd have to be dreaming to imagine such a fragile landmass could sustain. And think of Puerto Rico! There's little blessing to be found in these super-storms, these which have even the most stalwart among us deeply unnerved. (A Facebook friend in Florida, who doesn't balk at much, wrote, “I'll admit, this is scary,” just before seeking shelter away from home.)

What blessing there might be found is in an immediacy of risk brought home to us all, an immediacy of relationship that our actual lived lives might be touched by

the trauma. If we can't buy what we're used to buying because the supply chain for that thing ran through Houston, if we can't row where we used to row because that training center in Florida was lost, if we can't winter where we imagined we'd winter back when we began to use "winter" as a verb, these might have us understand in some new, yet ancient way, that we're all in the same boat, and given this, we should begin spending our money as if this were true.

The implications of this statement are far-reaching. Moreover, they're radically undermining what society we've been busy building here in these United States for the last four hundred years, and not even just here, but in all the industrialized world. If we were actually to take seriously the proverbial wisdom that "such is the end for all who are greedy for gain," we'd have real grounds to despair and give up.

On the other hand, I like a challenge, and maybe you do too. I mean, it's good to have goals, right? And how much better to have goals that could really result in something good! No one who worked on the Cathedral at Chartres figured he'd get to enjoy the final product centuries hence. I wonder what blessing there was then, if any, in working on it.

Strange: Proverbs, the book, begins with an ending and ends with a beginning, an opening of a better way. It begins in pointing out that those who are greedy for gain bring about their own end, and it ends with a prayer that money and possessions should not become to us as ends unto themselves but might always be regarded as a resource whose value is in their spending.

It strikes me as a worthy prayer for us: "Two things we ask before we die: that we not be so full of riches so as to believe in our own self-sufficiency, our own entitled worthiness, that we might actually ask, 'Who is the Lord?' and that we not be so poor as to resort to theft, so poor that we rig a system that guarantees a furtherance of our wealth." This is to say, one thing we ask of you before we die: that we remember what money and possessions actually are, that we spend what resources we have (which are great) on what actually gives life, that we treat our wealth as if it were actually the food we need, for in a powerful sense, it is. And if we have more than we need (a difficult enough conclusion to come to), we are then to expand just what we mean when we say "we."

Those thick interrelationships are who we are. If we've built a society that protects us from this risky truth, then we should be warned that such societies don't last forever, and we should be further warned that if we receive what we pray for, such a warning will transform into a promise, a mission, a reward.

The funny thing about rowing is that it hurts, and that it's a blessing. Somehow those two things are intertwined.