

Proper 17 C 2019

Proverbs 25:6-7

Psalm 112:1-6

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

If by chance you're hoping
To find advice in the Bible
On etiquette, or hygiene,
Or any number of social niceties,
By all means consult the Book of Proverbs.
Just don't go looking to Jesus.

He has no interest in social norms
Or avoiding embarrassment
Or gaining status in polite company.

Jesus is all about the radical reordering
Of human society
So that it at last lives into its promise –
Becoming an image of God's kingdom,
The commonwealth of love and justice
That offers welcome, acceptance, and inclusion
To every one of God's creatures.

Jesus is a disrupter of our order,
An overturner of our tables,
A comic interloper
Breaking into the tragic necessity of our lives,
Shaking us awake,
Setting us free,
Opening our hearts.

He is the holy fool
Who embodies all the wisdom of God.

Even though he tells the same story
About places at the table,
He is as far as he could be
From the worldly wise words of Proverbs.

Whereas the little couplet from Proverbs
We heard as our first lesson
Is all in earnest,
Jesus takes those same words

And uses them
Just to get our attention.

Remember, he has no interest in manners,
Or in avoiding embarrassment.
He is passionate about welcome and inclusion.

There are no high and low places at his table.
Every place is the best place.
Everyone gets to sit next to him.
Everyone is blessed.

All we have to do sit down at his table –
Or all we have to do in this moment –
Is recognize that the proverb he tells
Is not a proverb.
It's a lure.
A lure designed to catch us,
Reel us in,
And then to set us free.

Free of anxiety, free of fear.
Free of the tangle of strategizing
And false humility
And social stratification
That goes to the heart
Of our anxiety.

Free of the fears
That lie at the heart
Of the proverbs.
Am I good enough?
Do I fit in?
Can I be known,
And if I am known,
Will I be valued?
Is there any place at all for me,
At any table?

Will I be eating all by myself
With people laughing at me
And will that go on forever?

Let's go back to the proverb
From Proverbs.

It's a simple piece of advice
That makes perfect sense
If your aim is to live comfortably in the world,
winning friends,
Influencing people,
Avoiding embarrassment.

Proverbs are essential
For living in the world.
They have nuggets of ancient truth,
Surprises, insights.

When the truth is missing,
Says an African proverb,
We use a proverb to find it.
Proverbs can hold up mirror,
To make us wince,
Or strive,
Or aspire.

But when proverbs become institutionalized,
Stylized,
The province of the powerful
Rather than the hard-won wisdom of the people,
Then proverbs function as a form of social control.
They maintain,
Or restore stability.
They keep things in place.

When things get too firmly fixed in place,
Then we need a little comic relief.
Enter Jesus,
Believe it or not.
Not always,
But perhaps here,
Jesus is a jester.

One of the functions of comedy
Is to poke holes
In the balloon of our striving
And our self-esteem.

If proverbs bolster us up,
Comedy cuts us down to size.

These are not formal definitions,

But if tragedy is the way
by which we speak of life
In its ultimate seriousness,
Its glory and its limitations,
Then comedy is the way
We laugh at the limitations.
Tragedy elevates,
And we are moved to tears;
Comedy deflates,
And we laugh at the rude sound.

The gospel has been famously described
As tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale
All at once.¹

The same could be said of our life,
Here and now.
I don't need to explain it;
We all confront the tragic state of things
Every day –
And the comic interludes.
There is no escaping these realities.

So how do we respond?
What we can do,
As a community of faith,
Is set these realities of life
Against the truth of the gospel.
The tragic truth that elevates us.
The comic truth that shines a light.

We live in a disrupted world,
But the disruptions build higher walls,
Rather than breaking down barriers.

And how will we respond?
With proverbs,
Intended to keep things in their place,
Reinforce norms that work for us?

Or will we bring good news?

Good news that may overturn
Systems that still work for us,
So that others can have a chance.

Good news that may send us
To a lower place at the table,
So that others can sit down at all.

Good news that may ask us
To let go,
So that others can hold on.

Can we do this joyfully,
Authentically,
And for keeps?

In the proverb,
And in the tricky parable of Jesus,
There's a dodge.
We only pretend to go lower down the table,
So that someone else will send us back up to the top,
Where we still believe we belong.

But in the new economy of the gospel,
The household of God,
We have to mean it.

That's hard to do,
Unless we believe the good news
That undergirds the message of welcome, acceptance, and inclusion.

There is enough for everyone.
There is a table where everyone
Has a place that is best.

There is a system
Where everyone has a chance,
Everyone has resources,
Capacity,
Opportunity.

It's the kingdom of God,
The commonwealth of love and justice
Where all is healed,
All is made whole,
All is mended,
All is free.

It's not here yet,
And unless there's a big surprise coming

Sooner than we know,
We won't see it.

But we can believe it,
Work for it,
Glimpse it hiding here already,
Not yet revealed,
But now and forever
Giving hope to all things.

Jesus overturns tables to let the truth show.
He gives a feast where anyone can come.
He sets a table with room for all.

He sets it here, now,
Always, everywhere.
It is for us,
And everyone.
And it's free.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner