

WAGING PEACE

Scriptures: Selected Proverbs; Romans 12:14-21

In his book *Maybe (Maybe Not)*, Robert Fulghum lists some popular sayings, almost like proverbs, that seem contradictory. For example

Look before you leap. ... He who hesitates is lost.
Nothing ventured, nothing gained. ... Better safe than sorry.
Out of sight, out of mind. ... Absence makes the heart grow fonder.
Many hands make light work. ... Too many cooks spoil the broth. (pp. 21-22)

So which is it? Do many hands make light work? Or do they mess up the soup? Does absence make the heart grow fonder? Or cause it to forget?

If you noticed some of the Proverbs we read this morning also sound contradictory? Look at Proverbs 10:10: “Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but the one who rebukes boldly makes peace.” To wink the eye probably means to overlook an injustice, to turn a blind eye to some wrong-doing. But now look at Proverbs 19:11: “Those with good sense are slow to anger, and it is their glory to overlook an offense.” Which is it? Should we overlook a wrong-doing, or should we boldly confront it? Look further down on the insert to Proverbs 25:26. It says, “Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked.” But now look at the verse above it—Proverbs 25:21: “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink.”

In Proverbs making peace is complicated. It is not simply a matter of getting tough or of giving in. Peace comes from a subtle combination of telling the truth and standing up for justice, while at the same time treating people with a kind of forbearance and compassion that opens the door for healing.

In some of the verses we read this morning, Proverbs stresses standing up for justice and confronting wrong. Proverbs 20:26: “A wise king winnows the wicked, and drives the wheel over them.” That is a harsh image, but it means that a good ruler separates bad people from the good, like a farmer separating wheat from chaff. In other words, a good administration does not wink its eye at corruption or exploitation; it confronts it and deals with it. Proverbs 29:14 speaks in a similar vein: “If a king judges the poor with equity, his throne will be established forever.”

It is not just kings who should stand up for justice. Proverbs 10:10 says, “Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but the one who rebukes boldly makes peace.” When Proverbs says, “A soft answer turns away wrath,” it is not telling us to be silent. A soft answer is still an answer. A soft answer stands up and challenges those who do hurtful things.

But it does so without giving in to anger or vengeance.

Proverbs 29:11—“A fool give full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back.”

Proverbs 29:22—“One given to anger stirs up strife, and the hothead causes much transgression.”

Proverbs 30:33—“For as pressing the milk produces curds, and pressing the nose produces blood, so pressing anger produces strife.”

Please understand. Proverbs is not saying you should never be angry. Anger—as opposed to irritation or annoyance—real anger may be sign of injustice, a signal that you or someone you care about is being unfairly exploited or demeaned. If you feel genuinely angry—not just annoyed or put out, but angry—then there may be an injustice in your life that needs to be addressed or confronted.

But here is the key: Do not address it while you are angry. Use your anger as a warning sign that you have a problem that needs to be addressed. But do not address it while you are angry. Write it down, if you have to, but wait to talk about it until you are calm enough to give a soft answer rather than a harsh one, to listen before judging, and to choose words aimed at healing rather than retaliation.

Let me say a quick word about Proverbs 20:30—“Blows that wound cleanse away evil; beatings make clean the innermost parts.” You will notice that this verse comes just a few verses after Proverbs 20:26—“A wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them.” We are talking here about the administration of justice. Proverbs 20:30 is not a green light for beating your children or torturing a prisoner or punching out your enemies. It is talking about the lawful punishment of wrongdoers. If a government does not uphold justice, people will take justice into their own hands, and that, as we have seen in several places in the world, can be disastrous.

But notice this: a court never hands out a sentence in anger. The sentence for any crime is issued by a court solemnly, without emotion, often guided by sentencing standards determined in advance. Proverbs 20:30 is never meant to be used in anger, either by a judge or a policeman or a parent. Confront wrong when you have to, Proverbs says, but not while you are still angry. Give yourself time to use your head, to think clearly about what must be said and done, so that when you are finished reconciliation will still be possible.

Let me close with two examples. When apartheid came to an end in South Africa in 1995, the new South African constitution set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Victims of gross human rights violations under the former apartheid government could come to the commission, tell their story, and seek reparation for damages where such reparation might be possible. In many cases no reparation was possible, but just telling the story, letting the truth be known, was a healing salve for many people. Meanwhile, the perpetrators of human rights violations—and remember, we are talking here about arrests, torture, killings, imprisonment without trial, and unjust seizures of land—perpetrators of these things could also come to the commission, make a full truthful disclosure of their actions, offer to make restitution where possible, and in return receive full amnesty and be restored to full citizenship in the new South Africa.

What I find interesting about this is that South Africa is one of the few countries on the African continent in the last 10 years that has not suffered a devastating civil war. Look at Rwanda, the Congo, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Somalia. Where other countries in Africa have suffered devastating cycles of violence, retaliation, insurgency and counter-insurgency, South Africa, despite its long history of oppression, has transitioned to a new government without the waves of violence and reprisal that have racked other countries.

Whether they knew it or not, they were applying the book of Proverbs. They were confronted wrongdoing, but they did so in such a way as to open a door for healing and reconciliation.

Now let me share the experience of a family. Once while I was a pastor in Potlatch, Idaho, I helped a family organize an intervention for an alcoholic husband. All the important people in this alcoholic's life: his wife, his parents, his co-workers, his neighbors and friends—everyone who had significant relationships to this alcoholic were gathered together at a family member's home, where they prepared to share with the alcoholic how they had been affected by his drinking. At a prearranged time a friend brought the alcoholic to the house under some pretense, somewhat like a surprise party. And believe me the alcoholic was surprised. In the safety of the group each person there, one by one, shared directly with the alcoholic how he or she had been affected by the person's drinking. They did not talk about what an awful, irresponsible person the alcoholic was. They did not lash out with angry vindictive comments. They spoke truthfully about how the person's drinking had made them feel and had affected their lives. Then, and this is the crucial part, they talked about the relationship they would like to have with the alcoholic but can't because of the person's drinking.

It was intense. The alcoholic went through a stage of shock, then anger, then denial. But faced with a roomful of people all of whom cared about him, all of whom felt hurt and frightened by his drinking, he finally agreed to go in to treatment, and as far as I know he has been sober ever since. That is what the Bible calls "speaking the truth in love." It is what the apostle Paul means when he quotes from the book of Proverbs then says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

In a comic strip featuring those two great peacemakers Calvin and Hobbes, Calvin is swinging on a swing when he is pushed off and knocked to the ground by bully named Moe. Calvin says, "It is hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by lightning."

God responded to evil in the world not by incinerating us but by sending us Jesus. Perhaps that is a clue about how we should treat each other.

- Ken Onstot