

**ON LOAN**

*Sermon for Pentecost 15, Proper 19B: Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19*

LPC, 9/13/09

What does our culture value? A culture's values can often be discerned by its heroes. As a culture we claim people like Abraham Lincoln, or Helen Keller or Roberto Clemente as heroes. But does our culture really emulate people like this?

In the current climate, the people who are guaranteed exposure in the press are people like Michael Jackson and Jon and Kate. Here, in the first case, is an immensely talented individual who made, and then lost, a fortune; who placed his child in a dangerous situation publicly; who probably abused drugs, who evidently rejected the quite acceptable appearance that nature gave him. This is a role model?

In the second case, of Jon and Kate, whose many small children made them the subject of a reality TV show, we have an example of people who make their private life public, and manage to botch both private and public life rather spectacularly. These are role models?

Whether or not these people are considered heroes, their constant media exposure holds them up to us. What kinds of human traits are celebrated when people like these are celebrities? Self-interest, self-absorption, acquisition, materialism, instant gratification, obsession with appearances, addiction to attention.

Are these our culture's values? Well, not completely. Not yet. But if we are looking for values upon which to base our lives and actions we might want to temper our media exposure with something else. Because none of the people I've mentioned seems very happy. Michael Jackson is dead at a young age. Jon and Kate are getting an acrimonious divorce. Happiness would seem to lie elsewhere than in the values represented by our culture's celebration of the notorious over the virtuous.

The Bible, of course, does celebrate the virtuous, at least much of the time. In the Old Testament of the Bible, few virtues are celebrated as much as wisdom. The book of Proverbs is entirely devoted to the cultivation of wisdom. The Psalm appointed for today is a hymn to wisdom, which is identified with heeding God's judgments. The Psalmist makes clear that it is in following God that happiness is found.

Wisdom is in many ways the exact opposite of the instant gratification celebrated by our culture. Wisdom's rewards are long-term. They may take a while to achieve but are lasting. To teach and preach wisdom in this time and place is very, very counter-cultural, but wisdom leads to happiness in a way that instant gratification never will.

In the spirit of teaching wisdom, I offer an observation that seems to hold true for the happiest, most serene, and wisest people I have met in my life. That observation is this: Never assume that you have anything. Rather, assume that anything you acquire is being lent to you.

Our material possessions are on loan to us. Even our money, though we think of “making money” by ourselves, is on loan to us. The people we love are on loan to us. This comes home most poignantly when children grow up and move away, or when a loved one dies. Even our own bodies are on loan to us. Our health can change in an instant, and, at the very least, we all know we must die some day.

The more we can think of our things as our things on loan, the lighter we hold them. The lighter we hold them, the happier we will be in the long run. This is wisdom, and it stands in sharp contrast to a culture that emphasizes acquisition, possession, control.

Not that the possessions we hold dear are evil. One of my most prized possession was a cross pendant given to me by my parents just after my marriage. The chain it originally hung on broke, and Rich gave me another chain, which has never broken to this day. I never took my cross necklace off. In 1997 I was taken to the hospital unconscious from a concussion. I woke as the nurse was removing the cross from my neck in preparation for an MRI. “Please don’t take it off,” I begged her, “I never take it off. I need that cross.” “You must have no jewelry above your shoulders,” she said, “But here.” She sealed the cross in a baggie and placed it on my chest, placing my hand on top of the bag, right over my heart. The compassion of this gesture still brings tears to my eyes.

One day last year I noticed that my cross was not hanging from its chain. The hasp, the loop that linked the cross to the chain, had failed. The cross had fallen off, I know not where. My sorrow at losing this beloved object was tempered by gratitude. I had had my cross for decades. It represented my Christian faith, the love of my parents, the love of my husband, and the kindness of a stranger. I still have all those things in my heart. My cross, though I thought of it as “MY” cross, was in fact on loan to me.

Nothing belongs to us absolutely. This might be cause for despair if it weren’t for the other side, and herein lies true wisdom: Everything is given. All that we hold we hold in trust for the generous God who trusts us with God’s dearest things. Knowing that everything is given gives us renewed inspiration for caring for God’s things well, maintaining or disposing of them in wise, godly ways.

Knowing that everything is given also give us freedom. When we are not concerned with the ownership of things, we are not owned by things.

Finally, knowing that everything is given gives us a good and wise way to be before God. All that we have is given by God. And we have been given much. Perhaps only when we look upon what we have been given as what we have been loaned, do we realize how much. The gratitude to which this realization opens us frees us from culture’s relentless insistence on instant, and constant gratification.

All we have is on loan from God. Herein lies wisdom.