

Hide and Seek

In the name of him who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old testament reading gives us a prime example of some of the Bible's Wisdom Literature. We heard a few of the proverbs of King Solomon. And for a simple definition, a proverb is short, pithy saying that conveys a general truth in a memorable way, like: "A stitch in time saves nine" and "He who laughs last, laughs best". But biblical proverbs are always something more than that. Because they are also God's holy Word, in addition to the surface level "word of the wise" there is also a greater spiritual truth that may not be immediately obvious. That is to say, just like the parables of Jesus, which are earthly stories that contain deeper spiritual meanings, so also, with the biblical proverbs, we should expect that hidden underneath the general truth a proverb proclaims lays a deeper *spiritual* truth. Therefore our goal, as God's holy people, and enlightened by his Spirit, should be to seek out and discover the full meaning of the proverb; for if we do, we will surely be rewarded.

But how shall we go about this? How will we root out the spiritual truth and know for sure we've got the right one when we find it? Well, let me suggest that the key is Christ. If you can find Jesus in the proverb, you know that you've found the truth because *he is the truth*.

So let's try this on the proverbs we have before us, most of which, you'll notice, are expressed in couplets – that is, two parallel statements that express similar or complimentary ideas. Take the first pair: "It is the glory of God to conceal things, and the glory of kings to search things out." What does this mean? (There's a good Lutheran question.) On the surface, it's pretty easy to figure it out. The idea is that God knows everything that's going to happen, and that he has filled the world with all kinds of useful knowledge and things – objects, processes, truths, and wonders – yet to be discovered. All of this rebounds to God's glory. They show his vast wisdom, creativity, and care for his creation.

The wise king, on the other hand, realizes his limitations. He doesn't know what God knows. He makes it his goal to seek the knowledge that God has hidden – like Solomon himself, who when given the opportunity to ask for whatever he wanted, asked for heart that sought the wisdom of the Lord so that he might rule his people well. This rebounds to the king's glory. How does this play out? We could take a simple, concrete example: the Lord when making his creation, chose to hide in the earth all kinds of useful and precious metal ores, not to mention all the valuable gemstones. Earthly kings send out their miners to locate these valuable minerals in order to make tools for farmers and craftsmen, weapons and armor for the defense of the kingdom, and to build wealth for trade and to enhance the economic welfare of his subjects. So, God hides treasures in the earth and kings seek them out, and both are glorified in the process.

We could take this in broader sense. The Lord has filled his creation with the wonders of nature and the incredible complexity of life in all its forms. Every day we're making amazing discoveries among the stars and far flung galaxies, and on the subatomic level – what's called "inner space" – physicists are discovering new dimensions of space and time folded in on each other as they investigate the secrets of what holds all matter together. Or think of what's being done on the human genome project as researchers are unraveling the mysteries of the incredibly complex DNA molecule that is the blueprint and instruction for building the human

body. These scientists are doing nothing less than seeing the signature of God on his handiwork and proving what the Bible declares: that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. It's been said that what the scientist does through his discoveries is to think God's thoughts after him. Wise leaders encourage and fund this kind of research because they know that the treasuries of useful knowledge thus obtained pay dividends in terms of enhanced technology that makes their nations stronger and life better for their citizens.

But all of these are surface level applications of the proverb that says God hides things and kings seek them out – both to their glory. What about the deeper spiritual meaning? When we remember that the key to finding it is Christ, the answer practically jumps out at us. What is the greatest treasure of all that God has hidden? It's himself and the truth of his Gospel. We see his handiwork all around us; but God himself we don't see—unless, of course, we know where to look. Those of us whom he has called and enlightened with his Spirit *do* know where to look. And he has appointed us his priests and kings to seek him where he may be found. Where? Where he has hidden himself: in baby in a Bethlehem stable, in a Galilean carpenter turned itinerant Rabbi, in a condemned criminal hanging on a cross. There the glory of God is concealed – just as today he hides himself in the Words of an ancient book, in a handful of water, in a wafer of bread and a sip of wine, and in the suffering and needs of his people. There, hidden in these things, the kings of his kingdom find God himself. And this is their glory, that they see God in the face of Jesus Christ and receive the treasures of his kingdom: the forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Beautiful, don't you think?

But let's move on to the second pair of proverbs – which aren't exactly a *pair* because only one is stated; the other is implied. The proverb is this: "As the heavens for height, and the earth for depth, so the heart of kings is unsearchable." What does this mean? It means that to the average citizen of a kingdom, what the king is thinking and what he's up to are inscrutable mysteries. Why? Well think about it: while you're about doing your work and taking care of your family, he's engaged in overseeing things that are levels above what you're doing. He's receiving foreign diplomats, making alliances, some of which are secret; he's sending out spies, keeping track of trade and crop reports, listening to his advisors, planning defenses – he's privy to all kinds of information that you know nothing about. And so when he renders a decision or makes a policy, he's taking all of this information into account and doing what he believes to be best for his kingdom. It does no good for you to critique his decisions or complain about an unpopular policy because you don't know what he knows.

Now, because this is true on a merely earthly level, how much more is it true of God, who is king of the whole universe? That's the unstated part of the couplet; but it follows logically. If it's inappropriate for you to critique a king's decisions – who can admittedly make mistakes; but who is doing the best he can with what he knows – what makes you think you can sit in judgment of God's decisions? He knows everything and he never makes mistakes. And he loves us and always does what is for our ultimate good. And yet, we do complain, don't we? When things don't go the way we think they should, we ask, "How could God allow a thing like this to happen? What's he thinking, anyway?" We may even accuse him of being cruel, arbitrary, or unconcerned. How arrogant we are, when the truth is that we haven't got access to the tiniest fraction of what the Lord knows nor do we possess even a sliver of his perfect wisdom. This proverb calls us to repentance for such thoughts and feelings, and encourages us to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God who works in all things for the good of those he calls his children in Christ.

This leads us into the third couplet of proverbs, which reads: “Take away the dross from the silver and the smith has material for a vessel; take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness.” Once again, the surface meaning is fairly easy to grasp: raw silver ore needs to be purged of impurities before it’s fit to be used to make anything. If he doesn’t get them out, the vessel or utensil the smith makes is going to be weak and fail to do what it’s designed for. In a similar way, the administration of a king is going to be affected by the kind of people he surrounds himself with. No matter how good and wise the king is, if his staff is filled with corrupt officials who take bribes, do political favors for their cronies, sell government positions (did someone mention Rod Blagojevich?), well then the king himself looks bad and the citizens of his kingdom will suffer. Likely too, the enemies of the kingdom will be in a stronger position to influence and control it – maybe even capture it. No. Part of the king’s job is to make sure his administrators and staff members are not just skilled at what they do, they also have to be honest and upright. Then his reign will be a righteous one.

For the spiritual side of this, we have only to apply what’s just been said to the kingdom of God – his church here on earth. On an individual level, the Lord is like the silversmith purging away impurities from the raw material he works with – namely: us. By revealing our sins, calling us to repentance, and continuously cleansing us with the blood of his Son he is refining us to be vessels fit for his Holy Spirit. Then we can be used for what he designed us for. And collectively he puts us together in his holy church – knitting us into one body to be his hands, his feet, and his lips to execute his will in the world for the good of all. But boy do things get messed up when we fail in our lives to reflect the goodness and integrity of our King. This is true of all of us – any one of us can give Christianity a bad name through ungodly behavior; but it’s especially true of those whose job it is to serve the kingdom in positions of responsibility. I’m talking of the lay leaders of a church and in particular the pastor. When one of them goes astray in such a way that it leads to public scandal, or if they use their positions dishonestly for personal gain or glory, it’s devastating to the members of the church and it shakes their faith. The enemy loves nothing more than for such things to happen. This is why it’s necessary for us to hold our leaders in the church – those whose job it is to represent Christ to us – to a higher standard.

This naturally leads us to the fourth pair of proverbs we have before us: “Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. This is the backdrop of the parable that Jesus tells in today’s Gospel lesson, when he advises the people in that very class-conscious society how to choose a seat at a wedding banquet. If you pick a seat with the upper crust, you may be humiliated when you get bumped by someone your host perceives to be more worthy than you. Instead, select a lower place. Then, if the host thinks you merit it, he can move you up and you’ll be honored. If not, well, then you’re probably seated where you belong.

But obviously there’s more to this than using it as a technique to avoid humiliation and receive acclaim at dinner parties. Both Jesus and Solomon are primarily talking about the spiritual side in these proverbs. We ought not presume to stand among the great in God’s eyes. We should not promote ourselves and seek positions of honor and authority. Instead, following the example of Christ our Lord, we should seek to serve at the lowest places. There’s always work to be done there. And the Lord knows your address. He can raise you up when he wants to; but what he needs most are people who are willing to serve him by serving others with all humility. This is why also that among us no one can put himself forward

as a pastor. Our confessions state that no one may preach, teach, or administer the sacraments without a regular call. Sure, you can go to seminary and study theology and prepare yourself; but what makes a person a pastor is the call of Christ through the church. And it is a call to service – to serve the people of God by giving them the saving Word of Christ and to convey his forgiveness in a tangible way through the sacraments. It is not a call to power and personal glory. The pastor’s job is to serve you by exercising the authority Christ has given his church to forgive sins in such a way that all glory goes to Jesus the Savior. *He’s* the king of the church – and he’s also the judge ...

... Which brings us to the final couplet of proverbs before us today. They have to do with the way we treat each other. “What your eyes have seen, do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end when your neighbor brings you to shame? Argue your case with your neighbor yourself, and do not reveal another’s secret, lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end.” Once again, the general sense of this proverb is pretty clear. Everyone has a basket full of dirty laundry in their lives. If you take it upon yourself to go about revealing other people’s soiled drawers you can expect them to return the favor with interest. Warned against too is the spirit of litigation so prevalent in our country in which every minor offense or merely perceived offense demands a lawsuit. It’s good business for lawyers; but it’s bad for everyone else. Instead, greater tolerance for the foibles of others is called for; and when you’ve got a beef with someone that needs to be resolved, you’re encouraged to go to the person directly and settle the matter privately. All of which makes good sense.

As it does also on the spiritual side of life. None of us is without sin, guilt, and shame. And yet, for Christ’s sake, we have been freely forgiven. As a result, we who have been redeemed by Christ seek to live at peace with all people, ready and willing to forgive them for the offenses they commit against us even as we ourselves have been forgiven. If and when conflicts arise among us that need to be addressed, we seek to resolve them as directly, personally, and quietly as we are able, involving the fewest number of people possible. And if such attempts fail, like our Lord, we should be willing to suffer loss rather than go seeking justice in a court of law and making the sins of others public knowledge. The love of Christ covers all of our sins at great personal expense to him. In his love, we are to cover the sins of others regardless of what it may cost us. And yes, it’s hard to do; but to this we have been called. And doing so, we show our trust in the Lord who will, in his good time, settle all disputes and restore all things as they should be. We are to await his justice patiently, remembering how patient he is with us in our weakness and sin. And that kind of brings us back to where we started. Remember? It is the glory of God to conceal things. In Christ, he conceals and covers our sins so that we may live with him forever. It is our glory to be like him by concealing and covering the sins of others.

All this having been said, I hope you see that there’s a lot to be learned in seeking out the wisdom that God has hidden in the proverbs – and that the key to finding it is Christ. May he give us the grace to apply what we have discovered to our lives, that we may glorify him in time and eternity. In Jesus name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!