



Massanutten
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Way of the Wise (Proverbs Series)

Some Things God Hates

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

August 2, 2009

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Proverbs 6:12-19

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*A scoundrel and a villain
goes around with crooked speech,
winking the eyes, shuffling the feet,
pointing the fingers,
with perverted mind devising evil,
continually sowing discord;
on such a one calamity will descend suddenly;
in a moment, damage beyond repair.
There are six things that the Lord hates,
seven that are an abomination to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that hurry to run to evil,
a lying witness who testifies falsely,
and one who sows discord in a family.*

Hate. I don't like that word. That's one of the few words that we've banished from the girls' vocabulary at home, and they've taken that in to such a point that when they read or tell a story with that word in it, they will automatically and without pause insert a different word.

In my Sunday School class not too many months ago, the same subject came up, and it was clear that most in there—if not all—were uncomfortable with the word “hate” and the strong passions that go with it.

So it's always shocking to hear language expressing hatred for something or someone. And it's especially shocking to hear that word—“hate”—in the church. And the dissonance magnifies a hundred-fold when we link that word “hate” with God. But, according to Proverbs, there are some things God hates.

In the church—where we're used to tossing around “God loves” as easily and freely as tossing candy from a parade float—it can come as quite a shock to hear that.

Oh, you may see some crank holding a placard at some national event for everyone to see—a placard proclaiming that God hates this or that—you’ve seen the signs, I’m sure—but it’s rare to hear it so plainly. But the book of Proverbs isn’t neutral when it comes to God, and the sages are more than happy to tell us what they know about God. And when they do, they put it as plainly and absolutely as they can. It may shock us to hear it, but it doesn’t bother the sages to say it: “There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him.”

Now remember, at this point in the book of Proverbs, the parent is trying to train his child in the way of wisdom. He is trying to shape him into a person “who fears the Lord.” And the parent knows that he can’t command or force his child to be wise, but that he can only commend it by pointing down the Way of Life and preparing him for life outside the home.

And so you and I, as readers of the book of Proverbs, have been invited into the family household to be trained in wisdom alongside the child. To this point in the book and this sermon series, the book of Proverbs has promised us some things in the way of wisdom if we will pay attention; it has alerted us to the dangers of fool’s gold by encouraging us to avoid the Way of Death and to stay on the Way to Life; and we have been reminded that all wisdom comes from God and that we should trust in that God with all our hearts, and not to lean on our own understanding.

But in this chapter, as the child’s exit from the household draws near, the father describes what he calls “the good-for-nothing” that everyone will meet.

Did you hear the father’s description of the good-for-nothing? He gives us a great physical description so that we can know one when we see one. Here’s what they look like: His mouth is “twisted,” meaning that it’s contorted physically and his speech is distorted and false.

His eyes are narrowed, which suggests he looks on others with envy, disdain or hatred. Or it could mean that he squints as he conspires to make trouble.

His feet shuffle back and forth, giving testimony to his shiftiness and unease.

His fingers point in the air, perhaps showing the way to his crooked path, or it could be that he’s pointing the finger in blame of others.

And don’t forget the heart—it’s bent on thinking up ways to be wicked (Yoder, 75).

In fact, wickedness is what the good-for-nothing cultivates. He is, the father tells us, continually sowing discord. And when the good-for-nothing’s crop comes in, what you have is controversy and conflict. What you have, in other words, is the breakdown of community.

What the parent describes for his child in the opening verses of our text today is the walking embodiment of the seven things God hates. In other words, when we move on to the final four verses of our text today—when the father tells us what God hates—you get a list of things that the good-for-nothing is living out day after day after day. And so the child should avoid this good-for-nothing not just because the father tells him to do

so, but because God finds his conduct repulsive. (Yoder, 76)

So what does God hate? Here's how the sages put it: God hates...

*haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that hurry to run to evil,
a lying witness who testifies falsely,
and one who sows discord in a family.*

You may have noticed that the father characterizes the first five abominations to parts of the body and moves systematically from head to toe: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil. If you want to see what the things God hates look like, remember, just look at the good-for-nothing whose whole body betrays his disruptive actions. From head to toe, the good-for-nothing is a walking billboard describing in living color the things God hates.

I don't know about you, but everywhere I turn these days I see a heart-rending breakdown of community. I see a culture neck-deep in discord and strife whether in the neighborhood or the school or the office or the family.

Or the church. As painful as those other places of conflict are to me—and they are—my heart literally breaks when the good-for-nothings who are present in the church cultivate their conflict and controversy—continually sowing up discord and discontent—so that there is a breakdown of community.

Let me say it right out in the open: All of us from time to time end up doing one or two or seven of the things that God hates. But most of us immediately recognize our error and seek to make amends, and we would not be described as “continually sowing discord.”

And so this sermon isn't really about how you can avoid being or becoming a good-for-nothing. Most of us don't need that sermon. What we need help with is dealing with the good-for-nothings who sidle up to us and whisper words that drives a stake right in the heart of friendships we treasure or congregations we love or denominations we are glad to be connected to. Because you know it as well as I do that wherever community can be found—in the neighborhood or the office or the school or the home or the church—someone will be there seeking to tear it apart.

Not too long ago I found myself seated in a beautiful sanctuary before a worship service was to begin. It was the first time I had ever been in that sanctuary, and I was simply there as a member of the congregation. I had no official responsibility, which is a rare and welcomed gift for a pastor.

As I waited for the service to begin, people began to take their seats around me. The pastor who would be leading the service was already seated in the chancel. He was clearly preparing himself for the service to come, and I prayed silently along with him, as

well as for him.

Two people seated in the pew just ahead of mine began to talk about the pastor. One commented about how much weight he had lost recently, and that he really looked pretty good. The other said something about his work among that congregation and how much she enjoyed his sermons. It was clear they were looking at their pastor through grace-filled and loving eyes.

As I listened to them, a word from the sages sprang to mind: "*Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body*" (Proverbs 16:24).

When I turned my head back to where the pastor was sitting, he looked different somehow. I was no longer looking at a stranger. I was now seeing through the eyes of those women. He had been changed in the twinkling of an eye. Or perhaps it was in the parting of the lips. By the power of those "pleasant words," a community was being formed.

It didn't last long. Before I knew it, I found myself listening to some people seated behind me who were talking about the same pastor. "Just look at him," I heard one of them say. "He just sits there. He never talks to anybody. And he can't preach at all. He doesn't even use the Bible in his sermons. Oh, he reads the Bible before his sermon, but that's it. He's no preacher."

That voice was marked by a seething bitterness that sounded far too comfortable on her lips. Whether she knew it or not, she had just destroyed the community by whispering to her neighbor. As the sages put it, "*A perverse person spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends*" (Proverbs 16:28).

Here's the truth: You are going to have to deal with whisperers from time to time. It happens in schools, at the office, in your neighborhood. Though this story centered on a pastor, it could have just as easily been about a teacher or an organist or a neighbor.

Anywhere community can be found, you can bet that a good-for-nothing will be there as well. And it will not take you long to figure out why the sages call the good-for-nothing an abomination to the Lord.

When I looked at that pastor as the service began, I had a choice to make. Would I put on the lens that allowed me to look with love and grace? Or would I choose the lens of bitterness and separation? Believe me, there is a world of difference in the two. As much as I hate to admit it, I think I was tainted more by the whisperer's testimony than by the other's. An abomination indeed.

Given the context of the service I was a part of, I couldn't do anything that day to deal with that good-for-nothing. But then I read an account of what someone did in a similar situation that happened decades ago. The author of the book I was reading told of an incident in the congregation he grew up in when a disgruntled member made an off-color remark to a group of people about the person who had preached that day. He remembered his father saying very directly to that man, "There is no room in this congregation for talk like that." And the good-for-nothing was exposed for what he was—

someone who wasn't trying to sustain or strengthen the community, but rather to shred it (Yoder, 80).

The best way to deal with the good-for-nothing though is to do what a member of a congregation I served once did. He was hearing all sorts of stories about something that had happened in the congregation that had caused some extremely hurt feelings. He was particularly close to one of the parties involved, and all sorts of stories were being told—some of them had all the facts exactly right, some of them were wildly exaggerated and completely false—and he was upset.

A good-for-nothing would have repeated those stories to be sure that others got mad too.

A good-for-nothing would have sidled up to anyone who would listen so that community would be irreparably destroyed.

A good-for-nothing would have sown discord and watched for the harvest to come in—a community broken and people separated.

But here's what that person did: He called and made an appointment to come see me. And he sat down before me and said, "You know, I'm a doctor, and I believe in getting all the evidence before I make a diagnosis. And I don't have enough information to make a diagnosis yet.

And then he spoke a proverb—not a biblical one—but a proverb nonetheless: "It's an awfully thin board that doesn't have two sides."

What that member did was exactly what the book of Proverbs is hoping for in this section. It's trying to get us to consider who else has a stake in our attitudes and behavior, because our actions and behaviors and attitudes can help to strengthen and sustain community—or they can shred community. The choice is ours.

The idea for this sermon series from the book of Proverbs was prompted by the engaging presentation made by Dr. Christine Roy Yoder in January, 2009, to the *Lectio Jubilate Group* meeting in Malibu, CA. In addition to the insights generated through notes taken at that gathering, I have also been greatly helped by Christine's commentary on the book of Proverbs. (*Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Proverbs*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).