

“Proverbs: Sticks and Stones”

Proverbs 12:16, 23

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When I was about 12 years old I had a paper route. I had probably the biggest route in my neighborhood, over 200 customers. The bigger your route the more money you made, but obviously the harder you had to work.

My route was coveted by several of the other carriers at the bundle stop – I was just lucky that a kid was giving it up just when I was starting. But it was also the case that a couple kids who were older than I was and had routes in the neighborhood were passed over for my route mostly because they weren't reliable.

This, of course, didn't make me very popular with a couple of these older guys, especially Mike whose front lawn was the bundle stop – the place where all the bundles of paper for an approximately ten block by ten block area were dropped off.

It was frequently the case that Mike razzed me at the bundle stop. Most of the time I ignored him – he said a lot of stuff that I knew wasn't true. He did have a way of tapping into all that adolescent boy stuff however, laughing because didn't have hair under your arms, too many zits on your face and clothes that didn't fit right. Sometimes I would try to razz back, but he was a couple years older than me and I just sounded dumb most of the time.

One summer day I got to the bundle stop early and the truck driver told me that the bundle stop was being moved to a different house and Mike was losing his route. I asked why. The driver told me it was because Mike had really bad body odor and people were complaining. When the other carriers and Mike arrived I really wanted to say something about how bad Mike stinks, but I held back. The driver popped out of the truck and told everybody about the changes, but not about Mike's smell. When Mike heard about losing the route and the bundle stop he started to cry. It was so strange to see this guy who had been mean to me and other guys, cry.

I didn't like Mike, but I felt bad for him. His paper route seemed to be about the only thing he felt accomplished doing. I was glad I hadn't said anything about how smelly he was.

The great 20th Century Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: "In the Prophet's message, nothing bearing upon good and evil is trite or small in the eyes of God. The teachings of Judaism is the theology of the common deed. The Bible insists that God is concerned with everydayness with the trivialities of life. The great challenge does not lie in organizing solemn demonstrations, but in how we manage the commonplace."

Though being attentive to small things and managing the commonplace do not come naturally to me, I agree with Heschel that God is deeply concerned with everydayness and the prophets pointed out that trite things have a large bearing on matters of good and evil.

So many of the verses in the book of Proverbs speak to the importance of small, trite, commonplace, every day matters. They appeal to all of us who like bumper sticker wisdom – short, clear, maybe too definitive at times. Consider one of our verses for this morning: "A fool shows his/her annoyance at once but a prudent person overlooks an insult."

I wish I had had that verse memorized when Mike was talking about my zits and lack of hair on parts of my body back when I was a paperboy. Imagining what a great come back it would have been if after the razzing I could have responded: "A prudent man overlooks an insult." Well maybe just saying it to myself would have helped.

The point of the Proverb isn't anything about having a good comeback, but it is about managing the commonplace so that trivial annoyances don't grow into destructive forces.

One of the great teachers of our time that grasped the importance of how we deal with the trivial was Dr. Suess. He had an absolutely brilliant story about how the mismanagement of the trivial might lead to an outrageous arms race. The precipitating disagreement between two kingdoms had to do with which end of a hardboiled egg was the appropriate end to open. One kingdom opened the larger

end, the other kingdom opened the smaller end of the egg. Believing that only one way of opening the egg was correct, the two kingdoms go to war with each other and in the process they generate larger and larger weapons to use on each other. Dr. Seuss, in his proverbial story, shows the lack of prudence exhibited by the two kingdoms when confronted with the trivial act of opening an egg.

We have some cliché but sound attempts at helping us deal with keeping the trivial, trivial. As kids we often repeated: sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me. We all know that name calling and bullying can be devastating to vulnerable kids and we should all work to bring it to an end. But we also know that we need to help our kids recognize that name calling is a foolish thing and it is important to minimize its power.

A complimentary bit of proverbial wisdom is the saying: “don’t make a mountain out of a mole hill.” Again, we need to be aware that what is a mole hill to one person may be hugely important to someone else. In the early days of the feminist movement men often trivialized women’s responses to acts of sexual harassment – sexual jokes, inappropriate touching, comments about clothing, etc. Men would say women were being too sensitive, but in reality the harassment kept women from advancing, it made them fearful and angry.

Some things we say are mole hills, are really mountains, but there are things that really are mole hills and they shouldn’t become mountains or they will ruin our lives and relationships.

When I was in high school and when my family came back from church on Sundays, we would regularly recap the morning. We might talk about the sermon, or the hymns and we would always talk about who we saw and what was discussed with them. As I grew older my mom became more and more depressed – I think even clinically depressed. During that time in her life, when we would recap Sunday morning, she would talk less and less about enjoying the hymns, and more and more about who didn’t say “hi” to her. Each week it seemed that mom was keeping score and each time someone failed to greet her that person and their motives became suspicious to mom. Over time mom felt alienated from more and more people and church in general became more of a burden than a welcoming community.

Depression and other injuries in our lives can cause us to read into situations and people's motives, things that really don't exist.

While the proverbs that constitute our scriptural focus for this morning lift up the importance of being prudent, it seems that they are ground in a deep spiritual affirmation of humility. Verse 23 states: "A prudent person keeps their knowledge to themselves, but the hearts of the fools blurt out folly."

There are obviously times to share one's knowledge. It would be ridiculous for people not to say something if it could save a person's life or even just make a strawberry rhubarb pie taste better. The proverbs were written in such a way that sometimes they apply to the situation and at other times they are exactly wrong for the situation – so you have to be careful when you apply which proverb.

Our proverb about keeping one's knowledge to oneself pertains to moments when sharing that knowledge is intended to harm people or some other part of God's creation. It is, most of the time a trivial, small act to keep knowledge to oneself, but if shared can grow beyond what one might think its impact could be. I was glad I didn't say what I knew about why Mike lost his paper route. I don't remember why I didn't say anything, probably because he would have beaten me to a pulp, but I also knew that the only reason I would have said something was to be mean or get revenge.

I do believe what Rabbi Heschel wrote about the prophets and God being concerned with everyday and seemingly trite matters is accurate. What we do with little things – little motivations, little bits of knowledge, little decisions – all these all up. The proverbs help give us direction about managing the commonplace such that we see God's ways and hopes for abundant life become more visible.

Heschel writes, and I think it is a good place to conclude, "The predominant feature of the biblical patten of life is unassuming, unheroic, inconspicuous piety, the satisfaction of trifles, attentiveness to details." What happens in our lives day by day is where God becomes most real and where we have the opportunity to experience God's greatest gifts.