

“Proverbs: The Prosperity of Generosity”

Proverbs 11:24, 25, 28

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I stayed for almost four days in Alma, WI this past week. Alma is a river town a little south and west of Menomonie. The Army Corps of Engineers runs a lock and dam on the Mississippi at Alma. All day and night there are huge barges that pass through the locks propelled by powerful ADM (Archers, Daniels, Midland) engines. At this time of year the drop in water level from the north to the south side of the dam is only 3-4 feet, in the spring, I was told, it may a 7 foot drop. Right next to the locks run two sets of railroad tracks. There is a steady flow of trains that pass through Alma day and night. The little place I stayed at, the Hotel de Ville, is right next to the tracks. The sound of the wheels passing along the rails is loud, but tolerable. What made me jump more than once, sleeping and awake, was when the engineer decided to blow his whistle outside my windows. They were piercing blasts that stunned me for longer than the blasts actually lasted.

Though I didn't appreciate the train whistle, some of what attracts me to Alma is the constant flow of life. The trains, the barges, the river - mostly the river, have this powerful movement to them. It's like life in Alma and all along the Mississippi need to learn to go with the flow, it needs to know what passes through and what returns, it needs to know what goes quickly and what meanders, it needs to change with the seasons and to dive fully into the seasons.

There is a beautiful city park, Buena Vista (Beautiful View) Park that sits on the bluff that rises above this town of 1,000 residents. The paths of Buena Vista lead you to rock outcroppings that trees cannot cover, and from these outcroppings you see the amazing Mississippi River waterways extending more than 10 miles in each direction on a clear day. The river valley is vast, intricate, teeming with life, complicated and majestic.

Like so many of nature's colossal expanses, the Mississippi evokes feelings of humble calm and invigorating inquisitiveness. The life that flows along with the water is powerful and lush, it invites you in, but on its own terms. Before you jump into the current you need to know its ways or you will not last long.

When I pulled up in front of the Hotel de Ville there was a pickup truck parked in the space ahead of me. On the back window of the trucks topper was a bumper sticker that read: “11th hour converts die at 10:30.” It was a bit startling to read the sticker. When I see such things I

wonder to myself – “of all the things from the Bible and the teachings of the church, why would any Christian choose that particular thing, and that thing alone, to stick on their car?”

Not knowing a whole lot about Alma when I arrived, when I read this bumper sticker I wondered if it represented the flow of life in town, or if it was a person swimming against the current.

It doesn't seem farfetched to me, to think about the Proverbs of Hebrew scripture as teachings about the flow of life, about learning the divine currents. The Proverbs lift up the importance of developing wisdom, which is far different from learning to control life; the Proverbs consistently speak of being part of something more than just our personal life, they speak of our relationships to people, the community, creation and God that we will experience the gifts that the creator intended for us.

Chapter 11, perhaps it could have the sub-title of “The Bankruptcy Chapter”, is replete with verses that point to the emptiness of all that destroys relationships. Verse 9 reads: “With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape.”

Verse 18 reads: “The wicked earns deceptive wages, but he who sows justice reaps a sure reward.”

It is amazing to me how the Proverbs repeat over and over again, in slightly modified ways, the bankrupt ways of those who cheat, of those who put their trust in the accumulation of wealth, of those who find gratification and prosperity by ruining the lives of others. But it is important to note that the Proverbs don't just point to what is wicked and bankrupt, they also point out how to enter the divine currents where there is life, abundant life.

Consider our verses from chapter 11 for this morning:

Verse 24 – “A person gives freely, yet gains even more.”

Verse 25 – “A generous person will prosper, a person who refreshes others will also be refreshed.”

Verse 28 – “Whoever trusts in riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

In their simple clarity these verses are confounding. As far as the church, Christianity and in general, global spiritual teachings, these verses are nothing new, in fact they are ancient and persistent. Like so many religious teachings they lift up the divine sensibility of generosity, of giving freely, of directing ones energy and resources toward others. This is not new to any of us, it is a teaching that we have heard over and over again.

But the verses do not stop with this point, they go on to say that refreshing others leads to one's own refreshment, that in giving freely one gains even more, that generosity brings prosperity to those who are generous. The Proverbs love to lift up the relationship between actions and consequences, good and bad.

I think it is helpful to note at this point, that those who compiled the Proverbs recognized that those who cheat often live in luxury, and that many generous people experience hardship. It is not the point of the Proverbs, or of most Christian teachings, to guarantee the ease and economic success of individuals. The Proverbs and Jesus are much more interested in bringing to life God's loving kingdom and guiding people - us - to embrace it. In God's kingdom one is not refreshed when everyone else is suffering; in God's kingdom one doesn't prosper when everyone is going hungry. In God's kingdom abundance for each person is felt when the abundance is shared by many. In the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, it would not have been miraculous if one person in the group ate until he or she was stuffed full, the miraculous part was that everyone ate and was satisfied.

In a culture like ours that is possessed by libertarian voices, the Judeo-Christian focus on the wellbeing of the community feels like swimming upstream instead of with the current. While we encourage people to be generous with time, talent and treasure, we continue to trust more in competition than cooperation, we continue to believe and teach that all people have the same opportunities and that only the presence or lack of initiative prevents their success, and we continue to champion the vast accumulation of wealth by the few as if they didn't benefit by all the social structures that exist and as if their massive levels of wealth have no impact on the poverty of others.

There exists within our hearts, spirits, minds and communities opposing voices. They tell us on the one hand to be generous and on the other that we need to make sure of our own security first; they tell us to consider the well being of our community and nation, but we are to protect people that people claim as personal wealth and rights; we want to be happy in life, but we often make decisions that just make us isolated and lonely.

Instead of embracing the flow of God's kingdom we end up creating whirlpools that keep us stuck and slowly pull us under.

Return with me the little town of Alma where life is less than energetic, but has this strong current just below the surface.

The Hotel de Ville is owned by a man named Dan. Five to ten years ago Dan and his partner Jeff moved to Alma from the Twin Cities and they bought several buildings in the main

street area. I don't know if they thought they could make great profits in Alma, but it didn't seem like this was their greatest concern – the whole town knows they aren't getting rich from the less than robust tourist industry. It seemed more that Dan and Jeff were interested in being part of a community and wanted to help it prosper. These two guys made connections with all kinds of people in town. They hired the middle aged bachelor who lived on almost nothing to be their maintenance man; they made gallery space in their building for local artists; they helped plant flowers and install signs to improve the looks of Alma; they spent time patronizing other local businesses – they just became strong members of the town.

This last winter Jeff died of a complication that set in after an accident he had. Every person I talked to in town from the guy who ran the fishing float, to the restaurant bartender, to the Kwik Trip cashier, to the old retired guy on the street, to the owner of a thriving winery, they all talked about what a great man Jeff was and how his death was a loss to the whole community.

Dan is still trying to keep up with all the work and businesses he and Jeff started, but it is clearly difficult.

Somehow Dan and Jeff decided that the prosperity, happiness, joy and freshness of their own lives was deeply tied to the life of the community. Somehow they were able to step into the current of this rivertown and learn to move with it, they also seemed to help the community get reacquainted with their own natural flow.

I am sure that there were many voices that screamed at Dan and Jeff that Alma would be a foolish investment of their time, talents and treasure, but those voices were missing what Dan and Jeff seemed to be yearning for. Even if it ends up to be a financial loss or a short-lived opportunity, from what I can tell these two guys gave up on living in the swirl of opposing voices and let the current gently carry them into a community of refreshment.

May we all, day by day, grasp more of God's diving current and risk entering for our own sake and for the sake of our world.