

Reading: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: the Sovereign God is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

2nd Reading: “Somebody’s Watching Me” by Rockwell and Michael Jackson

9/6/09

Someone Is Watching You

Do you ever have that sense that someone is watching you? As children it was instilled in us that God was watching us – but not in a positive sense, God was looking out for the bad things – and my parents seemed to have a special connection so that what God knew about us they would find out. One of my most traumatizing experiences happened when I was seventeen – I skipped church on Sunday evening to watch an X rated movie at the local cinema. Throughout the evening I was haunted by the thought “What if Jesus came back during the movie – was he watching me?”

So, imagine you’re in bathrobe and slippers and you open the front door to grab the morning paper. FLASH! Someone snaps your picture.

Stopped at a traffic signal in your car. FLASH!

Walking into a coffee shop for a meeting with the pastor. FLASH!

Shopping for shoes with a friend. FLASH!

Writing your sermon for Sunday’s service while watching *American Idol*. FLASH!

Of course, with today’s digital technology and high-speed shutters, no FLASH is needed to capture just about anything. Still, this is the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Despite the protests it’s important for the paparazzi to be there. Without them most celebrity lives become obscure. Today, the celebrity paparazzi experience can become your own experience — for about \$500 an hour. For that price, you can experience some of the trappings of fame. You can hire your own paparazzo to stalk you and capture unplanned moments of your life. How would you like a clandestine photographer ducking in and out of the shadows, capturing your every mundane move with a telephoto lens?

It’s actually a bit unnerving to be watched so closely. You have to hope there’s nothing hanging from your nose.

Wired magazine editor Sonia Zjawinski hired her own paparazzo for a day, just to chronicle the voyeuristic experiment. As the paparazzo caught her every move, Zjawinski’s thoughts became obsessively self-aware: “Do I look authentic? Am I being spontaneous enough? Will my friends

warn me if I have a latte-foam mustache? Do I make funny faces when I talk?

Ten years ago, there would have been no money to be had in “Celeb-for-a-Day” photo shoots. But today, MySpace, Facebook and Twitter exist and we live in a culture where if it’s not documented, it doesn’t exist.

I have a wonderful photo taken at my brother’s first wedding, with my parents, maternal grandparents and my siblings. Of course it’s totally false – my parents hadn’t spoken to each other for three years and were not doing so on that day either. It was staged, it was definitely not reality.

So there is a sense of truth telling from spontaneous shots that capture moments and reality, but as we too soon discover it is not reality either. You cannot take a snapshot of a person’s life and say this is true, no more than you can take a random verse from the Bible and declare it to be God’s Word.

I’m old enough to remember the British spy scandals of Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Kim Philby and later Anthony Blunt. I also lived not far from Cambridge for much of my childhood and youth. So these close to home stories were thrilling; but they were part of an era of paranoia that everyone felt they were being watched.

Of course, what is wrong with being watched if we’ve nothing to hide? We say that God watches us, yet there are whole chunks of our lives where we live although God wasn’t around. Do we really believe that “there’s a Parent up above looking down with wondrous love,” or is it something we simply tell ourselves for reassurance.

I have no problem with believing that there is a greater power that looks out for us, provided that we don’t play with idea and have a part-time God. However, I feel more strongly about everyone else that watches us – those who interact with our daily lives. The Church is particularly prone to scandal because it conjures an image of being better than the average person, when in reality it isn’t. Scandal happens when people believe that they are getting more, only to find that they have been betrayed. We have to do more than look good, projecting a hypocritical “better than thou” image. Our lives have to speak the love-justice of Jesus.

Proverbs offers advice for people who want be more than just good looking. It is an ancient collection of wisdom thoughts that was compiled c. 2500 years ago. Its contents are likely much older dating to the era of Solomon. Its purpose was “a coming of age” guide for young men, but its wider value is to give sage advice for those who would listen and respond. It is like a lens upon our life; a camera documenting a life album.

The writings assume that God has designed us to live one way — according to wisdom — and warns us against living outside of that design.

In this text, a variety of images emerge that should shape what we look like. Here is a couple:

Our Reputation: The writer of Proverbs says that a good reputation is something we should

miss if we lose it. Mae West, the flamboyant and scandalous actress of the 1930s, reportedly said, “It’s a story I wrote myself, about a girl who lost her reputation and didn’t miss it.”

Proverbs urges us to be concerned about maintaining “a good name” and “favor” in the public eye (v. 1): “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.” Perhaps the same writer wrote: “A good name is better than precious ointment” (Ecclesiastes 7:1). People should easily be able to speak well of us.

Names were important in that age and culture; something that has eroded in western culture in the past half century. I changed my family name. My birth name, my father’s name was very synonymous with my Pentecostal heritage – I’ve often called us the Pentecostal mafia. As part of my own affirmation I took my mother’s family name Whiting, because it held memories of people who cared and who were not judgmental.

One of my favorite scriptures is Isaiah 56. It is a chapter that pleads justice. In speaking about eunuchs and those cut off from acceptable society, it says “I will give them a name, better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.”

Benjamin Franklin, who wrote: “It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it.”

But why all the hype about our what others think about us? Who cares? Why does someone else’s opinion of us matter? That’s a tough one when so many feel the need for two personalities, the outward professional, and the real, vulnerable one.

As people who seek to image God in a positive way, we become the lens for God’s standards. God doesn’t need advocates for God’s own reputation, but the visible expression of God lies in what we do or don’t do. We need to shake off the unworthy victim guise that some religious people like to wear, and be willing to say, “See me; see my God in me.”

This text goes on to say that a good name and reputation is better than silver and gold. If you’re a collector, or a fan of Antiques Roadshow or the like, you will know that a good name can add great value to a collectible object.

We find this text to be incredibly counter-cultural. Wealth often bolsters one’s reputation, but the text sets this in contention. Possessing wealth is usually equated with being blessed, but the text says giving wealth away is blessed. The rich and poor rarely intermingle, but the text exhorts not only shared possessions but shared meals.

The challenge is that we should be hard-pressed to find pictures of the rich or the poor in the church, only of the blessed generous and those blessed by the generous.

Our Regard: The biblical God is a God of the marginalized who cares for the widow and orphan, the stranger and the alien, the poor and the infirm; people who are often overlooked or forgotten. Today we don’t have the same divides between rich and poor. Single women, and children who have lost their birth parents are afforded a better place in society than in Jesus’

time. But there are other stigmas. Mental illness, addiction, old age are some of the stigmas of our time, people isolated in institutional care. Aboriginal people; people living with AIDS, transgendered people – these are the people who God cares about, yet the ones that we're more likely to sideline or overlook. These are the people watching you, maybe in hope that you're watching them.

Researching cognitive development in kids, Jean Piaget coined the term “object permanence.” It describes the awareness that objects continue to exist even when they are no longer visible. It usually shows up in kids at around eight months. That means if you hide a rattle from a three-month-old, he or she literally thinks there isn't a rattle at all.

Out of sight, out of mind ... out of existence.

Social Justice is one of the foundational values of MCC, yet, if we're honest, most of us lack object permanence in such issues. If the marginalized aren't in our sight, they aren't really an issue.

Because of this, God reminds us of his justice on behalf of those who are often ignored. God will ensure that injustice reaps calamity. The rod, or authority, connected with oppression lasts only for a short time.

Deuteronomy 10 exhorts Israel to maintain issues of social justice because God does. Isaiah 61 connects the coming of the Messiah to the advent of mercy for the marginalized. Micah 6:8 calls believers to live justly and to love mercy.

One thing we can do in response to God's call to share concern for the marginalized is to take steps to eliminate our object permanence toward social justice. Here are some suggestions to help us move forward:

- **Aware:** Educate ourselves regarding the issues of poverty, oppression and human rights.
- **Care:** Begin praying for our hearts to be changed by what we're learning.
- **Share:** support movements that are engaging in justice issues.
- **Go There:** Personally enter into situations where you can be used to bring redemption into injustice.

Princeton professor, philosopher, critic and civil-rights activist Cornel West said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” Part of defining who we are in the future is to educate public perception of the follower of God - we are to be pictured as those who love in public ... and not just ourselves but all those who God loves.