

“God’s Choice”

Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-10

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There are RICH, and there are POOR.

The book of PROVERBS - - in the Old Testament describes the world that way:

The rich - - and the poor.

My first reaction was - - frankly - - I wasn't all that impressed.

I thought, "Yea, and tell me something I DON'T know".

I don't need the Bible to tell me that there are rich and poor in the world.

The more I thought about it, the more it bugged me.

This is the book of Proverbs. / Also called the WISDOM literature in the Bible. / I began reading it more deeply - - expecting to be ENLIGHTENED. / I expected to be ASTONISHED. / I expected something NEW - - that I DIDN'T know. / Is it - - that I've simply gotten so NUMB to the wisdom in this statement that I can't hear it anymore?

I think it IS common - - to become NUMB to wisdom over time - - - - especially if we're only hearing it - - and not living it.

There is all kinds of EVERYDAY wisdom - - that we become NUMB to. / SAYINGS - - which are NOT Biblical Wisdom - - - but which are a part of our culture.

So - - sometimes writers - CHANGE these everyday sayings - to - - attempt to RECAPTURE our attention:

An apple a day keeps - - HUNGER away

Love makes the world . . . complicated.

Better late - - than - - BEFORE anybody has invited you.

Where there's a WILL - - there's a WON'T.

The reason - - writers alter endings like this - - is to WAKE us up. / Because we have become NUMB to the sayings - - and they go in one ear - - and out the other.

So - - I wondered - - how we could WAKE ourselves up - - regarding Proverbs in the Bible. / NOT by changing the endings - - I don't want to take the responsibility - - of changing the endings of the Biblical Proverbs.

But - - is it possible - - that we could be ASTONISHED by the notion - - - that there are RICH and POOR in the world. / Could we become that sensitive?

There are rich and there are poor.

Wow. / Behold.

Could we reawaken ourselves - - to the wisdom contained here...?

HOW can it BE - - - that in a world created by God - - - where ALL that we are, and all that we HAVE come from God - - - that there should be BOTH - - RICH people - - - - and people in NEED...

When you really get in touch with the astonishment - - doesn't it make you want to do something about it? / OR... Are you NOT there yet ?

Well - - who better to help us get in touch with that astonishment - - about riches and poverty - - than the SPIRIT - - of a great woman who spent her life serving and living with the poor: Agnes Gonxha Bejaxhiu. / Anyone recognize the name?

Born in Yugoslavia. / She became an Indian citizen - who we knew as Mother Theresa - and whose ministry in Calcutta was an inspiration.

Let us listen to her words:

“Poverty”, she wrote, “does not only consist in being hungry for bread. Rather it is found in the tremendous hunger for human DIGNITY. / In every country there are poor - - but in certain countries - - there is more SPIRITUAL hunger - - than material hunger.

“You may pick up a hungry person and give him rice, and the hunger may be satisfied. / But - - a person who feels shut out, or unloved - - HOW do you remove that hunger.”

Even as - - she spiritualized hunger - - Mother Theresa ALSO told the stories of the very hungry - - and the very poor. / She wrote about picking up a dying person from the streets - - to feed her some rice. / She said that there was a hesitation before she ate. / The person - in her hunger - simply couldn't believe it was rice. / She wasn't angry - - or bitter at anyone. / It had simply been so long since she had eaten, that she couldn't believe it was rice.

So - - are we astonished yet?

There are rich and there are poor.

NOW - - look at what ELSE Proverbs says. / The Lord CHOOSES - - the poor.

"The Lord will plead their case . . ." - in verse 22

So - - the poor - - are God's choice. //

And then - what does that mean for us?

How do we - feel about the choices WE have made?

How do you feel?

At first maybe - - it doesn't seem FAIR. / WHY - - does God choose the poor?

And what does that mean to me - - if I am rich - - or at least NOT poor?

I thought we all had an equal chance.

That's the American way . . . an equal chance . . . right?

But - - IS our government FAIR - - as we decide who to invade - - and who to protect?

Is BUSINESS fair - - as businesses go on strike - - or pay bosses huge salaries?

Is the way we inherit property more - - if we are white - - fair?

What - - is FAIR? / And does that matter?

Was the CROSS - - of Jesus Christ - - FAIR?

Listen to what Mother Theresa says about the CROSS:

On the cross Christ was deprived of everything - naked - "He chose poverty, because he knew that it was the genuine means to possess God, and to bring his love to the earth."

Poverty is freedom - - according to Mother Theresa.

Freedom so that what I possess - - doesn't possess me, or hold me down.

In order to understand those we help, Mother Theresa writes, "We live as they live.

Those we aid are poor by force, whereas we are poor by CHOICE.

But - - why are some people poor by force? / Why are there homeless camps?

And who - - among us - - is really ready - - to be poor by choice?

There does seem, to be at least ONE contradiction here: All this talk about CHOICE - - seems to CLASH - - - with ONE thing in James' letter - - in the New Testament reading for this morning. / James writes, in his letter, that we should "SHOW NO PARTIALITY".

Don't be partial.

Isn't God SHOWING partiality - - - toward the POOR?

WELL - - James advice to show NO partiality - - is NOT advice to God. / It is advice to US. / God's choice - - - is a challenging MODEL to us - - - because WE are inclined to choose - - - anything BUT - - poverty. / And if we won't CHOOSE to take the side of those in poverty - - at LEAST we can try to not show partiality - - that would benefit ourselves.

But why - - - would we choose poverty - - - if we could be partial to wealth?

Do you know people that have chosen poverty?

It seems like a rare choice.

To try to wake us up a little more to the wisdom here - - let's take a completely different tack. / Instead of a poor nun - - a wealthy princess. / Moving our attention to England... Compare princess Diana - - to the Windsors and the royalty of England. / Diana worked for charity and humanity. / Selling her dresses - - and giving the money away. / She was never POOR - - but she did, at times, choose the poor. / And she CLASHED with other members of the Royal family... Try watching the Netflix series the Crown and reflect on this. / It has a season that features an impoverished nun who is a relative of Prince Philip - - who upstages the Windsor family in an interview with the press...

Why would someone with access to the Royal family choose like this?

They are - - perhaps one of the RICHEST families in the world.

Maybe Diana had begun to understand today's proverb.

Because of the proximities of their deaths - it was difficult at the time - - not to compare Diana to Theresa. / And I DO think, that the comparison is instructive.

I remember hearing about a comparison of this type - - made on the radio - - on an NPR program. / The comparison was - between what each one left BEHIND. / Think of all the wealth Diana left - - material wealth - - jewels and dresses - - and two grieving sons - - and a legacy of good works.

Then think about what Theresa left. / A pair of leather shoes. / A well worn sweater.

A thumbed through Bible.

And - - a ministry in Calcutta - - and - - questions and challenges about God and faith.

A great princess, and a great nun... There are rich, and there are poor.

The very existence of rich and poor side by side begs us to ask the question:

what is greatness?

For Theresa, greatness was not found in the typical places.

She wrote this - - about greatness:

We have a great people among us, only we do not know it.

They are the poorest of the poor.

The unwanted. / The uncared for.

The rejected.

The alcoholics.

The crippled. / The blind.

The sick. / The dying.

People who have nothing and have nobody.

For them - - their very life is a prayer.

They continually intercede for us without knowing it.

That's why I say that the Home for the Dying (in Calcutta)

is a treasure house for the whole archdiocese.

The people there intercede for us without knowing it.

These words - of Theresa - explain for me - - why God's choice - - that is - - a choice for the poor - - makes sense. / It makes sense, but it also makes me uneasy.

Because what does that mean - - for rich people?

What does that mean for people who are comfortable?

What does that mean for us?

Thankfully, Mother Theresa, who SO lived this proverb about rich and poor - - had some helpful words on the topic of RICH people as well. She had this to say:

“We have no right - to judge the rich. We do not need class struggle, but rather we need an ENCOUNTER. / An encounter, in which, the rich save the poor, and the poor save the rich.”

According to Saint Theresa - there's something in each - and all - of us that needs saving.

Think about it:

If the proverb simply condemns us - - then in a way - - we are off the hook.

We are hopeless rich people. / Oh well.

But - - if there is still HOPE for us - - if there is still a CHOICE to be made - -

- - THEN - - there is also STILL - - WORK to do.

And what is our work? / You and me?

To know WHERE - - WE - - are poor - - maybe.

To choose - - - our own poverty - - maybe.

And to actually choose - - on behalf of the poor.

Mother Theresa wrote in another place:

“Do we know - OUR - poor people ? / Do we know the poor in our house, or in our family? Perhaps they are not hungry for bread. Perhaps our children, our husband, or our wife are not hungry, or without clothes to wear. / BUT - - - ARE YOU SURE - - - there is no one who feels poor - - unwanted? / No one who feels deprived?

Who are our poor people ?

What do the poor teach us?

What do the TIMES - - when I HAVE been poor - - teach us?

WHERE - - is the POVERTY - - in my soul?

How - - - will I CHOOSE?

What will I devote my time to?

As I think about my own future - - and retirement - - Nancy and I have begun to ask ourselves questions like this about mission and service opportunities.

What will we choose...?

There are - - RICH - - and there are POOR.

It is an ASTONISHING - fact of life.

We can choose to ignore it.

Or - - we can find our salvation - - in choosing - - with God.

Rather than being choosy - - maybe we will USE - - what God has given us.

Remember this:

When we are most in need - -

- - when we are closest to the poverty and pain of life - -

- - THEN and THERE we are - - yet - - God's choice.