

Sermon

As I was hunting for scriptures that might help me through this particular election season, I stumbled on Proverbs Chapter 29. Like the rest of Proverbs, its just a succession of wise sayings, but in this chapter they seem to be grouped around the topic of leadership: what makes a good or poor leader, and how we respond to their leadership.

Listen to some examples from The Message translation: I recommend reading these one by one at home and spending a few minutes ruminating about them.

*² When good people run things, everyone is glad,
but when the ruler is bad, everyone groans.*

*⁴ A leader of good judgment gives stability;
an exploiting leader leaves a trail of waste.*

*⁸ A gang of cynics can upset a whole city;
a group of sages can calm everyone down.*

*¹² When a leader listens to malicious gossip,
all the workers get infected with evil.*

*¹⁴ Leadership gains authority and respect
when the voiceless poor are treated fairly.*

*¹⁶ When degenerates take charge, crime runs wild,
but the righteous will eventually observe their collapse.*

These proverbs all point to the perils of poor leadership, and the potential for good leadership. Leaders can strengthen and sustain a community, or they can create tension and division, even corruption.

And here are two others that stood out because they address the way God has a hand in guiding leadership:

*²⁶ Everyone tries to get help from the leader,
but only GOD will give us justice.*

*¹⁸ If people can't see what God is doing,
they stumble all over themselves;
But when they attend to what {God} reveals,
they are most blessed.*

These proverbs are centuries old. They remind us that human communities have been wrestling with how to lead and be led, how to care for each other and prosper as communities for thousands of years. The wrangling we are doing in this election season is nothing new.

But this election season has become a season drenched in fear.

- Fear of Covid infection at the polls
- Fear that the Postal Service will lose our ballots if we mail them in
- Fear of voter suppression and Russian interference and gerrymandering,
- uncertainty about whether there will be a peaceful transfer of power, if needed
- In Wisconsin, last minute court decisions about how and when you can vote
- There is so much distrust of the institution of voting right now;
- Maybe I'm naïve, but I think that distrust is unwarranted.

Last spring, at the beginning of the pandemic, I was groping around for a way to be helpful to someone, so I volunteered to be a poll worker in my Township.

I was allowed in by a tight knit circle of women who have been poll workers together for many years.

They gave me what I thought was a rookie job at first: initialing ballots and passing them on to someone more experienced than me;

But then the Clerk brought me and my partner a stack of absentee ballots; I didn't get to look at the ballots or touch them; but I got to tally them one by one, by hand.

My partner reads off the name of the absentee voter and we each check that name off so we know they have voted. Somebody else feeds the ballots into the voting machine. We hand write notes on any irregularity on the ballot. The Clerk has already gone over each ballot to be sure all the i's are dotted and t's are crossed.

It is not rocket science to be a poll worker! It's a mundane, humble, detailed act, but one of enormous consequence.

The people who do this in my Township are all women in their 60's through 80's. The same women who lead 4H meetings and Town Board meetings and who you run into at fish fries. Many of them were born and raised in my Township. Many probably vote differently than I do. (we don't talk about that). Last spring, their husbands were enlisted to drag lumber out of their sheds and scrounge around for plexiglass to hand build barriers between us and the voters. Two of the women sewed handmade masks for all of us.

Because of the anxiety around the election, the state sent us a member of the Wisconsin National Guard. I imagined this would be some scary looking military official with a weapon on his hip. But the one we got looked more like an overgrown Boy Scout. He turned out to be a local kid, and all the ladies enjoyed chatting with him about his family pedigree.

When we weren't busy, the poll workers bragged about their children and gossiped about who has moved to the nursing home and who has gotten divorced. We work a 14 hour day, not counting a few hours of training, and we all got paid about \$10 an hour.

I feel lucky to be in a rural area where we haven't had the lines outside like they did in Green Bay. And I understand that my community enjoys the privilege of elections still being peaceful, orderly and reasonably accessible. Not all Americans can say that.

But being a poll worker has taught me that elections are run by ordinary neighbors like you and me. I believe that's true in most every polling place in America. And if you can fill out a ballot and drive or mail or walk it to the right location, every American should be able to have their vote counted.

Yes, it may take longer to count them this year. But with patience, it will get done. Poll workers and mail carriers will be the quiet heroes of this election.

I tell you this story because, despite all the fear surrounding this election, I think we should approach it with hope and trust instead of fear. I know there's corruption and evil out there. I know there are some bad laws restricting voting rights, and we have to keep fighting to change those. I know the consequences of this election seem monumental.

But democracy is messy. Democracy requires a lot of in-your-face confrontation between people to get things right. It takes time to work out conflicts—decades, centuries. Think of slavery! Centuries! It doesn't progress in a straight line; we fall backward and then get up and move ahead again. The conversations we've had in the last few years are hard but necessary conversations. People care and are speaking up about what's going on in their communities. New voices have demanded that they be heard, and are being heard. That is good news.

And finally, as people of faith, I want to remind you that no election is the end of the story. No president or Congress or Supreme Court defines who we are as people of faith. Our human leaders don't define us. We are governed by a Sovereign God—a God in charge of the universe, regardless of who is in office this year.

The last proverb in chapter 29, in Eugene Peterson's translation, reminds us that good leadership happens where good people are allowed to choose it:

*²⁷ Good people can't stand the sight of deliberate evil;
the wicked can't stand the sight of well-chosen goodness.*

There are always forces of good and evil battling each other in the world. As Christians, we try to align ourselves at every turn with the force of good, following in the steps of Christ. It isn't just our personal advantage we pursue, but the collective good of our neighbors and the whole of Creation, too. At the polls we express our hope for the common good, and we trust that God is going to bring that about in the long run, regardless of who wins an election. You can help God do that, in all our little acts of courage and hope.

Let one of your acts be going to the polls. If you're not sure how, call me and I'll try to help you figure it out. Just go vote and do it hopefully. Carefully, not fearfully. Amen.