

PROVERBS 6: 1-11

My child, if you have given your pledge to your neighbour,
if you have bound yourself to another,
² you are snared by the utterance of your lips,
caught by the words of your mouth.
³ So do this, my child, and save yourself,
for you have come into your neighbour's power:
go, hurry, and plead with your neighbour.
⁴ Give your eyes no sleep
and your eyelids no slumber;
⁵ save yourself like a gazelle from the hunter,
like a bird from the hand of the fowler.

⁶ Go to the ant, you lazybones;
consider its ways, and be wise.
⁷ Without having any chief
or officer or ruler,
⁸ it prepares its food in summer,
and gathers its sustenance in harvest.
⁹ How long will you lie there, O lazybones?
When will you rise from your sleep?
¹⁰ A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
¹¹ and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want, like an armed warrior.

What are ways we are bound to other people, ways that can also be exploitative? Is it a money loan, a co-signing of a loan, a promise we've made we are reminded of or a forgiveness we've been granted that is held over us? Is it guilt and shame that won't release us from its grip? Verses 1-5 in this passage offer sage advice about seeking every way to avoid getting entangled and bound in a way that dehumanizes us.

In ancient Israel, everyone was accorded a piece of land, family by family, clan by clan. Each family and clan were then responsible for cultivating the land. But it was also understood that for any number of reasons – health, misfortune, lack of children and hence lack of a labour-force, neighbours had to be there for each other. If I came to you seeking some support or a loan, as a good neighbour you would give me what you could seeking not to profit from my troubles but to benefit me as a fellow child of God. However, as we know in the real world, things don't always work out this way. And hence, this passage gives a warning – be careful. Try to avoid getting yourself entangled and bound. Know your neighbour, trust cautiously.

Well, we may be thinking, it may be sensible advice, but many of us don't get entangled and bound by choice. Our need and sometimes desperation makes us vulnerable. Misfortune is not something we can control or even anticipate all too often. Health is not always in our hands. We need each other and we need to cultivate solid relationships where there is giving and receiving so that when we need the receiving the giving is generous, trustworthy and caring. No one wants to be indebted, but without grace and generosity from others, this can often be the outcome.

Some of us have learned the hard way to take greater care binding ourselves to another financially, emotionally or in some promissory way. I know I have. But it would be a greater misfortune if we are not able to gain the kind of wisdom also, then, to form good and trusting relationships where we can expect from others what they can also expect from us. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," says Jesus.

But this also brings us to the second set of verses (6-11) that go at this from another angle. Do we become more vulnerable to exploitation and unnecessary dependency on others because we fail to take responsibility for our own affairs? Whether it's our family, our workplace, our community or our world, are we doing our part? Our verses don't pull any punches. They condemn the kind of persons using a word that has been translated as: "Lazybones." A lazybones just lounges around and sleeps life away while work needs to be done. Lazybones should observe the ant as a model of a creature of God who works to feed themselves and their community. What may we learn from the ant? They cooperate rather than fight or complain and do together what needs to be done to live. It sounds rather simple, and for some of us mundane, and yet working together and doing one's part for the larger whole is an essential part of a good life.

Good solid practical wisdom for living in the real world in these verses. Be careful, form good relationships that are not exploitative and get out of the ones that are. Be free but also responsible. Do your part where you can and don't just expect others to carry your load. And let us keep building a society where people in genuine need get help without being humiliated, dehumanized or exploited because of their need.

PRAYER: Thank you, O God, for the people in our lives who love us and are there for us. Thank you that we can get help and often do and do not feel bound in some negative way. Thank you for the ways we feel called to serve others and make our contribution to our world. Thank you for our getting the help we need physically, mentally and spiritually because there are people, communities and systems there to support us. Amen.