

Good morning. For those of you who don't know, my name is Kyle Oliver, and I'm a postulant for holy orders in the Diocese of Milwaukee and a divinity student at Virginia Theological Seminary. I want to thank you all for having me today and to thank Andy for sharing the pulpit with me once again. Before I start, let me just take this opportunity to say how good it is to be back in Madison. Before I moved to Northern Virginia, Bishop Miller warned me that "every car-driving culture in the world has converged" there. I regret to report that the world's bicycle-riding cultures have yet to follow suit, except perhaps for some borderline-suicidal ones. We're also missing dairy products that squeak, snowplows that can handle more than a dusting, and beer from Wisconsin micro-breweries. Your prayers for the arrival of all these good gifts that Madisonians take for granted are greatly appreciated.

My friend Gina is from Swaziland, a small nation in Southern Africa. As such, she's often looked to for on-the-spot cross-cultural perspectives in our seminary classes. I was entranced the day my Old Testament professor asked her for some examples of proverbs in her culture. For instance, she talked a bit about different perspectives on raising children, a subject the Bible's proverbs also explore. I'd of course heard the familiar wisdom that "it takes a village to raise a child," but she contrasted that notion with another saying: "He who fathers a lion should have the courage to tame it." My favorite example also involved that animal. Listen to this one, which to my ear says something about the nature of identity and risk-taking: "The lion is the king of the jungle. If it were given wings, it wouldn't be the king of the skies. But it would be foolish to refuse the wings." I just love that.

I love, too, what Gina said about the role of this kind of wisdom. Proverbs aren't intended to be taken, in the words of one Biblical commentary I came across this week, "as invariable

rule[s] or ... binding promise[s] from God.” No, these pearls of wisdom help us to, in her words, “begin a process of reflection and decision-making.” I like the sound of that. And in light of today's reading from Luke's gospel, I've gotta believe Jesus would like it too. After all, in this story he seems to model just such a reflection process using the proverb from our Old Testament reading this morning: “Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.” Let's see what Jesus does with this proverb.

For starters, I suppose it should come as no surprise to us that the piece of wisdom we know as Proverbs 25:6-7 surfaces in the teachings of Jesus not as a proverb but as a parable. Of course, the king and his court are transformed into those seemingly ever-present elements of Jesus's storytelling: the host and the wedding banquet. The choice is particularly appropriate, since Jesus is at a banquet of sorts himself and has just witnessed the very kind of honor-seeking behavior the proverb warns against. Other than this substitution of context, the parable is basically the proverb in story form.

On the surface, it sounds a little Machiavellian, doesn't it? “Always take the most modest seat available to avoid the humiliation of being sent lower. Plus everyone will be impressed in the event that you are called up to a place of greater honor.” It's like the piece of advice a new corporate board member might get from a more senior mentor. Or, as one commentator points out, like the kind of advice Miss Manners might give to a question about party-seating etiquette. This calculating approach might at first make us a little uncomfortable, but we should remember that the proverbs are full of such practical, worldly wisdom. After telling the parable, Jesus gives it a go himself, reformulating the proverb as a catchy one-liner: “all who exalt themselves will be

humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). If we were reading Luke continuously, we'd have heard this line as a close echo of the similar saying from the previous chapter, “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (13:30). These sayings are so memorable because they make use of an inverted parallelism that you may remember from English class is called chiasmus. I believe this rhetorical device is a favorite of Jesus not just because it is a good memory aid, but because it highlights that in the Kingdom of God, the wisdom of the world is often turned on its head. Injustices will be remedied, patient suffering and unselfish service rewarded. Ultimately, Jesus reminds us that humility isn't just a good strategy for working a room; it's a virtue he wants us to embody.

One thing it's not, of course, is a whole lot of fun. And Jesus is just getting started. Next he changes targets, continuing with an even starker reflection directed this time at the banquet giver: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (14:12-14). This passage, too, serves as an echo of sorts. To me, it sounds a lot like that passage from which we draw the Ash Wednesday gospel reading, where Jesus reminds us that our prayer, fasting, and alms giving should be done in secret, so that “[our] Father, who sees in secret, may reward [us]” (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18). When no one notices our good deeds, or, as in this reflection on hospitality, when those who notice them cannot pay us back, then God enters them on some sort of heavenly balance sheet. Frankly, I think even these instructions, commendable though they are, sound coldly transactional. “What's in it for me?” is a question we

humans are prone to ask. Jesus, who after all shared our nature, knows that, and here he offers a reply: “what's in it for you is treasure in heaven.”

Is that the takeaway here? Balance sheet morality? Humble yourself so that you can be glorified? Be a hospitality creditor so that you can collect such treatment with interest at the “resurrection of the righteous” (14:14)? Is this parable really a promise of divine loan guarantees? I hope you're suspicious, because I think the truth is far more wonderful and clever than that. I think we get some help in seeing it from the designers of our lectionary. I'm grateful that they offered the original proverb as an option for our Old Testament reading this morning, because its presence is, I think, a hint about the kind of teaching Jesus is really up to in this particular story. If you'll allow me a moment of digression, I think I have a joke that, though not all that funny, illustrates the point I want to make: a mathematician, a scientist, and an engineer are asked to calculate the volume of a shiny red ball. The mathematician steps up to the chalkboard, draws a picture of a thin spherical shell, does a little calculus, and derives the proper expression, $\frac{4}{3}\pi r^3$. The physicist takes advantage of the laws of nature, submerging the shiny red ball in a tub of water and measuring the volume of fluid that the ball displaces. The engineer reaches for a book on the shelf and starts leafing through the pages. “What are you doing?” they ask him. “I'm consulting my handbook on the volumes of shiny red balls.” Proverbs, like the cookbook equations favored by engineers, are not explanations. Proverbs become proverbs because they work, not because ethicists and theologians come to the conclusion that they are derived from sound premises and correspond unambiguously to reliable metaphysical truth.

No, Jesus is nothing if not practical, and by spinning stories from this proverb, I believe he is not offering not explanations of God's ways but engineering a strategy for helping us learn

to walk in them. Again, being human, he knows we initially need motivation for doing the right thing, and he offers the necessary spiritual training wheels with promises of repayment for good behavior. But notice what following his advice teaches one to do. Besides the banquet setting, what both of these stories have in common is that they demonstrate a willingness to delay gratification, something we Americans in particular struggle with but that always poses a challenge to the human condition. Forgo the certain and immediate reward of sitting in the place of honor by deferring it, he says. Invite guests knowing full well that they won't be returning the favor any time soon. Learn to trust your identity and well being to God. Learn to behave more selflessly. As we practice this way of life, something happens. We may not be able to change our human condition through our own force of will. But we can, through prayer and action, make room for God to enter our lives and do that transformative work for us. It happens incrementally, so we seldom notice the progress without taking a long look backward at the people we used to be. But it happens. One decision at a time, we are tempted to act self-servingly and yet choose to humble ourselves and defer our reward. Eventually we forget about that carrot Jesus dangles, and, in the words of our reading from Hebrews, we “do good and ... share what [we] have” simply because we know “such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (13:16).