

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Proverbs 26:11

July 23, 2006  
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11 As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.

It's gross but you know it's true. There's a reason why Proverbs is included in that part of the Bible we call wisdom literature—there is truth to be found in its chapters and verses. And if you've ever owned a dog, you know this particular piece of wisdom to be true. I'm guessing all the dog people in the room have a story to share that supports this proverb. Having three dogs, one of whom is enamored with eating trash, I have more than my fair share of dog regurgitation stories, but I'll spare you. The real wisdom in this proverb has nothing to do with the digestive systems of our canine friends. Rather, this is a proverb about humanity's tendency to make the same mistakes over and over and over again.

Let's think of this proverb's relevance on a societal scale. Folks should know by now that the walls of every great empire begin to crumble when principles of equality and justice are ignored. And yet we're living in a nation where the upper class is getting richer while the lower class is getting poorer and the middle class is getting smaller and if we continue on this path of economic stratification, we will, like every other global "superpower" before us, come to, if not ruin, then some form of revolution. We should know this by now and be making strides to make sure every American is given the opportunity to earn a living wage and pursue happiness, and yet it's getting harder and harder for folks to do just that. As a nation, we are being foolish and returning to the follies of those who have gone before us if we do not tend to the needs of the least among us—if not to preserve our Union then at least because it's exactly what Jesus told us to do. Surely this proverb applies on a societal scale.

We also know the truth of this parable on an interpersonal level. Corey and I are well-schooled in this aspect of returning to our folly. We've been married for over six years. And for over six years we've been having the same old arguments over the same old things. We are so well-versed in our "roles" in these little marital dramas that we could actually play the part of the other person. Psychologists call this having a scripted conversation and Corey and I are so good at it that, if filmed, we'd be worthy of Oscar nominations. We know how to push each other's buttons, how to tick each other off, and how to shut each other down. In these moments we are not kind or loving, often saying and doing things we later regret. Surely this is folly and the better part of wisdom would be to resolve the core issues and stop expending any time or energy on what end up being very unproductive encounters. And so, until we wise up, we'll be foolish and return to these follies, wasting what precious time we have to love and enjoy each other during this earthly life. Surely this proverb applies on an interpersonal level.

Along with knowing the truth of this parable on societal and interpersonal levels, we know this truth on a very personal level. Because of our addictions, our brokenness, and our fears we continue to do those very things we know are not the best things for us to do. A heart attack survivor just can't help but dig into a big ol' cut of prime rib. A smoker can't resist taking just one more puff. A co-dependent person gives a co-worker, a spouse, or a friend just "one more chance" over and over and over again. A workaholic takes on just one more "Big Project." A young person continues to hang out with the cool kids even though the cool kids make him their scapegoat. In our wisest moments we know these are foolish choices and yet it can be so hard to

garner the courage and strength to stop and redirect. And so if I may be so bold I'd say that the words of Proverbs are too harsh here, I don't know that we're being fools when we return to our follies so much as we're just being human, sometimes unable to help ourselves even when we know better.

Surely we can all think of examples when we, others, or even entire societies have acted foolishly and returned to their follies, it happens all the time. And this is the truth about living the author of Proverbs highlights. However, this proverb also speaks to another truth, though I don't think intended, about how we, as human beings, return to our follies. That is to say, so many of us return, in our minds, to the mistakes we have made in the past. It's not that we repeat our mistakes, it's just that we can't forget and move on from the mistakes we have made. And what I'm really wanting to say here is that we can't forgive ourselves from our sin, from our mistakes, and even from those things we just wonder guiltily if we've done or if we should have done.

*Downhere* is a popular Canadian Christian rock band. The lyrics from one of their songs speaks to the difficulties of forgiving ourselves.

You keep laying down \$100 bills  
 On the counter of your untamed guilt  
 And you'll keep paying out from your empty purse  
 Until you feel you've satisfied your curse  
 No one here is throwing stones  
 But you have got to drop your own

Forgive yourself . . . Anyone who bears a scar wants to forget it  
 Forgive yourself . . . Nothing ever frees you more than just believing  
 That you've been forgiven, come out of the prison

Can you tell me how you spend every day  
 Looking in the mirror of your shame  
 And staring like a judge, you are ruling for yourself  
 You tied a stone around your neck  
 You're drowning in a past regret

Don't believe it's okay to be like this  
 Don't believe you deserve to live like this  
 'Cause every part of you wants to know  
 Just one reason why you should let go

Forgive yourself . . . Nothing ever frees you more than just believing  
 Come out of the prison You've been delivered

And oh that we could forgive ourselves, get over it, and heal. But it's hard for us. Clinging onto our guilt becomes part of who we are—at least to ourselves. To forgive ourselves would be to lose a part of our identity and regardless of the gains we make by doing so, it's still hard. And so we continue—day after day, week after week, and sometimes even year after year to return to our folly, or perceived folly, to play it over and over again in our minds wondering what we might have done differently, wondering why we did what we did, wondering how it might have all turned out differently had we only made a better choice.

And no matter what the answers to those questions might be—if we could have made a better choice, if we could have done something differently, if we could have changed the outcome—that makes not a bit of difference whether we are completely without blame or the only one to blame. And the reason it doesn't make a difference is because it doesn't make a difference to God. And who are we to hold something against ourselves when even God has let it go? In the Gospel of John Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (Jn. 10:10) Filling our hearts and lives with guilt crowds out the abundance God wants for us. In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus responds to Peter saying, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. In other words, forgive to the point that you've lost track of how many times you've forgiven for surely God has forgiven you even more times than this. Indeed, throughout the Gospels Jesus makes no less than 39 (NRSV concordance) references to forgiveness and being forgiven. Jesus forgave because God forgives and therefore we are called to forgive as well—not just others—but ourselves.

So whatever it is that you did or didn't do, ask God to forgive you. Go ahead, let it go. And then, perhaps, knowing that God has forgiven you, you'll be able to forgive yourself. And subsequently you'll be able to breathe a little deeper, walk a little taller, and sleep a little better. Forgiveness—it can be yours—and that my friends, THAT'S in the Bible.