

“Whoever Welcomes One Such Child”

Proverbs 31:10-31 • Psalm 1 • James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a • Mark 9:30-37

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Today’s readings invite us to consider some *family* matters, specifically, *spouses* and *children* – which pretty well covers all of us, because even if we don’t have a spouse, *all* of us are somebody’s *child*.

We begin with the reading from Proverbs, a passage which has been given names like “a capable wife” or “ode to a woman of strength.” Now before I proceed any further let me express my trepidation as I approach this passage. It is a risky for a *man* to step into the affairs of *women*. Women have a long history of being subjugated by men, of being governed by men, of being told what they can and cannot do by men, of being denied the right to vote by men – our country existed for nearly *a century and a half* before women gained the right to vote. Women have been told what to wear by men, what professions they can and cannot pursue by men, what they should look like – or even *smell* like! – by men. Countless women have been abused by men; countless women have been raped by men. There is still a significant wage gap between women and men; according to Forbes, working women in the U.S. currently earn an average of 16% less than men. In many churches, women are not allowed to hold any positions of leadership; even in denominations like ours, which joyfully ordain both men and women as Elders, Deacons, and ministers of Word and Sacrament, many congregations, when they are searching for a new pastor, still seem – even if they would never admit it! – to favor male candidates over female candidates, as if the *preferred* gender of a pastor is *male*. It is risky for a man to step into the affairs of women. It is far too commonplace, still to this day, for men to try to *limit* what women can do.

So it’s foolish of me to try to preach on this passage. But I’m going to do it anyway, because it’s better to *deal* with the hard passages in the Bible, than to *ignore* them or pretend they don’t exist.

So: let’s start by thinking about what this passage actually *looks* like. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. In Hebrew, it looks like this – these are the first eight lines:

אִשְׁת־חַיִל, מִיּוֹמָצָא; וְרוּחַ מַפְיָנִים מְכַרָּה
בְּטַח בָּהּ, לֵב בְּעֵלָהּ; וְשָׁלָל, לֹא יִחְסֹר
גְּמֻלָתָהּ טוֹב וְלֹא-רָע-- כֹּל, יָמֵי חַיֶּיהָ
דָּרְשָׁה, צְמֹר וּפְשֻׁתִים; וַתַּעַשׂ, בְּחִפְץ כֹּפִיָּה
הִיְתָה, כְּאֵנוֹת סוֹחֵר; מִמְרוֹחֶהָ, תָּבִיא לַחֲמָה
וַתִּקֶּם, בְּעוֹד לִילָה--וַתִּתֵּן טָרַף לְבֵיתָהּ; וְרוּחַ, לְנִעְרֹתֶיהָ
זָמְמָה שְׂדֵה, וַתִּקְחֶהּ; מִפְּרֵי כֹפִיָּה, נָטַע נְטֵעָה כְּרָם
חֲגָרָה בְּעוֹז מְתִיבָהּ; וַתִּאֲמַץ, זְרוּעֹתֶיהָ

I realize I'm probably the only person in the room who can actually read this. But what should be obvious is that lines are of different lengths, and there's a break in the middle of each line. This is *poetry*. Somebody went to the effort of writing a *poem* about the woman who is described here. What's more, it's a carefully constructed poem. Hebrew reads right-to-left, and if you look at the *first letter* of each line, you find *aleph, beth, gimel, dalet* – the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet – and so on, all the way to *tav*, the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. There are twenty-two lines in this poem; there are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet; each line begins with a different letter, and the poem moves sequentially from the first letter to the last. It would be like if someone wrote a poem in English with twenty-six lines, each line beginning with a different letter of the alphabet, starting with “A” and ending with “Z.” Think about that for a moment. It's easier to find words that begin with some letters of the alphabet than others, right? How many words start with the letter Z? How many with X? It would take a great deal of *time* and *thoughtful effort* to create a good poem like that. Two and a half thousand years ago, give or take, somebody did just that. Somebody went to a *lot of effort* to create this poem!

What's the poem about? What the woman *does*. Not what she *looks like*. If, as seems likely, this poem was written by a man, he's not *objectifying* her. He's not seeing her as a vessel for his own personal pleasure. No, he's looking at who she is on the *inside*. What kind of *characteristics* and *traits* she has. Her *industry* and her *productivity*, her *intelligence* and her *wisdom*, her *creativity* and her *resourcefulness*, her *savvy* and her *generosity*. Listen to some of those lines again: “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.” “She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.” “She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.” “Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her.” This is a woman who is *respected, trusted, and admired* by the person who wrote this poem – presumably a man, possibly her husband. The work she does isn't the same work her husband does – he's one of the leaders of the city, “taking his seat among the elders of the land” – but remember, this poem originated more than two millennia ago, half a world away, and in *that* era, her work was *no less important* than her husband's. The husband, to his credit, *appreciates* the hard work that his wife does; he does not take her for granted; he readily acknowledges that what she does with her time and energy is both *hard* and *important*. She's *smart, she's resourceful*, and he *appreciates* that about her.

Some branches of Christianity take this poem and make it *prescriptive*. They say, “This is what a good Christian wife looks like. She tends to the affairs of the household; she puts food on the table and clothes on our bodies; she raises the children.” That may well be what *some* wives do. But nowhere does this poem say that *all* wives need to do those things. There is nothing prescriptive or normative about this passage. It is simply a poem praising the remarkable strengths and character of *one particular woman at one particular point in time*. No more, no less. If anything, this poem serves as a model for the way each of us could respect, trust, and admire the person we have chosen to spend our life with. When was the last time *you* wrote a poem honoring the strengths and virtues of *your* spouse or partner? I mean that in all seriousness. As I said, the writer of this poem took a great deal of *time* and *thoughtful effort* to write these words. He wanted the *world* to know just how *amazing* this woman was. When was the last time any of us wrote something to *publicly* honor the person we care most deeply about?

Turn now to the Gospel passage. Jesus and his disciples are walking through Galilee and he is telling them, for the second time, about the things that will happen to him. Along the way, the disciples get into an argument with one another about who among them is the greatest. Imagine these grown

adult men, followers of Jesus, trying to one-up each other. “I’m the greatest, because he called me first.” “I’m the greatest, because he took me up the mountain and he didn’t take you.” “I’m the greatest, because I turned my life around more than any of you.” It’s like they’re playing “King of the Mountain,” except this doesn’t seem to be a game; this really *mattered* to them. Some people really think they’re *better* than anyone else. That’s their *immaturity* showing through. Adults who behave like *children*.

Jesus lets them argue. Only after they have arrived at their destination does he call out their behavior. He doesn’t scold them, or lecture them; he simply asks them: “What were you arguing about on the way?” They are silent, because they know they are guilty. There’s something about Jesus looking at us square in the face and asking a simple question that can bring us back to our senses. “What was I thinking?” they might be wondering. “Why did I need to do that?” Great questions, questions we should ask ourselves periodically, whenever we want to puff ourselves up and put other people down.

Jesus tells them: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Stop putting your *own* ego first. Stop thinking that *you’re* the most important person in the room. Instead of thinking about how *superior* you are, think instead about how you might *serve*, about what you can *give*. To illustrate his point, Jesus takes a little child and holds it in his arms. “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” Christianity isn’t about being the *greatest*. Christianity is about welcoming the *least*.

Talk about humbling. The disciples think they’re *so* great. Jesus tells them to stop playing games, stop acting like children, and start *servicing* and *welcoming* other people. The ones without any power, without any influence; the ones much of the world would rather pass by. Or, in some cases, *exploit*. We hear far too many stories of children being victimized, far too many stories of adults *taking advantage* of children. Some people here in this congregation know firsthand what it feels like when an adult you *thought* you could trust uses or abuses you for their own twisted pleasure. That kind of thing even happens in the *church*, in what is supposed to be a place of holiness, a *sanctuary* from the world.

Jesus holds a little child in his arms. It’s a tender, loving image. It’s an image depicted on the window of our Chapel downstairs. The children and youth who participate in our Wednesday program see that stained glass window week after week. It reminds them that they are important. They are *precious* in God’s sight. They should *always* feel welcome in the church, even if they are misbehaving. There are ways to address children’s bad behavior while *loving* them at the same time – just like the way Jesus addressed his *disciples’* bad behavior while loving them at the same time. We may not always love what our children *do* – but we should never stop loving them, for they truly are *beloved* by God.

And so, for that matter, are we. I said at the outset that “all of us are somebody’s child.” Some of us were blessed with wonderful parents; others among us were not. But we all have this in common: we are all *beloved children of God*. Over the past few years I’ve been teaching the children this question: “Who are you?” The answer: “I am a child of God.” That is the most basic truth of our existence. We are, every single one of us, a *beloved child of God*. God doesn’t always like what we *do*; God sometimes wishes we would make different choices; but *nothing* we do can ever change that fundamental truth. *We are beloved children of God*. Say it to yourself: “I am a beloved child of God.” Say it with me together: “I am a beloved child of God.” Nothing, *nothing*, can ever change that fundamental reality.

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