

Wisdom From Above – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

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

Sometimes the people preaching at St. Paul's begin by talking about the difficulty of the texts and their frustration that Pastor Judy stuck them with the impossible task of piecing together a meaningful sermon using the lectionary texts of that day. Today will not be one of those sermons. As soon as I saw our Old Testament reading, I understood exactly why Judy asked me to preach today. Proverbs 31! I AM the Proverbs 31 woman! I AM the *capable wife* who is *far more precious than jewels*. If you don't believe me, look at the passage and listen to this evidence. I am like the *ships of the merchant*—I bring food from far away. (I buy groceries in St. Louis and Edwardsville at least twice a month.) I get up in the middle of the night—6:30 a.m. on weekdays—to make food for my household (Mathea's lunch). I plant vineyards, of tomatoes and basil. I sew my family's clothes. (I hemmed Mathea's choir dress last year.) I don't let my lamp go out at night. (I need it on so I don't run into something when I get up to go to the bathroom.) I never *eat the bread of idleness*. (Of course not, I'm gluten intolerant.) If my husband was here today and not in Seattle, I'm sure he would stand up right now and call me *blessed*. Believe me, Pastor Judy knew what she was doing.

In churches that don't follow the lectionary, Proverbs 31 only shows up on Mother's Day and at women's funerals when male pastors use it to celebrate the women in the congregation or in the casket. I'm guessing it makes women squirm in both those places. It's a difficult and controversial passage. Will Willimon says that it may be “one of the most problematic texts in the Old Testament” (Van Harn 285). Old Testament scholar James Newcome, in his commentary on this lectionary reading, said “the best that a preacher may do with this present lection is to avoid it.” Newcome goes on to say that, “There are simply better texts in Proverbs on which one may preach, and one would be well advised to select one of these.” He finds it “astonishing that [this passage] should have been included in the Common Lectionary at all!” (Brueggemann 516). Apparently the people who crafted the lectionary calendar thought Proverbs 31 was valuable enough to put it in today's group of readings; however, they weren't brave enough to lock churches into using it once every three years. Instead they offer two alternative Old Testament readings that can be used on this Sunday instead of Proverbs 31.

So why, as Newcome suggests, would we want to avoid Proverbs 31? If you were listening as Emma read it a few minutes ago, the answer to that question may seem quite obvious. First, for people who live in the 21st century it's really difficult to find relevance in a passage that seems to celebrate a woman's domestic servitude so that her husband can be *known in the city gates* and take *his seat among the elders of the land*. Second, this passage seems to suggest that all women should aspire to live up to the ideal of this Proverbs 31 superwoman. She can do everything, and she does it all well. While our culture today tells us that we women should try to “do it all,” the call of culture is typically not the call of God. I have to admit that when I began preparing for this sermon, I didn't really like Proverbs 31 either. It was one of those Biblical passages that I wanted to ignore, perhaps even flee from. That's one reason why I had to choose it and work with it for a few weeks rather than selecting one of the alternative texts.

Another reason I needed to work with Proverbs 31 for a while is because I'm a literature person. If there's one thing I learned about poetry in my undergraduate and graduate English courses, especially the courses I took in grad school on T.S. Eliot and Dante, it's that things are not always as they seem at first glance in poetry. Coming at the end of the final chapter of Proverbs,

these verses form an acrostic poem—you know, a poem in which each line begins with a letter that spells out a word or some sort of message. In this acrostic, each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, starting at the beginning and proceeding letter-by-letter to the end. So the number of characteristics describing the Proverbs 31 woman doesn't depend as much on her character as it does on the Hebrew alphabet. Form impacts content. Another thing we know about poetry is that it frequently gathers its meaning through the poetic conventions it employs—figurative language, imagery, hyperbole, simile, metaphor, personification, and so on. We can find most of these conventions in this passage. At one moment the Proverbs 31 woman is a merchant ship, and later she is dressed in *strength and dignity*. Poetic language can typically not be interpreted literally or just on the surface; its layers of meaning must be uncovered in order for its whole truth to be found.

Will Willimon affirms this as true of Proverbs 31. In addition to calling this passage “problematic,” he added that, “we do well not to assume that we know what is going on here until we give it a careful, contextual reading.” Yet despite saying that, he still comes to the conclusion that there is little of value in the passage for the church today (Van Harn 285-287). I'm not sure I agree with Willimon though. Along with a few other scholars, I see the possibility for another layer of meaning in Proverbs 31, especially when examined in light of the rest of the book of Proverbs and when placed beside our other readings for today.

Good wives are mentioned elsewhere in the book. For example, chapter 12 says that a *good wife* is the *crown of her husband* (Prov. 12:4). Like the *good wife* described throughout the rest of the book, the Proverbs 31 wife or woman is thrifty, pious, charitable, energetic, dignified, and lovely. Yet while this Proverbs 31 wife would definitely qualify for her husband's *crown*, she is just too good to be true. We have already acknowledged that this woman must be superhuman if her description is taken literally. We also need to acknowledge that women just weren't given crowns or called *blessed* by their husbands in this deeply patriarchal society. Women were property, not *jewels*. They were responsible for the kinds of domestic chores the Proverbs 31 woman managed, but they would not have had a place of authority in the home or in the public sphere in the ways that this woman does. They were also not the source of their husband's honor in the community. Throughout this book of wisdom literature, beginning with the first chapter, the author portrays wisdom as a woman, and the Proverbs 31 woman bears a strong resemblance to this personified Woman Wisdom. Both are more valuable than jewels, and both provide protection, honor, and prosperity for those close to them. Multiple verses declare that wisdom begins with *the fear of the Lord*, and the Proverbs 31 woman is described as *a woman who fears the Lord*. Her wisdom is evident not only in this but in the myriad of good works she accomplishes on behalf of her family and those in need.

Situated at the end of the book of Proverbs, this passage can be read as a summary of the qualities of wisdom presented throughout the book. If we read the wife here as wisdom rather than the superhuman ideal she appears to be on the surface, then the passage has relevance for both the women and the men of the ancient Near East as well as for us today. By reading the wife as Woman Wisdom, the passage moves from being a message about women to addressing men as well. Rather than presenting an unreachable ideal of womanhood, Proverbs 31 tells us that wisdom is a gift that we must all continually seek and that our search for wisdom must begin with *the fear of the Lord*.

Our other readings reinforce and expand this Proverbs definition of wisdom. Like Proverbs, Psalm 1 utilizes figurative language to explain how the righteous demonstrate wisdom. They fear

the Lord and are like *trees planted by streams of water* that prosper.

In the two New Testament passages for today, wisdom is more concrete, but also more challenging to attain. In the passage from James, the author contrasts Godly wisdom with earthly wisdom. While earthly wisdom is characterized by *envy and selfish ambition*, Godly wisdom is *first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, and without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy*. This definition of wisdom sounds almost as difficult to attain as the description of the ideal wife in Proverbs 31. It's definitely more difficult than getting a high score on the ACT or GRE tests.

We all see much more earthly wisdom around us each day, than *wisdom from above*. We can turn on the TV to hear the *earthly wisdom* of politicians vying for a spot on their parties' next presidential ballot. If we get tired of that, we can turn on the radio to listen to a talk-show host scream at the foolishness of his callers. If we get tired of that, we can probably walk down the hall and hear someone we know criticize a fellow student or co-worker. And if we're honest, most days we recognize it coming out of our own mouths as well.

There's plenty of earthly wisdom around us, but we are less likely to find Godly wisdom like James describes—wisdom that is *willing to yield* and that is *without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy*. We don't see a lot of yielding in our contemporary world. In fact, much of our national identity hinges on our strength, on being the best—the world's number one superpower. We like to operate with our national muscles flexed most of the time. Individually we aren't much different. We avoid showing our weaknesses. When was the last time you caught yourself in a conversation of one-upmanship, trying to tell a better story or display greater wisdom than the other person? Seldom do we see our nation truly promote peace, gentleness, or mercy. And it's difficult not to be self-promoting ourselves.

It was this *wisdom from above* that silenced the disciples in our Gospel lesson for today. Jesus didn't make sense to them because they were caught up in earthly wisdom, in *envy and selfish ambition*. And what Jesus was telling them was so contrary to all that they knew that they didn't understand or know how to respond. What Jesus told them to do—welcome a child in his name—seems all nice and good for us today because we think of children as innocent and pure—that's why we trust them to take the offering—but for the disciples and for the broader culture in which they lived, a child had little value, a child was one of the *least of these*. That's why at other points in Scripture we see the disciples sending children away from Jesus. Like a wife, children were a man's property. They were dependent on their father for everything; they had little value on their own. So by picking up a child and holding it in his arms, Jesus demonstrated what he meant when he told them that the *first must be last of all and servant of all*. Jesus turned their concept of wisdom upside down.

It has been interesting, encouraging, and discouraging to watch how countries have responded to the influx of refugees from the Middle East to countries across Europe. Some have fortified barriers, others have opened their gates, and some have done both. Last week I read a five-page statement issued by the Free Methodist Church in Hungary regarding what is appropriately being called an "immigration crisis" there. In it they summarized the situation and provided concrete ways the local and global church can respond. They encouraged their "congregations and members to demonstrate the love of Christ by engaging in compassionate ministries directed toward immigrants of any kind, as well as other needy populations, either of their own initiative or in partnership with other like-minded organizations." Surely this is *wisdom from above*.

Despite fears and protests being publically voiced in Hungary that more immigrants will enter

than they can handle, or that the immigrants are law-breakers who shouldn't be helped, and or that the people coming in are ISIS, or Al-Quaeda, or Talliban terrorists, their statement affirmed: "We must not be afraid. We must do what is right. We must love as Jesus loved—the poor, the homeless, the lost, the sinner, the foreigner, and even the refugee."

Christians today disagree about a lot of things, even within the same church, but we all agree that Jesus is Lord. As Jim Reinhard so beautifully put it last week, the "Christian faith is not about Jesus, but about knowing Jesus." As we individually and corporately seek to know Jesus and to follow his example, how will we identify the *wisdom from above*? How will we separate it from our selfish desires to be greatest? How will we welcome the child? Let's begin by affirming what our sisters and brothers in Hungary affirmed in their statement: "We must love as Jesus loved—the poor, the homeless, the lost, the sinner, the foreigner, and even the refugee."

That will take all that we have. That will take more than we are. That will take knowing Jesus. May God grant us *wisdom from above* to see and to hear what this means for us here at St. Paul's and for us as individuals. May God grant us the wisdom to know both what we can do and what we should do. Amen.

Sources:

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