

Proper 20/Year B
Proverbs 31:10-31
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

The Capable Life

I want to start this morning with full disclosure: I am not a capable wife. I do not seek wool and flax except in a clothing store and when I do seek it, it is not to work it with willing hands. I do not of my own volition, rise up at night to provide food for my household, regardless of whether it comes from near or far, or to give tasks for my servant girls, which I will get to shortly. I really don't care all that much for gardening, so it is unlikely I will ever buy a field, let alone plant a vineyard.

My lamp does go off at night and my household is not clothed in crimson. I think it is against our CC and Rs. I don't make my own clothes, coverings, linen garments, or sashes. While wisdom and kindness are on my tongue from time to time, I have some consistency issues in that regard. I have been known to eat the bread of idleness. And like it.

As for servant girls, I do think it's possible I could be a more capable wife if I had some.

But, notwithstanding what I hope are the rather obvious and significant moral issues, let alone legal ones with having servant girls, my husband and I live in a townhouse and it's just not that big. There is no place for them to sleep. So we will never have servant girls.

By the standards of the lesson from Proverbs 31 we just heard, I have a long way to go before anyone will say I surpass all other wives.

Now, I take comfort in the thought there probably weren't any more Capable Wives back when it was written than there are now. The Book of Proverbs is considered by many to be a series of instructions for young people on how to live a good life, so the provisions of Proverbs 31 could be seen promoting an ideal as opposed to a realistic expectation any such woman would actually exist.

Accordingly some commentators believe this section from Proverbs, also entitled "The Poem on the Good Wife," should be looked at as an ode to strong, enterprising women, even if they were chattel. But at least the ideal is to aspire towards being good, smart and energetic chattel, rather than docile and frail chattel.

Others however see in it, the seeds of the impossible standards women had to live up, and have to live up to, in order to have value in a male dominated world. The woman's value is measured not by her own standards but rather by those of her husband and children.

It is easy to still see both interpretations at work in our own day. The wife described in it is smart, kind, creative, and entrepreneurial. All positive attributes and ones women, especially in the Western World, are often encouraged in.

But the shadow side of this of course, is to live as the wife described, would be to live in a state of constant exhaustion. One doesn't get the impression she gets much rest, let alone spa days. And frankly, she probably wouldn't be very easy to live with. We all know women like that. Many of us have been women like that. Human beings may be made in the image of God but we are not engineered for non-ceasing perfection.

However, there is another way to look at this particular passage, which can give us more balance. It requires we stand back and look at the book of Proverbs as a whole.

Chapter 1 states in the beginning, that its lessons are for “learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice and equity.”ⁱ The wisdom referred to in it, is a distinctly feminine voice.

Later on in Chapter 8, we hear “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice . . . [saying] ‘To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live . . . Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right.’”ⁱⁱ Wisdom then goes on to give lessons for living a faithful, holy life.

It is not until the very end of the book, we come to the passage we just heard read this morning, serving almost as an example, and still in the context of the feminine, of what following the teachings of Wisdom might look like and how living such a life can result in, not necessarily a perfect life, but one at least filled with blessings.

It is hyperbole, but hyperbole not meant as an absolute but rather meant to instruct. To show that not just the wife, but any of us who follow Wisdom’s instructions, may “share in the fruit of our hands.”

Of course, it is necessary to remember the wisdom we are talking about is not the wisdom born solely out of our human experience, because while there is value in such, it can also take us places God would rather we didn't go. The wisdom referred to is from God, and given to us by God. And it is so different because it can transform even the smallest thing we do, into something amazing.

The Capable Wife is not capable because of what she accomplishes but rather because she seeks God's wisdom in what she does do.

As Christians, we believe we are saved by grace, but the book of Proverbs illustrates how a life of faith, at least in terms of the day to day reality of our lives here on earth, is one in which God's wisdom and our works are meant to be intertwined. It is God's wisdom which helps give us, and the things we do, balance, context, and a reality check.

Which of course is the same message we also heard today in the letter of James. Wisdom and understanding are not in and of themselves demonstrated by fame, place, or prestige but rather by good works done in the spirit of gentleness, kindness, and mercy.

The most fantastic, and seemingly generous gesture done for purposes of personal glory and attention, in the long run will yield far smaller results than an act as seemingly small as saying a kind word to someone in passing, which can change the nature of not only that person's day for the better, but all those he or she comes into contact with, long into the future.

Wisdom compels us to look at not only what we do, but the reasons we do them.

And in order to find such true wisdom, James tells us to submit to God, to draw near to God and God in turn will draw near to us. And we do this not only by prayer and spending time with God, both of which are absolutely necessary, but also by and through our interactions with others.

Which in many respects, was what Jesus was telling his disciples when he admonished them to not focus on their status or standing in the Kingdom of God, but rather seek out and minister to the least of those among them, so they may come into the fold of his embrace and love.

It is in doing so, where they will find their true purpose, gain wisdom, and the works they do will have wonderful, profound consequences. And in this process they will both draw closer to God and God to them.

None of us, female or male will ever be Capable Wives, but to the extent we seek the wisdom God freely gives us, and allow that wisdom to guide, inspire and transform us, we can lead capable lives. Lives in which each of us, in our own way, will not only know what it means to abide in God, but also be able to show to a world clearly in need to good news, God is real, God is present and desires nothing less than all should know the loving embrace shown us in Jesus, the one in whom all these things, and so much more, are made possible.

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20 September 2009

ⁱ Proverbs 1:1-3 (NRSV).

ⁱⁱ Proverbs 8:1, 4, 6 (NRSV).