

A Well-Tempered Life

Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, 23 September 2018.

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

From the start let me admit to a turbulent relationship with the Woman from Proverbs 31.

As a good Christian girl growing up, I was taught to admire her. I understood that my value would derive chiefly from marriage. I was told to be like this woman so that someday my husband and my children would rise up and call me blessed.

As I grew older, I realized women have value apart from marriage and children. I dismissed the woman from Proverbs 31 and the fascination with her as a product of patriarchy past and present.

As things turned out, I was blessed with a good marriage, and two fascinating kids, and a fulfilling work life. Like the woman in Proverbs 31, I had it all. And it nearly killed me. In that season in life when I struggled to balance demands of work and parenting, I resented the woman from Proverbs 31. She became a symbol of the unrealistic expectations placed on many women by ourselves and by others.

I have not thought much about her for years. But she came up in the lectionary this week. The scriptures we read each Sunday in our church are assigned to us, which invites us to deal with passages we might otherwise avoid. In thinking about the Proverbs 31 woman all week, I've realized I need to give her another chance.

The earlier verses in the chapter make it clear that these are the words of a king's mother searching for a wife for her son. This is a mother-in-law's wish list.

And given the times, the way this woman is described is striking. She is not expected to be charming because charm is deceitful. There is no mention of appearance because beauty is vain. She has business savvy. She considers a field and buys it. Her value does not derive from others but from her strength and wisdom and generosity.

It turns out this woman from Proverbs has suffered from mistranslation. The version we read today says "a capable wife," which is a fair reading. Other versions call her worthy or good. The very first English translation by Wycliff was closer to the Hebrew. That version called her strong. The Hebrew word describing her occurs 233 times in the Bible. When used as a noun, it means an army.

For some reason, translators working on the King James Version of the Bible in the early 1600's twisted the meaning a bit. When they saw this word as a noun, they translated it army. When they saw it describing a man they translated it as strong or valiant. But on the four occasions in

the scriptures when this word describes a woman they translated it virtuous and the name stuck. Though most modern translations call her capable or worthy many people still think of the woman from Proverbs 31 as the Virtuous Woman.

There is nothing wrong with being virtuous. Virtue requires great strength of character. All people should strive to be virtuous. But in the King James era, the kind of virtue assigned to women had to do with being meek and gentle and chaste. Rather than listen to the text, the translators of the King James Version listened to their own biases. They thought women should be quiet and submissive rather than forceful and brave. So rather than call her an army, they called her virtuous.

Imagine with me how the present moment might be different if the translators had listened to the text 400 years ago. What if women had been taught for the last 400 years that the Bible told them to be strong?

This mistranslation did a disservice to the woman in Proverbs and to women in general. But it was also a disservice to the word virtue. Virtue also has a fascinating history. It comes from Latin and originally meant simply being a man. Over time it came to mean qualities associated with the ideal man, and eventually the ideal human.

Aristotle and Plato lifted up four cardinal virtues of prudence, courage, temperance, and justice. Christian thinkers later added the virtues of faith, hope, and love mentioned in Paul's writings. The catechism of the Roman Catholic Church celebrated these seven virtues as the opposite of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Of course, there are more than seven virtues, and there are more than seven sins. We could add to both lists. But the seven classic virtues are helpful reminders of the goal. They remind us of what is possible. The texts we are reading over the next weeks happen to provide good illustrations of all seven. So beginning today and over the next several weeks I'm inviting us into a Bible study on virtue.

The message seems timely to me. I don't know about you, but I grow weary of seeing the less than ideal in human behavior. I grow weary of hearing how low human beings can go. We need reminders of who we can be.

So, while we could consider several virtues in the example of the woman from Proverbs, I want us to turn our attention briefly to the other lessons and consider the virtue of temperance.

Temperance is the ability to hold back. The word got associated with the anti-alcohol movement in the 1800's. Abuse of alcohol was harming people, so well-intentioned folks began to encourage moderation. Over time, the movement became an abstinence movement and then a prohibition movement, but that's not what temperance means.

Temperance looks more like this. At one point in my piano lessons I learned some pieces from J. S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. The clavier is a keyboard instrument like a piano. At the time,

I assumed the title “Well-Tempered” meant happy music, but I was wrong. The phrase refers to the way the instrument was tuned. Then and now to tune a piano the strings are held in perfect tension – not too tight and not too loose, just right to produce the right sound. That’s temperance.

James described the lack of temperance and its results. *Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?*

In the gospel lesson, the disciples were mired in one of those conflicts and disputes. They all wanted to be the greatest. It was not enough to be part of the blessed community gathered around Jesus. Each wanted to be the best disciple, the first, the favorite.

Had each disciple sincerely hoped to be as faithful as he could be with no comparison to others, Jesus would not have needed to offer a teaching moment. Striving for excellence was not the problem. The problem was wanting to be more excellent than everyone else. They imagined life as a ladder with some on top and others below. Each one wanted to be above the rest.

Those cravings at war within us that James described are so often about being first. We want to be first in possessions, so we buy more than we need. We want to be first in intellect, so we argue and put others down and refuse to listen. We want to be first to know or first to tell so we participate in gossip. The mistranslation of Proverbs 31 was about putting men first before women and that has reaped all manner of strife. James was right. “Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.”

So Jesus, in love, tempered this drive to ambition. For our own good, he put reverse tension on the wire. *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.* Temper that drive to get ahead at all costs. Temper that desire to be the greatest because it is fruitless. There is no first. There is no last. The ladder we so often climb is an illusion because we all stand on the same ground.

And to illustrate the point, he invited them to welcome a child. The word is actually closer to hold. To hold a child you have to get on the child’s level. Kneeling eye to eye with a preschooler we see we are all children of the one God who made us. No first. No last. All one.

Jesus invited disciples then and disciples now to let go of the drive to be the greatest. We know from the scriptures that they didn’t learn this right away. They had to practice. Likewise, I couldn’t play any of those pieces from the Well-Tempered Clavier at first. I had to practice. And we, too, have to practice temperance. It doesn’t come naturally to us. Boasting and extravagance are easy. Moderation and restraint are hard. We have to practice holding back in a world that loves excess and power. We have to practice letting go of the drive to be the greatest and just be glad to be. It takes strength to practice the virtue of temperance.

But the result is the beautiful music of a well-tempered life that plays the song God gives us to play without drowning out the songs of others. And that is what God wants to hear.

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A couple of study resources influenced this sermon. An article by David Lose pointed out the counter-cultural nature of the description of the woman in Proverbs 31.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/what-the-bible-says-and-d_b_1898813.html

Another blog post mentioned the discrepancies in translation in the King James, which I looked up in a Hebrew concordance just to be sure. <https://www.unveiling.org/Articles/women.html>

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