



Wisdom Woman

September 19, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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O Lord: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. (Psalm 19.14)

Today would be a good day to celebrate Mother's Day.

Fortunately, it's not Mother's Day, because the passage from the Book of Proverbs this morning, in the middle of September, gives us a welcome chance to ponder for a bit the meaning of motherhood and womanhood on a day when it's not demanded by the Hallmark Card-Industrial Complex.

Although, as we move through the first weeks of the school year, it is an appropriate moment to express our gratitude for and appreciation of mothers as they kick start the machine by which school clothes are bought, vaccinations brought up to date, lunches plans provided for, text-books procured, backpacks purchased, carpools worked out, opening day jitters soothed, permission slips completed, and perform the unpaid, psychic labor of countless women in making sure that these, and other essential, seasonal tasks are accomplished.

First, a brief bit of context on this passage about Wisdom Woman. The Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible is just after the Book of Psalms and just before the book of Ecclesiastes. We have a psalm every Sunday, so we know what that is. And most of us know the part of Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, which begins, "There is a time for everything, a time to be born, a time to die..." We may know it from the 1965 hit by the Byrds: "To Everything, Turn, Turn, Turn." These books are part of a broader category of Biblical literature called wisdom literature. We might define wisdom literature as texts—maxims, sayings, aphorisms, poems, riddles, and the like— which arise out the rich experience of, and reflection upon, human life, in light of God's providential care.

Some of the more familiar sayings that come from the Book of Proverbs are: Trust the Lord with all your heart, lean not unto your own understanding (3.5-6); The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (9.10); Spare the rod spoil the child. (13.24)

The proverbial form is not limited to the Book of Proverbs. Jesus also uses proverbial phrases in his teaching: Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you (Matthew 7.12); Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself (Matthew 6.34); Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's; render unto God that which is God's (Mark 12.17); Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone (John 8.7)

This morning's passage, which comes at the very end of the Book of Proverbs, is a summation of the preceding 30 chapters, which include chapters 8 and 9, full of personifications of Wisdom as a woman. We heard from Wisdom last week as well. A woman is chosen to be the final and chief embodiment of Wisdom, displaying virtues that epitomize Wisdom, adding strength to the interpretation that she is Wisdom herself, and that the pursuit of Wisdom is the highest human calling.



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First, in the first line, it's important to note that "capable" is a rather limp translation of the underlying Hebrew word. Taken with the noun for woman, a more accurate translation would be a "strong woman," a "woman of worth," even "a warrior-like woman." ([Feasting on the Word](#), volume 4B, p. 75)

Now, if you are a woman, it seems to me you would be forgiven for seeing in this portrait an impossible ideal. You might roll your eyes and think to yourself, "When does this superwoman rest? I do enough as it is." Or you might think to yourself, "That's me. And I never get to rest." As one scholar notes, this woman is working hard everywhere, on everything, for everyone, from dawn to dusk. For a generation of women who have taken on more roles and responsibilities than ever before and yet still report never feeling like they've done enough, this ideal is not just unattainable, but also can be demoralizing.

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

On the other hand, while overall the Bible is resolutely patriarchal, here are some things this passage *doesn't* say. First, while it happens that the passage says that this woman is a wife, it does *not* say that she derives her worth and value from her husband.

Second, while it says she is a good mother, it doesn't say anything about pregnancy or childbirth, often key credentials for womanhood in the ancient world, and still in our own world in many quarters.

Nowhere does it say that her *primary* purpose is to bear children.

Third, the passage doesn't say anything about her appearance—her shape, her weight, whether she has wrinkles or not, whether she needs a makeover or a new outfit. In fact, in verse 30, the text says that beauty is in vain. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/what-the-bible-says-and-d_b_1898813.html

In a culture obsessed with appearance, especially with the appearance of women, highlighting Wisdom Woman's skills, competencies, and achievements is an important takeaway not just for women and daughters, but for men and our sons as well.

And, as the father of a 16-year-old daughter, it's the emphasis on excellence and achievement in this passage, rather than on a narrow, culturally confining definition of external beauty that I want to hold up. Furthermore, a passage like this can be heard not as one more impossible ideal to live up to, but rather as an invitation from God to imagine and know that we all have worth in and of ourselves, that women and girls can do anything they set their minds on, but they don't have to be perfect, and that their value rests in their character and accomplishments, and in God's love, because we are defined not by what we do, but by who we are, and that is God's beloved children. That is what defines us, not the glow from the latest skin product.

So, on this "not Mother's Day," when we lift up women, let's remember this Wisdom Woman, who reminds us of what we need to know.

Amen.