

MARRY WISDOM
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September 20, 2009
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Proverbs 31:10-33

A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.

The final chapter of the Old Testament book of *Proverbs* surprises us with a rhapsody to the ideal wife. Considering that the book is mainly a collection of aphorisms, maxims and pithy sayings, you have to wonder: where did this “Rhapsody (or Accolade) to the Ideal Wife” come from? Why is *that* the concluding chapter of a book of proverbs?

A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.

Allow me to interrupt myself before someone else does. And let me say it before someone else does: If a *capable wife* is so hard to find, imagine how hard it must be to find a *capable husband*. There! I’ve said it! But I digress.

A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

There’s a lot more to this lesson but I think I’d better stop there before certain women reach for tomatoes or scurry for the exit. For I know that in this era enlightened by feminism, I am about to enter where angels fear to tread. I am going to take on the biblical “Rhapsody to a Capable Wife.” But first let me hasten to add, it’s a *so-called* Capable Wife.

True: this glowing tribute has been read at countless funerals upon the death of a mother or wife known for extraordinary grit and grace. With good and sincere intention it has been recited to praise stellar women and—wittingly or unwittingly—to confine them *by such praise* to a role of servility to husband and children. This rhapsody to the so-called “Capable Wife” can be read and heard that way.

I read it at my own mother’s funeral before I knew what I now know about it. And I would read it again but in a different way.

Proverbs 31 is not necessarily an accolade to a particular wife, a particular woman or even women in general. Rather, it may be heard as a *personification* of Wisdom *as a wife*. “Wife” in this case is a metaphor for that to which anyone—male or female, young or old—marries or joins their soul, their being.

The capable wife is “more precious than jewels,” we are told right at the beginning of the accolade, which is exactly how “wisdom” is introduced at the

beginning of the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs chapter 3. *Happy are those who find wisdom for her income is better than silver and gold. She is more precious than jewels and nothing you desire can compare with her. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her.* "The tree of life," as cited in Psalm 1, is also a classic metaphor for the way of wisdom.

There are more clues that this is not about an actual woman right on the surface of the text itself. Notice that the woman portrayed in this rhapsody is hardly *conventional* by traditional patriarchal standards. She is outspoken, she is savvy at economics, she buys and sells property, she assists the poor, and she is strong as a warrior. Ellen Davies, Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke Divinity School, refers to this woman as the *Woman of Valor* since the word for "woman" and "wife" in Hebrew is the same and the word translated "capable" also means "strong and excellent."

In any case, the so-called "capable wife," which is to say *wisdom*, works hard everywhere, on everything, and for everybody, from dawn to dusk. She doesn't spend time cultivating cosmetic charm and beauty. Her grace and beauty is deep. Her piety, which is to say her deep reverence for God, doesn't remove her from the ordinary, mundane things of life. She is fully and deeply engaged in every aspect of the material world. She is earthy. She is practical. She is resourceful.

The book of Proverbs is a compendium of aphorisms and sayings designed to be memorized and held in the heart as one navigates the treacherous terrain of life. Here is a sampler:

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. And, better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice.

Desire without knowledge is not good and one who moves too hurriedly misses the way.

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

Even a fool who remains silent is considered wise. In other words: shut up and leave people in doubt. Speak up and you may remove all doubt!

And one more: pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.

These kinds of insights are reflected in today's gospel lesson in Mark (9:30-37). *Want to be great*, said Jesus. *Be childlike*. Jesus, as it turns out, was more deeply influenced by the wisdom aspect of his Jewish tradition than the temple and animal sacrifice aspects. More on that in the weeks to come.

The *Book of Proverbs* begins as instructions from a mother and father to a young son about to journey out into the world. With some modifications we can easily include daughters in these life lessons. Be alert, my child. There are two ways to follow. One leads to life; the other to death. The first few chapters present *the two ways as two women*: Lady Wisdom and Madam Folly. That's not unique to this book. Poets of every era use personifications for many abstract notions.

As the child, or young soul, goes out into the world he or she will encounter all kinds of options and decisions including moral dilemmas. *How will anyone know what to do?* Answer: by heeding Wisdom's call, by listening to the deep voice of Wisdom within creation. Wisdom (*Chochma* in Hebrew; *Sophia* in Greek), we are told in chapter 8, was with the Maker in the beginning and delighted in the world as it unfolded. By the way, the Gospel of John (1:1) introduces Jesus as the incarnation of the "Word with God from the beginning," which is to say, the embodiment of Wisdom.

Wisdom, you see, is at the heart and foundation of our own souls. But we must listen to her voice just as we listen to the voice of Jesus—which is nearly one and the same.

In the world the soul will be lured and enticed in many directions but they boil down to two ways—the way of wisdom and the way of folly; the way of life and the way of death.

Our recently departed friend Harvey Kercheval liked to cite God's admonition from the book of Deuteronomy. God says to the children of Israel: *I have set before you this day life and death. Choose life.* Harvey pointed out that God was afraid the children wouldn't figure out which to choose: life or death. So God yells out: **CHOOSE LIFE!**

As the *Book of Proverbs* unfolds, Lady Wisdom and Madam Folly spot the child or soul wandering through the streets and extend invitations to enter the house each has built. Wisdom, we are told, has built her house. She has hewn her seven pillars. She calls out to the young: *come be with me.* Meanwhile, Madam Folly lounges on her porch offering enticing morsels of her own.

It's time to choose. To what will you marry your soul?

Proverbs 31:10-33 [Translation by Rabbi Rami Shapiro in *The Divine Feminine*]

A Woman of Valor, who is worthy of her? Her value is far beyond pearls. She guides your heart and through Wisdom her household flourishes. She repays kindness with kindness and is never driven by revenge. She buys wool and flax, and works cheerfully in her house. She fills herself with Wisdom from far-off lands, like a merchant ship laden with treasure

She rises early to attend to her household, her family, and her servants. She plans her expenditures with care; She buys land and plants a vineyard. She is a tower of strength, her arms strong and secure. She devotes herself to what is useful; and lets nothing snuff out her lamp. She reaches for the spinning wheel, and cradles the spindle in her palm. She opens her hands to the poor, and her arms to embrace the needy.

She fears no winter, for she has clothed her household in scarlet wool. She makes for herself glorious bedspreads; and dresses of fine linen and purple wool.

She counsels her husband and her knowledge makes him wise among the elders. She weaves cloth, and sells cloaks and belts to peddlers. She adorns herself with dignity, and is not afraid of the truth. Her speech is full of Wisdom, her tongue teaches human kindness. She anticipates the needs of her household, and does not eat the bread of laziness.

Each morning her children feel blessed, her husband praises: *There are many wonderful women, but you surpass them all.* Do not be taken in by grace and beauty alone; praise only the woman who devotes herself to God. The way she lives is evidence of her integrity; Her whole life is a testament to her goodness.