

B Lectionary 25 9.22.24
Proverbs 31:10-31; Mark 9:30-37
Focus Statement: God is in the ordinary

“A capable wife who can find?” This is one of those questions where tone matters, so let’s start by framing this Proverbs reading a bit. Proverbs 31 is the last chapter of the book of Proverbs. The first nine chapters, part of which we read last week, and this chapter, provide the framework for all the wisdom within it. Last week we heard Wisdom personified as a woman, this week we get this hymn of praise for a capable woman. The Hebrew here is *eshet khayil*. *Khayil* is the same word translated as strength in verse three and as excellence or noble in verse twenty-nine. So another, maybe better translation is not “a capable wife” but “a woman of valor.” A woman of valor, a woman of bravery, of courage, of fearless ingenuity, who can find?

Here’s something else fun about this poem that we lose in the English translation. This “Ode to a Woman of Valor” is in its original Hebrew, and acrostic poem, one of those poems where each line starts with a letter that spells a word, or, in this case, forms the alphabet. So in Hebrew the first line starts A, then B, and so on. Acrostic poems are frequently used in scripture, like today, as teaching tools. This poem, this hymn is a teaching tool, to teach young men on the cusp of adulthood how to notice and praise the work and accomplishments of his wife. Verses eleven and twelve make that clear, a man should honor, value, and trust his wife the way the wise honor, value, and trust God. In the Orthodox Jewish tradition, men sing this hymn to their wives on the eve of the Sabbath in praise and appreciation of her. Which is beautiful. Remember a few weeks ago the hearts I passed out where we were supposed to write something we love about someone and share

it with them? This poem is a formal version of that. And thus far this has all been very gendered because language is binary, but the world's not. Time to extoll the virtues of others is a good reminder for all people. I was remarking to Travis the other night how much nicer he is to me than I can be to him. When I am irrationally worried about something, he is calm and kind. When he is irrationally worried about something, I tease him. I could certainly be improved by a more regular recitation of "A capable Travis, who can find..."

This is a poem about seeing the gifts and values of another, and I do this breakdown because that's not always how it gets read. It gets read as a checklist of all the things one must accomplish, women must accomplish, in order to be worthy of praise. To quote theologian Rachel Held Evans, "'No longer presented as a song through which a man offers his wife praise, Proverbs 31 is presented as a task list through which the woman earns it. . . . We turned an anthem into an assignment.'" We turned an anthem into an assignment. Woof, this cuts. Instead of looking for the good actions of myself and others, how often do I, I'll speak for myself here, feel free to insert yourself if it feels applicable, how often do I try to measure myself and others against some impressive checklist. But since when is that how the God who, upon the creation of each and every thing, looked upon that thing and said, "this is good," ever looked at us. Says Evans, the most faithful use of Proverbs 31 is not as an unattainable standard we must reach in order to be worthy of praise, but as an example of how much in our lives and work is already worthy of praise.

Notice how the things lifted up for praise in Proverbs 31 are not massive, overwhelming tasks either. The woman in this poem didn't solve world hunger, cure cancer, win a Super Bowl, run a Fortune 500 company, or serve in high office. She loved and cared for her family, worked hard at her job, spoke kindly, cared for the poor. She did simple, beautiful, and important acts of the sort that never appear on the front of any magazine, never go viral, never get picked up as a news story, but make the lives of those around her better for her having done them. As Jesus demonstrated to his disciples when he pulled a child into their midst and spoke of those who welcomed such a child also welcomed him, greatness is found in simple acts of caring.

We're dedicating the Bill and Millie Sullivan Memorial Garden after worship today, and thinking about Bill and Millie got me reflecting on all the simple acts of greatness, all the ways that one might ask the question, a Bill and Millie of valor who can find? I remembered all the afternoons I came across Bill, John, and Ellis peering intently into the engine of a lawn mower, Millie sitting quietly in a car in the shade nearby. Bill and Millie at the Franklin Food Pantry, Millie in the kitchen for Family Camp. One of my strongest memories of Bill, one that has shaped my own ministry, is walking down the hall to the social hall with Bill one Sunday, on our way to a meeting to discuss something we wanted to do for mission. I don't remember what exactly, letting some group use the space, maybe an expensive repair for an outside partner, it's doesn't matter. What matters is it was something I was concerned wasn't going to be very popular, and as we were walking down the hallway, I remember Bill turning to me and saying, "I guess it's good we're having this meeting. It's

good to talk about stuff. But I don't know why it's necessary. The Bible says we're supposed to love everyone and share what we have, so that's that. We should just do that."

Proverbs 31 invites us to reflect on the people in our lives who have taught us through living lives of ordinary greatness. Greatness, faithfulness, is the kindness we show to each other. I am blessed to see so much ordinary greatness in this congregation in the way you care for each other, showing up in simple acts of care and service. And so, I invite you this week to sing this anthem of praise to those in your lives who demonstrate this sort of Proverbs 31 valor and capableness. To reference Rachel Held Evans again, some of her friends reported that for years, when someone in her life accomplished any task from getting a new job or publishing a book to successfully ordering a pizza to feed their family, confronting injustice, or remembering to pick up the dry cleaning, Rachel would exclaim, "woman of valor!" Because, she would remind them, there is valor—bravery, courage, and strength—in our simple, ordinary actions.

Sing this anthem of praise for others, and also let it challenge you to live a life of simple greatness. See it not as a checklist of things to do, but a list of options, of possibilities, of ways you might choose to improve the lives of those around you. Maybe you're not much of a weaver—in case you're not familiar, I had to google it, distaff and spindle are tools used for spinning yarn by hand, maybe you're a lawn mower, like Bill, or you garden, like Millie. Maybe you make coffee, or send affirming texts, or greet people with a smile and a kind word. All of these and more are ways of living lives of valor.

Dear people of God, your greatness, abilities, achievements, and accomplishments have no impact on your value in the eyes of God. Proverbs 31 is not a checklist to make God or others value you, “greatness” was not how Jesus measured his disciples. This poem is anthem not assignment, it is affirmation and invitation, it is a challenge to live as fully as we can into the people God knows us to be. People of valor. Thanks be to God, who loves us as we are. Amen.