

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20) – Year B – September 23, 2009 - Homily
Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3,7-8a; Mark 9:30-37
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Did tonight's reading from Proverbs remind anyone else of a kind of Martha Stewart wonder-woman combo on steroids? "Good Lord," I said after I read it, "how on earth could any woman live up to this description?" Well, you know, words to that effect anyway! Fortunately, God heard my prayer, and sent me some help to get a better idea of who this formidable woman is and how she does everything so effortlessly and graciously, whilst maintaining her gentle sense of humor, and all without even a hint of PMS!

As you might remember when we last looked at one of the readings from Proverbs, we have an overall theme of God's wisdom and humanity's folly. The "capable wife" described for us in tonight's reading is an excellent testament to God's view of men and woman as different, but equal, in witnessing to God's love and grace. She is also a woman of strength, rather like the wise men described elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs. The ideal woman described in this passage is clearly wealthy, and has considerable independence in her interactions with others, venturing into the world of business and even buying property. In today's world that doesn't sound unusual, until we consider that woman in ancient times were not usually accorded such status or respect. According to the societal norms of the day, for the most part women were considered little more than property. Obviously, that doesn't quite match what God has to say about the dignity and equality of both women and men, and how to encourage and support one another. Reading between the lines, we can see how our relationships are transformed by God's wisdom to reflect mutual trust and support.

This ideal woman embodies all the virtues of a life well lived. She is a woman who fears the Lord, and is therefore filled with awe of God. She spends her time in service to God living with integrity, energy and industry, creativity and compassion. The question of the first line "A capable wife who can find?" gives us a clue that the description is an ideal of righteous living, that likely far exceeds our individual ability to fulfill in all respects. That's also important and part of the message here: our individual abilities versus the radical mutuality of the Body of Christ. Bookended with the penultimate sentence, the ideal woman is not praised for her 'doing'. She is rather, praised for her faithfulness. Despite the cultural pressures that many women face today to be some kind of superwoman, often working full time, raising children, and caring for elderly parents amongst what seem to be a million other things, the key to a faithful life is balance, not working ourselves to exhaustion.

As we just saw, one of the teachings from Proverbs is that no single individual could do all that this woman of virtue achieves. This woman is the ideal wife of strength. As God reveals in Scripture, Jesus came to prepare the whole world to be His bride. The Body of Christ is the living embodiment of the ideal wife described in Proverbs. That is you, me, this community of faith, and the whole church working together in the world, sharing our gifts to the glory of God's name. Just as our faith in Christ touches every aspect of our lives – family and work, business and politics, as well as how we choose to spend our leisure time and our money – this ideal woman's faith informs and guides every facet of her life. It is the work of the whole community of Christ's body to be a witness to the world for Christ, growing and expanding the kingdom of God. God's community of love and grace thrives where there is mutual empowerment, respect and support. With God at the center of our lives, we become subversive counter-cultural agents inspiring goodness and generosity, and God blesses the fruit of our work.

Embedded in the reading itself is yet another hint of God's intent for all of our lives. In the original Hebrew, this portion of Proverbs is an acrostic poem. The first word of each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The whole is in alphabetical order, and conveys all the benefits of one who chooses to seek God's Wisdom. It is like the A to Z of a life of integrity and obedience to God. The analogy of seeking God's Wisdom, is that of a diligent search for a capable wife. There are many ways we can see that making a decision for God in Christ Jesus is, first of all, like choosing a life partner, and then making moment by moment decisions to faithfully maintain our relationship with devotion and trust. As we follow the poem's progress there is a comprehensive orderliness about a life filled with Wisdom that draws the admiration and praise of others. It is a life of intentionality, empowered by God, and extending beyond hearth and home into the world around us.

One of the biggest challenges of daily life is keeping the Lord front and center in all we do. Matters of faith and religion have long since been relegated from the public sphere to the private and individual realm. That means that living our faith in the world on a daily basis, especially at work or anywhere outside of church or home has become more and more challenging. Here's a simple example and something to think about. No show of hands or anything is necessary. How many of us are shy about saying grace before a meal at home? Now, does our answer change when the question becomes one of saying grace before a meal at a restaurant? Intellectually, I'm sure we all know that there is no shame in thanking God for all our blessings, especially for a good meal in a world filled with hunger. But I think we can agree, it is a measure of how culturally indoctrinated we have become when we are even a little uncomfortable thanking God for anything in a public place. This is not to even mention how you and I respond when we have the opportunity to share with someone else a story or two about how Jesus has changed our lives. More often than not, the reality is that practicing our faith in the broader context of daily life is much easier said than done.

The good news is that there is truth in the old proverb that actions speak louder than words. St. Francis is attributed with this saying, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words." Faithful service to the Lord requires discernment and obedience to God's call, and our daily surrender of self for the sake of God and our neighbor. Working ourselves into burnout has never been part of God's plan. As spectacular as any comic book superhero's deeds may appear, even he or she is only doing what they are gifted to do. In faithful service, God does not ask more, or less, of you and me, in order to 'be' and 'do' our own part in building up the Body of Christ to the glory of God's name.

Amen.