

Call Her Happy

Candidating Sermon for First Congregational UCC Appleton
September 19, 2021

Friends, let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth, may the meditations of every heart be acceptable in your sight, you who are our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

So this is it. The trial sermon. As if it isn't already too late – as if I haven't already fallen head over heels in love with this congregation. This is the way of things. When Pastor Steve let me know that this was it – September 19th – was my opportunity to preach officially as a candidate for the called position of pastor for mission and congregational care, I reacted like a real nerd and raced to check the lectionary. What gift might present itself in the recommended preaching texts for this day? And then I saw it. Proverbs 31. And I laughed and laughed because God is nothing if not sometimes darkly funny. Hear and listen for the Word of God:

Proverbs 31:10-31

- ¹⁰ A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
- ¹¹ The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.
- ¹² She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.
- ¹³ She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.
- ¹⁴ She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.
- ¹⁵ She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls.
- ¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
- ¹⁷ She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.
- ¹⁸ She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.
- ¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
- ²⁰ She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.
- ²¹ She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.
- ²² She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.
- ²³ Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.
- ²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.
- ²⁵ Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.
- ²⁶ She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
- ²⁷ She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.
- ²⁸ Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her:
- ²⁹ “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”
- ³⁰ Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
- ³¹ Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.

This is also the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You might be thinking – good grief, just preach on the Mark passage! Proverbs 31 is a little like feminist preacher kryptonite. I've been completely unsubtle with y'all about the fact that my faith is shaped by feminist and womanist theology, and this passage from Proverbs 31 is among those scriptures that gets co-opted for the purposes of furthering an agenda rather than the love of God, contributing to a type of Christianity that is most interested in keeping people in their places, keeping women especially in a place determined by people who are very much not God. So perhaps wisdom would indeed recommend just steering clear of this Proverbial wife... at least today.

But, wise or not, I'm going in. Because really, I'm delighted to preach on the capable wife, her mysteries and just what she is doing.... Here.

There is beauty in this passage, there is good in this, there is grace in this, because it's so much more than we've let it become – centuries of cramming this “capable wife” into some sort of domesticity box, as if the ancient Israelites were writing about 1950's middle American housewives. Hebrew scholar and theologian Professor Wil Gafney reminds us, dividing the world into domestic and public spheres is a modern convention, and not one that would've meant anything to the original audience.

Yet the patriarchy is strong in many interpretations of this passage, contributing to a theology that supports gender disparity and perpetuates actual harm. This woman is up on one heck of a pedestal, like some sort of pre-Christian influencer. I bet she wakes up with flawless hair too. I don't know what ancient Hebrew for “girlboss” is but a shallow reading of this text would let us think that's exactly what the capable wife is all about. Some impossible idea of a woman, too perfect to be human.

She is presumably married, of course, but her greatness does not come through her husband, nor is she defined by her relationship with him. The fact that her children call her happy implies that, sure, she has kids, but being a mother isn't the source of her greatness either. Rachel Held Evans, the modern theologian, gone from us far too soon, put it this way, that this passage from proverbs is misused “as a way of reducing womanhood to marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, when really, this passage is about character that transcends both gender and circumstance. She goes on to write “As a poem, Proverbs 31 should not be interpreted prescriptively as a job description for all women. Its purpose is to celebrate wisdom-in-action, not to instruct women everywhere to get married, have children, and take up the loom.” This woman is doing absolutely everything. She's all verbs – she seeks, she buys, she provides, she makes, considers, girds, perceives, she rises. She's not obeying anybody, but rather choosing and acting on her own generative agency.

And yet somehow, none of this defines her. It's not her looks, her relationships, not even all the work she does for everybody around her that makes her capable, and happy. When you tease apart the different translations of this passage, she changes, this kaleidoscopic woman. A capable wife is alternatively translated as “peaceful wife”, or, a new, personal favorite of mine, “a woman of warrior strength”, or “a woman of valor”. That last, woman of valor, comes from the Hebrew “eshet chavil”, the highest form of praise. She is, in a word, extraordinary. Not because of what she does. But because of who she is.

Valor, you see, is about character. It's about wisdom. It's great courage in the face of danger, and it's about who you are regardless of who's in the room. It is the content of your character, nobility in the dark and courage when no one is watching. When I consider valor, the most courageous ways

of being, I think of the Joy Harjo poem “For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet”, the part where she writes:

Call your spirit back. It may be caught in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse.

You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return.

Speak to it as you would to a beloved child.

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

The greatness, the blessedness, the excellence of this woman of valor is in her gathered and beloved soul, from which stems the joy that empowers her ways of being in the world. What if the same could be said of ... the church? Of us?

Elsewhere in the Bible, scripture talks of the church in marital terms - as the bride of Christ. Perhaps the church is – could be - not valorous for all the accomplishments in the world, all the collections taken and the classes offered and the missions fulfilled, but because Christ called the church into being and made her good. And only because of this, she is able to put so much good into the world. I think we get a bit caught up in our programs and achievements in busy church communities, but maybe our divine gift, our valor, our peace, is rooted instead in the life God gives us and it is from that wellspring that we flourish and can nourish the world around us.

A capable church, who can find? A church of valor, the beloved community. She is far more precious than jewels.

- ¹¹ The heart of Christ trusts in her, and will have no lack of gain.
- ¹² The church does good, and not harm, all the days of their life.
- ¹³ The church, she seeks the lost and lonely, the unloved and the unpredictable, and works with willing hands.
- ¹⁴ The church, he is like the ships of the merchant, moving throughout the world, seeking out those who need refuge and becoming their welcome and way to a new home.
- ¹⁵ Her doors never lock, for the church is the church is the church, no matter the time of day or night. She provides food for her community, letting not one neighbor go to bed hungry. Not ever.
- ¹⁶ She considers and invests in her community; stewarding what she has and turning it into something even better, planting and growing and nurturing the life of those around her.
- ¹⁷ She stands firm in the truth of her faith, and does not back down from seeking justice. He is fair and righteous before he is nice. She is merciful before she is polite.
- ¹⁸ The church of valor knows that her work is worthy and good, and rises above the din of the world. Her lamp does not go out at night.
- ¹⁹ The church puts her hands to the hard, daily work of building community, and her hands hold the door open, the full serving ladle, the wheelbarrow of produce to deliver to the food pantry.
- ²⁰ They opens their hand to the poor, and reach out their hands to the needy.
- ²¹ The church is not afraid for herself when the storms come or the plague rages, for her truth outlasts any storm and every disease.

- ²² The church makes himself beautiful; not out of shallowness or vanity but because he exists to celebrate his beloved.
- ²³ Christ is known in the city gates, preaching of love that is wiser than hate, and beauty that is stronger than discord.
- ²⁴ The church makes beautiful offerings to the community; she gives people what they need, not what she wants them to have. She puts their health and wholeness far ahead of her own ease.
- ²⁵ Strength and dignity are their clothing, and the church laughs at the time to come. They are unafraid.
- ²⁶ She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
- ²⁷ She looks well to the ways of her congregation, and knowing they cannot eat the bread of idleness, that they are called to be so much more than self-contained or self-congratulatory.
- ²⁸ The church of valor's children know they are welcome first to the table, that they are beloved and held safely in her arms, and they rise up and call her happy;
- ²⁹ "Many churches have done excellently, but the church of valor surpasses them all."
- ³⁰ Slick programming can be deceitful, and the battle of the best praise band is vain, but a church who knows who she is in the eyes of God - is to be praised.
- ³¹ Give her your life, and see what she can do.

My friends, a capable church I have found. Or you found me. Or better yet, God gave us to each other.

So let us rise up and let them call us happy. Amen.

Sermon preached by Reverend Dr. Laurie Lyter Bright at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
Sunday, September 19, 2021 at 9:30 AM