

Sermon, St. David's, September 9/19/21, Proverbs 31:10-31 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

“A capable wife who can find?”

We are currently trying to trim time from our services in compliance with the latest diocesan guidance, which means not using all four Sunday Eucharistic readings. I was sorely tempted this morning to skip the Proverbs reading, because that translation makes me want to brain myself with a brick. “A capable wife who can find?”

“Capable wife” is a pathetic translation from the Hebrew. That’s not just my opinion, it’s true. I am ashamed of the New Revised Standard Version for this translation. “Woman of valor” is much better and more accurate. A lot of the language in this proverb evokes war, but translators domesticated it. Valorous, not capable.

Militaristic language, of course, can be problematic. Some of us used such language when we battled and continue to fight cancer. Those militaristic words cause controversy in the cancer community. Some of this is because with battles, we talk about winning and losing, and none of us wants to feel like we “lost” a battle with cancer.

But for me personally, the language comforted me and made me feel strong at a time when I was physically weakened by chemicals and treatments and having parts of my body removed. Gary encouraged me to see my scars not as deformities but as battle wounds. We talked about the “impressive” seven-inch scar on my back that part of my lung was pulled out of. When I saw my family in April, I was excited to show them that scar, and a little disappointed when they told me how good it looked. I wanted it to look IMPRESSIVE, not barely noticeable. I had bought into the military language, rather than wanting to look pretty.

Proverbs 31 doesn’t praise the valorous woman for her looks, which is notable for the Bible. Like so much literature, the Bible talks too much about beauty. This still happens today in and out of the church. We comment too much on women’s looks, and we start this young.

Many people have told me how beautiful my great niece is after I posted vacation photos of her on Facebook, and of course she is, but she is a lot more than that. She is funny and smart and bossy, and I am not using bossy as an insult: I intend it as a compliment. Alice will lead people. And sure, she’s adorable with big blue eyes, but I would love her just as much if she weren’t, because she loves books and gets in trouble for reading in bed at night when she is supposed to be asleep.

In Proverbs, the woman is praised for what she does, not for what she looks like. This is good news but has also contributed to why the proverb has driven women crazy for millennia: this woman of valor gets up when it’s still dark and works joyfully and energetically and makes stuff and is vigilant: clearly, she’s not a real person, but an ideal, and one that women have found hard to live up to. Since we skip around the book of Proverbs and only feature three sections of it on Sundays, we might miss that this is indeed an idealized wife that a king’s mother tells him to seek out. While some of us might cringe at aspects of the proverb, notably this ideal woman is valued for what she does instead of what she looks like. She buys fields and has merchandise in addition to domestic activities. And while she does have children, childless women like me

appreciate that her children are just mentioned vs. being the reason why that she is known and praised.

Men might feel like this proverb doesn't have much to say to you beyond finding a good woman, but it does. This is our third and final selection from the book of Proverbs, and its line "a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" evokes Proverbs 1, which states that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Like some of the attributes of a capable wife or woman of valor in this proverb, fear isn't something that we generally uphold as a value these days. A word that might make more sense to us in this context could be "awe" instead of fear. Some of us seem to have lost our ability to feel or express awe. Church is a place we come to reawaken our awe: through liturgy, through music, through flowers and stained glass and through hearing our ancient text read by gifted lectors who take it seriously. We practice reverence here in church, even here in St. David's, where we don't have soaring ceilings or stone floors and where we laugh instead of cry when we make mistakes.

But "fear" as a translation isn't misleading in the way that "capable wife" is. Many of us could use a little healthy fear of the Lord. We emphasize love in the Episcopal church and in St. David's in particular, which is absolutely right. You are a child of God and Jesus loves you unconditionally, no matter who you are and what you've done. Yes, even that really awful thing. God loves you.

Some of us can't quite grasp the love of God, but some abuse that love and the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God by not worrying at all about what we do. I mean, who cares, because God is going to love us anyway, right?

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear of the Lord means putting what God wants for us before what we want. We often want things that are not what is best for us as Christians. As humans. Fear of the Lord, wisdom, means we try to discern what God wants and work towards that.

What do you want for yourself right now that may not be what God wants for you?

Can you cultivate a healthy fear of the Lord?