

Proverbs 31:10-31

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.
She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.

Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

Proverbs 31 Men

I would like to once again begin our sermon time with a little bit of “Show and Tell.”

Are you excited? Are you ready?

This morning I have just a few things that I want to show you and maybe you can figure out what they have to do with our Scriptures and the Good News of Jesus Christ.

First of all, take a look at this wonderful and bright purple bag. Isn't that nice? The bag says, “She is clothed with dignity and she laughs without fear of the future.” Wow, isn't that nice! That quote sounds familiar. I wonder where we have heard that before.

Let's see what's inside of it, shall we?

First of all, we have this amazing leather journal. Do you see that? It has a quote on it too. Same as the one before but also it says, “Her words are wise and she gives instructions with kindness.” Wow, isn't that sweet?

We also have a bookmark here with a floral design and some beautiful beads.

And we have these flash cards. They're “A Woman of Noble Character” flash cards. Let's read a few of these ones.

The dish towel is on the way. It did not arrive on time, which is too bad because it is my favorite.

If you haven't figured it out yet, all these items are part of a movement that's been around for at least a few decades. Surely some of you have heard of it. It's called being a "Proverbs 31 Woman" and the swag is easily ordered online. We heard Proverbs 31 read a moment ago. It comes up in our lectionary every three years. You too could be a Proverbs 31 woman *if you study your flash cards.*

Afterall, "a capable wife who can find?" She is trustworthy, willing, works hard, provides food for the family, gets up early, invests in agricultural property, plants crops, has strong arms, looks incredible, sells her merchandise, makes clothing, feeds the poor, shovels the driveway when it snows, wears gorgeous clothing (preferably while shoveling the driveway), speaks with wisdom and kindness, she does not eat the bread of idleness (and actually probably eats very little bread at all to keep up her figure), and my favorite of them all is Proverbs 31:18, "Her lamp does not go out at night."

Okay, so I think that you know that I am having a little bit of fun with this one. The truth is that there is an entire movement within evangelical Christianity about developing girls into these "Proverbs 31 Women," which is really about making women into certain types of wives. And let me just say right now that if this movement has been a part of your faith journey then you have not done anything wrong. If you have found that more traditional gender roles in your home have allowed you to live out your discipleship more fully than I commend you for following Jesus with such intentionality and passion.

But also today, as these scripture readings come up in our lectionary, I feel that it is necessary to look at them in a more nuanced way than what you might find written on a tea towel or a shopping bag. And I do think that nuancing Proverbs 31 is to exercise an interpretive muscle in our relationship with scripture that we need to exercise more often than we usually do. Here is what that looks like: The problem with interpreting Proverbs 31 in this very traditional and literal way is not so much that it is wrong but rather it's that it's incomplete. In other words, one of the things that is true about scripture is that the Bible usually does not say just one thing about a topic or an approach. Instead, the Bible offers us glimpses and angles of what it means to be in relationship with God and to be a part of God's people and, as it does so, it is often in conversation with itself.

So scripture offers different views on what it means to be a god-fearing woman. And not only is Scripture in conversation with itself, offering these different views, but at times scripture very clearly argues with itself. Scripture invites us into the tension of what it means for different people in different times to live out their lives of faith. So Proverbs 31 is only telling one version of the story. It's important to say this because if you have had your life built up by this passage in

a more literal way than that's completely fine. But if you are a woman and you have found that you do not fit into the traditional role of a wife as described by Proverbs 31 and its subsequent swag then it is essential that you know that God has other things in store for you and for your life then what it seems these 21 verses have to say. This passage doesn't say everything we need to hear about what it means to be a Christian woman or a Christian man or a disciple of Jesus regardless of the gender.

For example, as a wife or a mother who is seeking to be God's person in the world and in your family, you're allowed to let your lamp go out at night. You are allowed to have children who might not always thrive in the way that this bit of wisdom literature describes. You are allowed to ask your partner for help in the kitchen or to arrange a way of being family where you're not even in the kitchen at all. **In fact, the incompleteness of this passage it's not so much what it says about women; it's that it doesn't say the same thing about men because you could replace the word wife with husband and the word she with he in this passage and you would find that the description of what it means to fear God and love God and serve God applies the same regardless of the gender.**

That can be a destabilizing interpretation if you have built your life on traditional roles and expectations. That can be a hard message to hear. And you don't have to change who you understand yourself to be in this moment. Yet if these expectations have been forced upon you through rolls passed down from one generation to the next, then it can be incredibly liberating to know that the Bible has other views of womanhood and discipleship in general than what we find in Proverbs 31. We find in the book of Judges women as prophets through whom the voice of God speaks. We find in the book of Romans women listed as prominent among the apostles. We find Paul saying that in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile. And, perhaps most significantly, we find that women follow Jesus all the way to the cross. They do not run away out of fear even when the male disciples are nowhere to be found.

We could even argue that the issue with this passage is not so much what it says to women. It's that so many men have used it to justify that it's not their job to help with the kids or to clean up in the kitchen. It's far too easy for men to use passages like these – which you can find in the scriptures – as a way to justify underfunctioning in home life or even to exercise headship and control over partners they are called to love and to serve.

This is why our gospel reading is so foundational for what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. As they walk on their way, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to lay down his life for the world. He is trying to explain to them how God's love works when it's lived out most faithfully. Yet the disciples begin to argue amongst themselves, not about what it is to give one's life away in loving service, but instead about what it means to be the best, the strongest, the most powerful in the Jesus movement. They are longing for control. **They are longing for control** – a

control that is not dissimilar to what can happen when men read Proverbs 31 and think that it doesn't have to be applied to them also.

Jesus' words could not be clearer this morning. Greatness in his Kingdom is defined by loving service, by not being first but by being last, by putting others' needs before one's own, by welcoming a child whose curiosity about God cannot be easily quenched. It's this call to service which is universal just as Christ has served and loved us all regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and so on. We might even say that a traditional reading of Proverbs 31 has guided women well because so many women have prided themselves in living lives of service for their partners, their children, the communities, and their churches. It's men that are often missing out. If you want to make a Kingdom move this morning – if you want to apply the Gospel we heard to your life – then fellas, you and I will need to flip the Script! Men will have to serve by welcoming a child and cleaning the bathroom and washing dishes. That's what greatness looks like in God's Kingdom. Guys, you might even say that we need to become Proverbs 31 men!