Sermon on Proper 25 Year B 2021

The following is a reflection on Proverbs 31. I do it with some trepidation, my pronouns are “he, him” but I hope to be an ally to genders, plural, in what I say.

How did that reading strike you? If you are of a certain age perhaps you remember the Peggy Lee song called *I’m a Woman* “I can bring home the bacon / Fry it up in a pan / And never, never, never let you forget you’re a man.” A bit corny, but certainly a ditty for the “do-it-all-woman” who was asserting influence in the 1960’s and 70’s.

The feminism of that period needed to bring home the message that women weren’t just for the kitchen and the bedroom and/or the limited vocational options open to them.

White women were pushing back against the idea that they were weak, vulnerable, objects of beauty. “We can do and be more” was the anthem of feminism in that period.

Unfortunately, it also reinforced something else not so healthy: women can give and give and then give some more!

Now we’ve learned that we must think more holistically when addressing social issues; for instance if the social roles of women are to change that can only happen if men’s social roles change, that is they need to be ready not only to bring the bacon home, but fry it up as well.

Sharing in housework and childrearing (if you have them) is the secret to genuine partnership in marriage, whether that is in straight or LGBTQ marriage, to say nothing of what it does for romance.

Things have changed a lot since the 60’s and 70’s but more change is coming and much of it needed. We need to continue to work to bring about social change, now not just for women and men generally, but to the inclusion of racialized minorities, for indigenous peoples.

Now we talk, not just of two genders but of a gender continuum and surely this is right based on people’s experiences and what the best scientific and psychological data confirm.

Indigenous women were never seen as weak and delicate but have in their own way been expected to give and give and then give some more. The same could be said about black Canadian women.

Asian women have been stereotyped as “passive” and they often feel the clash between a more communitarian culture and the radical individualism expected of North American people. This leads to feeling the need to be different people in different settings to a degree that many of us will have never felt.

This is our present context and as we engage with our Bibles, and our faith we are implicitly asking week by week, “how does the message challenge/empower us create a flourishing life that is attuned to God’s Loving Justice?”

This week in particular, we ask, how does an ancient ode, perhaps 3000 years ago, an ancient ode to a virtuous woman relate to women today, and as or if it does, what does that mean for the rest of us?

Does the passage imply on the one hand that a good woman gives and gives and then gives some more, without a thought to her wellbeing? Are women’s identities tied up with how I “hold it all together” for the sake of the family, the children etc.? This passage has often been interpreted that way.

The flip side question is what if I don’t give and give and then give some more? What if I simply can’t be all things to all people in all areas of life? Am I a failure?

From a historical perspective it’s important to remember that the Proverbs as a collection were addressed to young men about to enter the King’s military or bureaucratic service.

But it’s not a set of military or bureaucratic rules, but a set of proverbs. We would have expected tough sayings from a General MacArthur figure; that it is Lady Wisdom who is instructing these men throughout is already counterintuitive and countercultural.

Why would the author imagine a woman to be the “teacher” as personified Wisdom for these men, warriors many of them? We are being told that “the feminine” is not weak or submissive however it is conceived by men or by women for that matter.

Today we’re in the final chapter; we’ve not read the whole of the chapter so it’s important to go back to verse one of the chapter that says, “The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him.”

We’re not sure who King Lemuel is; he’s not on any list of Israel’s or Judah’s kings; indeed, he may be a king from outside of Israelite tradition which would mirror how Proverbs draws truth from surrounding cultures. All truth is God’s truth, from whichever culture or, indeed religion, it comes from!

The really brilliant move is going from personified wisdom, Lady Wisdom, a feminine metaphor who is the teaching voice, to the actually flesh and blood teacher, a woman, the King’s own mother no less, who lived this way and is now sharing with her son the embodied version of a woman’s wisdom.

As someone who, in preparing funeral rites, is often privileged to hear, “this is what my mother meant to me, this is what she taught me.” I’m prepared to hear this final chapter as a holy moment, something to listen to at a deep level.

King Lemuel explains that his mother taught him to be a good man, not to waste his energy on meaningless sex (presumably a King can have all the sex he wants, but this simply destroys a king); she tells him not dissipate his strength by overusing alcohol, this will cloud his vision for justice.

Indeed, the big question she wants her son to consider is, what kind of woman do you want to be by your side? We would ask “what kind of partners do we need to live a flourishing life in view of God’s Loving Justice?

Of course, you’ll look for someone who is wise, someone who brings, as we would say, positive energy, but notice too the emphasis on strength: “she girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong,” “strength and dignity are her clothing.”

The translation “she rises while it is still night and provides food for her household” makes it sounds like she’s rising early to bake bread and cakes but actually quite literally the Hebrew is rendered “she rises while it is still night to take ‘prey.’”

Whether we imagine this metaphorically or not it would seem that the Queen mother is describing a woman who is a true partner to the King; she is to be respected and not dominated.

When she is finished describing her, the mother of the king finishes her advice by saying “give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.”

The King should not claim all power and renown, he should make sure this amazing woman gets the recognition she deserves.

This then isn’t a to-do list for women’s service; a piling on of activities that have women doing all the housework in combination with a career outside the home all the while having plenty of energy left over to please her man.

This isn’t then the feminism of the 70’s or the misinterpretation that came along with that of give, give and give some more that leaves many women feeling depleted and possibly guilty, with women still exercises patriarchal dominance.

This is actually, deep from within the iron age, an egalitarian vision of how humans build partnerships in and amongst difference; difference of perspective, difference of gender, difference in roles and gifts.

This is addressed to men, not to women! It’s a call to me, to all men, to the King no less, to share, to recognize the community building power of a woman, and so other women.

This is the vision that informs texts like our second reading: the kind of living that leaves aside selfish ambition and bitter envy (the perpetual war of the sexes as the feminism of the 70’s described it) in favour true wisdom that is willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.

We find this so hard to grasp. Is it any wonder that Jesus’ first followers could not and that we struggle with it still. But astoundingly, God in Christ will take us through the steps even as it leads to suffering and death, death on the instrument of shame, the Cross. God becoming last so that humanity could be first.

So that you and I can find the bright and expansive joy of welcoming those, working for the flourishing of those that others are ignoring and find ourselves in our welcome, in God’s presence!