

Wisdom and the Teaching of Kindness  
Rev. Nicole Farley  
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
September 23, 2012

**Mark 9:30-37**

<sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

**Proverbs 31:10-31**

<sup>10</sup> A capable wife who can find?  
She is far more precious than jewels.  
<sup>11</sup> The heart of her husband trusts in her,  
and he will have no lack of gain.  
<sup>12</sup> She does him good, and not harm,  
all the days of her life.  
<sup>13</sup> She seeks wool and flax,  
and works with willing hands.  
<sup>14</sup> She is like the ships of the merchant,  
she brings her food from far away.  
<sup>15</sup> She rises while it is still night  
and provides food for her household  
and tasks for her servant-girls.  
<sup>16</sup> She considers a field and buys it;  
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.  
<sup>17</sup> She girds herself with strength,  
and makes her arms strong.  
<sup>18</sup> She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.  
Her lamp does not go out at night.  
<sup>19</sup> She puts her hands to the distaff,  
and her hands hold the spindle.  
<sup>20</sup> She opens her hand to the poor,  
and reaches out her hands to the needy.  
<sup>21</sup> She is not afraid for her household when it snows,  
for all her household are clothed in crimson.  
<sup>22</sup> She makes herself coverings;  
her clothing is fine linen and purple.  
<sup>23</sup> Her husband is known in the city gates,  
taking his seat among the elders of the land.  
<sup>24</sup> 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.

Talking about Proverbs is a bit like taking an exotic vacation; we see new sights, hear a different language, marvel at its beauty. The book of Proverbs is found in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the first being the Torah, the first five books, the second being the Prophets, and the third being the Writings. Within the writings are a specific type called “wisdom literature,” of which Proverbs is a part. This particular part of Proverbs, from which we read this morning, is special in its own way for it is one of a few acrostics in the Hebrew Bible. For those of you who need a refresher on acrostics, think back to the refrain of the old song of Howard Johnson’s, “Mother.”

M is for the million things she gave me,  
 O means only that she’s growing old,  
 T is for the tears were shed to save me,  
 H is for her heart of purest gold;  
 E is for her eyes, with love-light shining,  
 R means right, and right she’ll always be.

Put them all together, they spell MOTHER, a word that means the world to me.<sup>1</sup> In this case the acrostic involves each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from Alef to Tav.<sup>2</sup> While our reading begins “A capable wife,” a truer translation is “A strong woman.”<sup>3</sup>

It is this description of a strong woman which dovetails nicely with our other reading, the reading from Mark where the disciples are arguing amongst themselves about who is the greatest. Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” The author of our reading in Proverbs lists an alphabet’s worth of admirable traits and says in the voice of her husband, “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” We know there are lessons to learn in each of these but what exactly are they?

Jesus offers yet two more suggestions to help the disciples understand what it means to follow him.

<sup>1</sup> <http://libx.bsu.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/ShtMus&CISOPTR=720&REC=1>

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

When we hear “servant of all,” we tend to think of someone who helps **everyone**, not just select persons. While this idea is close, it waters down the scandal of the gospel as it was first intended. Sharon H. Ringe explains, “The word translated...as ‘servant’ is *diakonos*. While that word came to refer to a person in ministry [think “deacon”], in the Greek of Jesus’ and Mark’s day it meant someone who served meals. The person who was ‘servant of all’ was the lowest in the rank of all the servants - the one who would be allowed to eat only what was left after everyone else had eaten their fill.”<sup>4</sup> The lowest of the low. And then Jesus says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” The servant of all and the child are not only linked because they were both references by Jesus.

Ringe continues, “Mark’s audience would have heard the word ‘child’ as referring to someone like the servant...in that both were seen as without ‘honor’ or high social standing. A child did not contribute much if anything to the economic value of a household or community, and a child could not do anything to enhance one’s position in the struggles for prestige or influence. One would obtain no benefit from according to a child the hospitality or rituals of honor or respect that one might offer to someone of higher status or someone whose favor one wanted to curry. Children and servants were of equally low social status.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus wasn’t only telling them how to be; he was telling them how, and who, he was. Jesus was the one of lowest status - he came to us that way on purpose. In Jesus, God puts God’s self last to serve us. As Christians, we seek to emulate Christ and the example of the lowest is what Jesus offers - nobody said it would be easy.

And then we read from Proverbs of this wonder woman, who Kenneth H. Carter, Jr. has described as “a spiritual Martha Stewart.”<sup>6</sup> She wakes before everyone and goes to bed after everyone, she provides food and clothing and sources of income for everyone, she plants and sews and sells and keeps busy. Oh, and she laughs in it all. And for all this and her fear of the Lord, she is to be praised. Again, nobody said it would be easy. This litany is a tall order for an individual, a tall order for a church, and a tall order for a people. We could look at this as simply a list of virtues toward which a woman should aspire but doing so would forget the depth of meaning inherent in any biblical witness. The people of Israel understood themselves as the bride to God’s bridegroom; we, as the Christian church, understand ourselves the bride to Christ’s bridegroom. These admirable qualities are therefore not simply for women to strive toward.

So what shall we, as Christians and as the Church, be striving toward? In all of these examples, wisdom is the foundation but first a word of caution. I say “striving toward” because no one human can

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<sup>4</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 74.

have all of these traits or be all of these things to all of these people. These lists in today's readings, and elsewhere in the Bible, are not God's expectations but God's hopes. Does that mean we're off the hook then, maybe for the ones we find most distasteful or difficult? Of course not. But it does mean that we don't lose ourselves trying to be Jesus. Only Jesus could be Jesus, just as you can only be you, not Martha Stewart, spiritually or otherwise, or your parents, or the godliest person you know.

I follow Christian author Anne Lamott on Facebook and she posted the perfect note yesterday morning. In it, she wrote, "I was up at 3:30 Tuesday, headed to Tennessee for two talks--one on Writing, one on faith--and then to Chicago for a talk on the Search for Meaning. They are all, at core, the same--the decision on how we choose to live this one short, precious life. The decision to stop hitting the snooze button. The willingness not to be good at things right away, to be clueless but committed; to make more messes and mistakes in the interest of living with spaciousness and a sense of presence; to find out who we truly are, who we were born to be, and to learn to love that screwed up, disappointing, heartbreakingly dear self of ours."<sup>7</sup> We grow into wisdom, in general and specifically about ourselves. The book of Proverbs and other wisdom literature was not written for those who are already wise but for all of us, who are seeking wisdom.

So what shall we, as Christians and as the Church, be striving toward? We consult our primer for wisdom and the teaching of kindness, the acrostic like a child's teaching tool.

The heart of God trusts in us,  
and God will have no lack of gain.  
We do God good, and not harm,  
all the days of our lives.  
We work with willing hands.  
We provide food for God's household.  
With the fruit of our hands we plant a vineyard for God.  
We gird ourselves with strength, without leaning on weakness as a crutch.  
Our lamps do not go out at night - we do not fall asleep on our call.  
We open our hands to the poor,  
and reach out our hands to the needy.  
We take care of our household so that none should suffer in the cold.  
Because of what we do, God is known and is held in high esteem by all.  
We laugh at the time to come, instead of worrying about how we might control it.  
We open our mouths with wisdom,  
and the teaching of kindness is on our tongues.  
We look well to the ways of our household - keeping one another in check,  
and we do not sit idle when we could be serving.  
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain

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We don't seek to be a church that prides itself on its beauty; we don't seek to be a church which implies that the life of a Christian seem easy; we don't seek to be a church which

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott?ref=ts>

is charming above a church of substance.

but all who fear the Lord are to be praised.

All who fear the Lord: fear of the Lord gets less use these days so a reminder is due. Carter reminds us, “‘fear of the Lord,’...is the place that we all stand before God and which is also, Ellen Davis reminds us, ‘the deeply sane recognition that we are not God.’”<sup>8</sup> He continues, “This is surely good news for women and men who seek after wisdom.”<sup>9</sup> We are not God. We are not Jesus. But we are challenged to take our examples in God in three persons. We are challenged to grow to wisdom, to grow into our fullest selves, to grow to a point where we open our mouths with wisdom, to grow to a point where the teaching of kindness is on the tip of our tongues, ahead of vindication or spite or hate or even unkindness. We are challenged to think first of others instead of looking out for ourselves at all times. We are challenged into kindness toward those who can do nothing for us merely for the sake of kindness. There is a *mantra* among the younger generation right now - if something seems impossible, the natural response is “Challenge accepted.” Ah, the wisdom of youth. Nobody said it was going to be easy. Will you look at the impossible and respond with “challenge accepted”?

Let us pray: God of wisdom and kindness, inspire us to seek you and your ways above all. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*