

## ***The Fruit of Her Hands***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
on the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide – Mother’s Day  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

May 13, 2018

Text: Proverbs 31:10-31

For some in the mainline churches, like the United Church of Christ, Mother’s Day has become controversial. The folks who consider it so, some of whom are colleagues and friends I value, do so for a variety of reasons. An article I read online on Friday actually advocated strongly that churches should be a “Mother’s Day Free Zone.” In other words, the church should make no mention of honoring of mothers whatsoever because, the author argued, women were staying away from the church on Mother’s Day saying it was just too painful to be there. The author, a female UCC pastor, said there are just too many women who find Mother’s Day painful and others who find it irrelevant and hopelessly dated. This is because, she says, and this is certainly true, that there are in every gathering women who have not been able to conceive and bear a child, women who have chosen not to have children, women who have lost a child, women who have lost a mother and not gotten over the loss, women who have bad relationships with their own mothers or their daughters and the list goes on.

I confess the article gave me pause because I knew I intended to preach about Mother's Day in some way today and I try very hard not to preach on topics that I know in advance might be needlessly hurtful to some in the congregation. But, the more I thought about the author's arguments, the more I disliked them from a personal perspective as a pastor but also as a feminist. Although she does reference the awkwardness of Mother's Day in some households where only males hold the parental roles, most of her reasons for disdaining Mother's Day had to do with protecting other women from any pain they might feel for any number of reasons as the honoring of mothers takes place in church. The more I thought about this, the more upset I became. This attitude, it seems to me, is dismissive of the strength of women to deal with whatever comes their way in life – motherhood or the lack of it being part of life for us all. Quite literally, everyone – absolutely everyone sitting here this morning had a mother. Everyone sitting in any church anywhere had a mother. That is a biological necessity. So why is the consideration of those women who gave us life not worthy of consideration in the church? Because someone might be hurt or uncomfortable? But, what about all of us who had wonderful mothers and love this annual opportunity to celebrate the extraordinary women in our lives, our mothers among them for many?

I know that women who have experienced emotional trauma connected to the idea of motherhood must be treated with real compassion, but I don't get the desire to protect women from sad feelings they may experience in a church service about mothers. Of course, I don't get any desire to protect women from anything like we are some species of delicate hot house flowers. Not me. Not now. Not ever. But I do understand that for some of us, talking about our own mothers or our own experience as mothers ourselves might be painful. I do realize that if you have recently lost a beloved mother, or a child or grandchild, reflections on mothers might be painful which is why I hope the message this morning can move us beyond thinking about just women who are mothers. My hope is that we can take this unique opportunity to think about all the extraordinary women we know and have known throughout our lives and celebrate them for the gift of their presence in our lives. The truth is that many of these special, gifted women who touch our lives in big ways and small function like mothers for us, whether their contact with us is for a brief time or a lifetime. It is these extraordinary women who have touched each of our lives that I hope we can honor today.

We see such a woman described in our biblical text this morning from the book of Proverbs. This is a most interesting book in the Bible since it is a collection of witty sayings, which often seemingly have no connection to each other. Scholars know

that Proverbs is actually a collection of such collections and that the collecting was done by scribes associated with the Temple sometime during the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. Interesting to note here is that Proverbs was initially intended for use only to train the next generation of scribes as well as the next generation of men who would be involved in the running of the Temple and the government. The imparting of wisdom to this influential group of leaders was seen as essential but no value was perceived in sharing Proverbs with the uneducated lower classes, the bulk of the population. This only changed gradually over time as literacy rates among the general population improved in both Judaism and Christianity.

This general overview brings us now to the consideration of our specific text for this morning. This last portion of the last chapter of Proverbs is known as the “Ode to a Capable Woman.” What is not readily apparent to us from the English translations we read is that this was originally an acrostic poem with each line beginning with a subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In other words, it is written to be exactly like some of the corny poems and songs we hear on Mother’s Day: “M” is for the many ways she loves me, “O” is for the one and only her...

Understanding this about our text for today helps us to see more clearly the context within which it was written. It’s obviously written from the point of view of a husband and children, which is

one reason why some find it offensive, as though a woman's value can only be found in traditionally female roles. Important to note is that, while that makes sense to us in our contemporary context, it would have made no sense in the context during which the text was written. This is because a woman who was not a wife and mother was nothing in her world. I mean literally nothing. It was as though she didn't exist. She would have had no opportunities to do anything, totally dependent on the kindness of strangers for any kind of life. Of course, Scarlett O'Hara made out just fine relying on the kindness of strangers as *Gone with the Wind* fans will no doubt remember. But that is a different sermon!

The woman portrayed in the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Proverbs was indeed an extraordinary woman in her time and I argue she would be in our time as well. The text is very direct and articulate in describing her as a hard worker willing to do whatever it took to take care of her family. She is compared to the ships of the merchants because she brings food to the household from far away. She manages a household staff competently showing she comes from a wealthy home, but still the text says she "opens her hands to the poor and reaches out to the needy." She buys a vineyard and makes it profitable with her plantings and her management. She creates merchandise by weaving even if it means working into the night. She's not afraid of challenges coming to her household because she has prepared for them. She

makes linen garments and sells them. She supplies the merchants with sashes for them to sell. In other words, this ancient biblical text written in the midst of one of the most patriarchal cultures ever, portrays this woman as an independent, successful business woman in an era where women were legally the property of their husbands or fathers. The woman, this ideal capable woman, being described in this text is the opposite of what the traditional role of women would have been in her world. But here, in these words, she is praised for breaking all the rules. She is described in simply extraordinary terms: “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!” I read these words and I think, who is this woman?? I want to meet her! I want to have coffee with her! I want to know how she does everything she does! And, perhaps you’d like to meet her too.

The thing is, though, you’ve already met her. You already know her. Each of you sitting here today, you’ve met this extraordinary woman! I know you have. Maybe she was your mother or your grandmother. Maybe she is your wife or your best friend. Maybe she’s your boss or that teacher who helped you believe in yourself in a whole new way. My point is – you know this woman. We all do! And if we’re really lucky, we know more than one. And today is the day we honor and remember all these extraordinary women who have helped to make us who we are. In

your order of worship this morning you found a small piece of decorative paper. I invite you now to take a moment and just write down the names – first names and nicknames! – of these women. List as many as you can think of. Then, as we are singing our hymn of response after the sermon, I invite you to bring those papers forward and place them on the altar. You can fold them tent style so they will stand up or you can just lie them flat. Up to you. The point is to honor these women by naming them on this special day devoted to extraordinary women in our lives.

And if you're trying to remember who these women might be in your life, perhaps these closing lines from Proverbs might bring her into sharper focus. Take a moment to consider whom these words describe for you: "Many women have done exceedingly well but you surpass them all. Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who loves the Lord is to be praised. Give her a share of the fruit of her hands. And let her works praise her in the city gates." Make no mistake, these are extraordinary words in a society where women had no real status. By contrast this capable woman being honored is praised in the highest terms possible in any society – that ancient one or our own. May we all remember, name, celebrate and honor all the extraordinary women in our lives as we recognize that the fruit of her hands is in no small way – us. How blessed are we. Amen.