

A Capable Woman¹

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Mother's Day
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

May 12, 2024

Text: Proverbs 31:10-31 (selected verses)

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 online a few years ago, and several others published since, advocated strongly that churches should be a "Mother's Day Free Zone." In other words, the church should make no mention of honoring 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, 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 these thoughts always give me pause because I always preach about Mother's Day in some way. 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

¹ Adapted from a sermon first preached by Rev. Ruth on Sunday, May 13, 2018

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 that life. 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 recognition of those women who gave us life not worthy of consideration in the church? Because some of them were bad mothers? Okay, fine. But, if you are an adult and you are still blaming problems in your life on bad mothering, then you need more help than the church is in a position to provide. And, 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 understand and appreciate that women who have experienced emotional trauma connected to the idea of motherhood must be treated gently and with 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. The style and content of this book in the Bible is quite unique and the story of how and why it came to be is worthy of our consideration. It is essentially a collection of witty sayings, which often seem to have no connection to each other. Scholars have discovered that Proverbs is essentially a collection of collections of witty sayings and pithy verses. The book was formed through the work of the scribes associated with the Temple sometime during the 4th-5th centuries BCE. Interesting to note is that Proverbs was initially intended for use as a means of training the next generation of scribes in the art of scribing. Scholars believe it was also used to train 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 which is why it was retained as part of the sacred text. 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 that world. I mean literally nothing. It was as though she didn't exist. Without a husband, she would have had no opportunities to do anything, totally dependent on the kindness of strangers for any kind of life.

Understanding this part of the context of today's text does not change the fact that the woman portrayed in the 31st 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, capable women who have helped to make us who we are. As you arrived this morning you received a small piece of decorative paper and I invited you to take a moment and write down the names of these women who have been or are part of your life and then I asked you to place them on the altar during our first hymn, among the photos and mementos of these women you were also invited to bring this morning. The point of all these

remembrances and mementos is to honor these capable women by naming them on this special day devoted to these women who inhabit our lives. Let's pause now for a special prayer of remembrance for all of them and I can think of no more appropriate words to do this than the words of the ancient scribe who first wrote them down millennia ago:

Loving and amazing God who is both Father and Mother to us all, we pause to acknowledge the extraordinary women of our lives. As we read the words of this ancient scribe, we hold in our hearts these women, celebrating them for all they have meant to us. "Many women have done exceedingly well but you surpass them all. Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman such as you who loves the Lord is to be praised. We celebrate all your efforts in our lives and acknowledge all your accomplishments as a share of the fruit of your hands. In you we have been richly blessed and for that we will be ever grateful. Amen."

In conclusion, allow me to say that these ancient words from Proverbs 31 are extraordinary coming to us as they do from 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. Today and all day long, may we remember, name, celebrate and honor all the extraordinary women in our lives as we recognize that the fruit of their hands is in no small way – us. How blessed are we. Amen.