

*From Great to Last*  
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
September 20, 2009  
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Proverbs 31.10-31,  
Psalm 1,  
James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a,  
Mark 9.30-37

When Gordon and I began worship planning for this Sunday and saw that Proverbs 31 was the assigned reading from the Old Testament, we both looked at each other and said, "Should we look at the alternate reading for this week?" This is not one of my favorite passages from the book of Proverbs. I cringe when I hear people read this passage on Mother's Day or give this to young girls as the motto they should live by. Part of the resistance to this text is the way in which the woman is celebrated here. Clearly she is celebrated and honored and that is a good, good thing. But the praise of this woman is limited to her vocation as the center of her home and family. What about men and their role in home and family? What about women who aren't called to marriage or motherhood? What about women's vocations beyond home and family? I guess it's the gender role expectations that get under my skin.

Another reaction to the text is that it promotes this unrealistic ideal of the superhuman woman who never rests - always serves - does it all and does it well. One commentator said that preaching this text given the gender politics of our age is like "stomping through a minefield." Depending on where you stand in that question of women's place and role in the church and in society, members of your churches will either "claim this text for their side of the cultural war or designate this text as enemy territory. Few will really hear its challenge to all."<sup>1</sup> That inspired me to take another look at this passage and to listen for the Word of God and for the Wisdom of God to be revealed through it.

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<sup>1</sup> Work, Teleford Work, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pg. 74.

Last week we read the portion of Proverbs where the Wisdom of God is personified as a woman who stands in the city streets, on the busiest corners, and in the public square calling to people from the center of daily life to embrace knowledge and to choose the fear of the Lord. I want to pause for a moment to be clear about what is meant by this phrase the *fear of the Lord*. This phrase is repeated throughout wisdom literature. It is a catch phrase of sorts. I want to begin by clarifying what it does not mean. Fear does not mean fright. We're not talking about being afraid or shaking in your boots and shrinking in fear before God. The idea of the *fear of the Lord* involves something more like reverence and it has to do with commitment and obedience....it's a posture of being in awe of God, not afraid of God.

When we talk about knowledge we're not talking exclusively about intellectual information. This is not just an engagement of our minds. It has to do with the integration of mind and heart. It's the place where the knowledge we receive becomes so compelling to us that it inspires us to change the way that we live. The book of Proverbs contains the wisdom gleaned from the lived experience of God's people in Israel. It is different from the kind of revelation entrusted to prophets. It comes from the ground up and from the people living life together. The book of Proverbs concludes with the poem of the woman of worth. She is not Wisdom personified as in our passage from last week but she is clearly more than just an example of the ideal woman.

This is an acrostic poem where each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order from A-Z if you will. It moves from the description of Wisdom crying out in the public square (from our passage last week) to Wisdom embodied in center of the home. Taken together the message of Proverbs is that wisdom is to be lived in every sphere of life. The image of this text is of complete harmony; of the way in which the peace and stability of private life supports and empowers the impact one can make in the public sphere. The blessing of the woman of worth flows from her to her family and through her family to the marketplace and out to the city gates. It's not a singular figure who can pull off such a blessing. It's a description of the whole of God's people who have come to fear the Lord

and to embody the Wisdom of God in the way they create their community together.

As I was meditating on Proverbs 31 this week with these themes in mind the title of the book *Good to Great* came into my mind. Do you remember when this book came out back in 2001? It was written by Jim Collins based on research he conducted into companies who were able to distinguish themselves as great companies over and against the multitude of good companies that are out there. As you read what led Collins to conduct this research, the motivating force behind it was his quest to find what he hoped would be timeless, universal answers to this question of what it takes to go from good to great.<sup>2</sup> He was looking for wisdom - for the kind of wisdom that presses an organization past the comfort of the status quo into the realm of excellence. We read the same kind of celebration in Proverbs today where in verse 29 it says that “many have done excellently but you surpass them all.” Collins wants to understand what makes it possible to take that leap.

His book reflects this hunger in our culture for wisdom – this desire in people to find the path to the good life and to find it by seeking out the experience of those who have gone before. You see this shift in the rise of mentoring and coaching in recent years. It has become the norm not only in business but also in the church. It reflects an acknowledgement that intellectual knowledge (the kind you can get in school or from books) will only take you so far. There is no substitute for the wisdom that is gained from the sages who have gone before and have integrated knowledge with experience; people who have passion and determination and a track record from which they can share their wisdom.

As Christians we have an incredible opportunity to speak to our culture when it comes to this quest for wisdom. There is a rich resource in our scriptures and in our tradition to lift up and share with the wider world. These questions of how to find the path to the good life or what it takes to go from good to great – these are the questions of our faith. And there are

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<sup>2</sup> Collins, Jim. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), pg. 5.

many gifts in our wisdom literature that are worth uncovering and pursuing.

James is a New Testament expression of wisdom. We often talk about this book as if it is a conversation about faith and works. You may recall the passage from two weeks ago that ended with the warning that “faith, by itself, if it has no works is dead.” James is not just interested in contrasting faith with works. What’s he really interested in is wisdom.<sup>3</sup> His interest is in the integration of your thoughts and words, your will and action – the way you make sense of it all in the context where you live. What James introduces into the conversation today is the contrast between earthly wisdom and what he calls heavenly wisdom. Earthly wisdom is the wisdom that is prevalent in the world around us. It is rooted in selfish ambition and I would also add a belief in the principle of scarcity (this isn’t James word for it but it what James describes). He gets at this when he is talking about the conflicts and disputes that rise up between people – it comes from the cravings that are at war within us. Conflicts come when we want something that we do not have and we believe that there is not enough for all of us to have it. And so we fight to take it for ourselves even if it requires that we take it by force. This applies to more than just material possessions. Think about the way that this comes into play around things that are much less tangible – things like admiration, respect, and love. We live in a world of comparisons. Greatness is defined by its opposite. The one who is great is the one who is better.

Jesus understood what is at stake in our quest to be the greatest. He understood the way that earthly wisdom defines those terms. If my success is dependent on diminishing yours then Jesus says that success is not worth having. This was just one among many ways that Jesus redefined what it meant to belong to the realm of God. And his disciples were perpetually confused because it went against the grain of worldly wisdom and all the things they had been taught to value. From their point of view, if he was to be the Messiah – the Son of Humanity – he should rise up in power and triumph over Israel’s enemies not die at the hands of them. But what Jesus teaches here and what he will embody when he comes to

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas, Mark. *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pg. 86.

Jerusalem is that in the realm of God there are no positions of power, only opportunities for service.

The invitation of the gospel is to go from great to last.

There is nothing wrong in striving for excellence as long as you understand that any power or privilege you may glean from that position is to be put into the service of the most vulnerable of our community. As I was sitting at the funeral for Bob DeBruyn's this week I was thinking how his life reflected this truth. I know he was not perfect but the story of his life is in many ways a story of one who sought to live according to the wisdom Jesus teaches here.

It's how we serve and lift up the children among us...  
It's in how we welcome the poor in our midst...  
It's in the ways we support health and wellbeing  
of the most fragile among us...  
That is the measure of our greatness.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

This is the Word of the Lord....thanks be to God.