

UNDER THE FAMILY OF GOD

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Damascus United Methodist Church

Proverbs 31:10-31; James 3:13-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost – September 20, 2009

I have a question for all in the congregation about the Proverbs 31 passage that was read just a few minutes ago. You know the passage about the “good and capable wife.” You remember. “Seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.” Target or Hechts? “She is like the ships of the merchants, she brings her food from far away?” Whole Foods. Trader Joes. No longer the Safeway in Mt. Airy. “She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household;” (Honey Wheat Cherrios, yogurt selections, pop tarts) “and tasks for her servant girls.” (We’ve got to clean the house before the cleaning lady gets here.). “She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong.” (Curves or the gym, what will it be?) “She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.” (I don’t know how we did it before we were both working.) “Her lamp does not go out at night,” (Darling, can you tear yourself away from the computer? Just a few more minutes, sweetie, I can’t get anything done when the kids are awake.) Is this passage an anachronism or what? Maybe it should be saved for your grandmother’s funeral.

I do like the part about, “She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.” Or the line that goes, “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.” But what in the world does this line mean, “Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat with the elders of the land?” Don’t you think with all the things this lady has to do, her husband should be taking the kids from 5 to 9, and Saturday mornings to give her a break? Come on, this passage is a little over the top. As Bishop Will Willimon writes in his essay on this specific passage, “Is this woman doing her family a favor by bearing all of their burdens, working from before dawn to well past dusk, while they merely praise her for being such a good woman? Ought we to join our voices in praising her? Or ought we to question how her self-sacrificial life may be warping the lives of her children and her husband, relieving them of their God-given responsibility to serve and to create?” (*The Lectionary Commentary: The Old Testament and Acts*; p. 287)

Mr. Willimon’s question is more than appropriate if we see this passage as a definition for a good and capable wife, it seems to me. “That is, too many people, both women and men, know no limits on their activity, take upon their backs too much responsibility for making their families work, say yes to every request for help and eventually pay dearly for what the rest of us hail as remarkable capability.” (*Willimon; The Lectionary Commentary*; p. 287) Justifiably we should ask, “Is not such driven workaholic activity a violation of God’s call to Sabbath understanding and Sabbath rest?” I believe this passage needs to be seen, curiously serendipitous to yesterday’s discussion in

the Strategy Committee, as a visionary statement as to what a person might seek to do, when they are filled with the Spirit of God in their lives and want to love selflessly where they are planted.

Such behavior should not be seen as a requirement. Such behavior should be seen as sign of what dwelling in God's presence is all about. A vision of what we can see when a person is truly united with the love of God in his or her heart. These words end the Proverb text, "Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades. The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in right relationship with God." (WGE)

Psalms 1, the favorite psalm of our late sister in faith, June McCreary, sets the tone for our message this morning. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers, but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season, their leaves do not wither. In all they do they prosper." Or as Eugene Peterson, one of my favorite interpreters of scripture puts it in *The Message*, "How well God must like you- you don't hang out at Sin Saloon, you don't slink along Dead-End Road, you don't go to Smart-Mouth College. Instead you thrill to God's Word, you chew on Scripture day and night. You're a tree replanted in Eden, bearing fresh fruit every month, never dropping a leaf, always in blossom." (*The Message*, p. 912) The point is this. Being good, or as we have been saying over these last weeks, being in God's company or fellowship is the only way to stay healthy and do good things.

Let me share something that I have been really thinking about over the last several years. When I was younger and well after my confession of Jesus Christ as the Lord of my life, I still captured the way life was laid out in this order. First God and his full revelation in Jesus Christ, and God's on-going Spirit which never ends. Then I or me, however your grammar; then one's spouse, partner, or significant other; then children, close relatives and friends, and somewhere down here, the Church, the people I knew who were trying to follow Jesus; then the community where I lived, the state, nation, world. That pattern has been turned upside down as I have encountered God's word in scripture, observed the tradition of the Body of Christ, and experienced God's presence with others.

What we have is God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer up here; then we have the Holy Community, those seeking to be at-one with God, those worshipping together and trying to stay close to the Creator, doing sacramental acts to keep in fellowship with the Redeemer and with one another, practicing forgiveness and reconciliation, going deeper into the fellowship of the Spirit, and thereby being given the daily energy to do the God-like, godly acts that make this world a better place. And then it is from this "holy community," call it the real Church, if you are comfortable with that term, where I find out who I am, a child of God. I find out what I can be with my wife, my husband, my most intimate partner, because the holy community teaches me in its godly wisdom how to love like God loves and Christ loves. Traditional words like, "Where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am also," begin to make sense. I cannot learn how to

live as a father or mother, as a son or daughter, as a friend, until I am connected to a holy community where the work of God is being practiced daily, being experienced moment by moment, flooding both my outer life and my inner soul with the God presence. Then everything else and everyone else even the stranger and the enemy are put before me in a way I can begin to see from God's view, because I feel God's Spirit in me. And I can identify that Spirit, and its transforming power, as Jeremiah said it, "In my bones."

In fact, as soon as I behave in a manner that again puts me at the top of the heap in my thinking, deliberating cutting me off from the holy community, I sink quickly back into the quagmires and human pitfalls that always spell alienation and destruction to some degree. This order of understanding becomes so important I realize I must choose the relationship with the holy community day after day. I must be always choosing, in St. Paul's words, the Body of Christ, if I am to live now and for the rest of my days.

This is what James is talking about in chapter 3 when he writes, "But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace."

What James is clearly saying is that to submit to God, we must submit to God's community. That does not mean submitting to a preacher, to a church program, to a denomination, or to a set of rules to judge ourselves and judge others. These observations deserve much reflection in the future. Suffice it to mention these important insights for the moment.

What submission to God means is most clearly revealed when we hear St. Mark's closing verses from today's gospel lectionary. Here it afresh in closing. "He sat down and summoned the twelve. 'So you want the first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all.'...He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, 'Whoever embraces one of these children as I do, embraces me, and far more than me- God the *abba* who sent me.'" (*The Message*; p. 1828)

We began with a vision of a capable wife. We end with the embracing of an innocent child. Both lessons suggest that we must be willing to abide in the family of God, and work most diligently to stay grounded and connected to His Body, the Holy Community of Christ's making. Let us seek to be faithful.