

Sermon A Good Woman
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Reading Proverbs 31:10-31

About this proverb

- Clever acrostic poem. The first letters of each line are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order from first to last.
- It is the admonition of the mother of a king to her son
- It is situated after a host of tirades against foolish and brutish behavior of men – especially those who make themselves victims of women and wine. It is the last of the proverbs, the next segment of the canon is the Book of Job.

10A capable wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.

11The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.

12She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.

13She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.

14She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.

15She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.

16She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

17She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.

18She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.

19She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.

20She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

21She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.

22She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.

23Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.

24She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.

25Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.

26She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

27She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
28Her 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.”
30Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
31Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

Sermon A Good Woman

What ideal is portrayed here?

- The queen – a partner to her king, and yet subordinate.
- She is not defined as someone who gives her husband children. She is not defined as a paragon of virtue. She is not necessarily beautiful and charming.
- She is industrious and inventive and in charge and trustworthy. The woman is a helpmeet, with a separate domain from her husband, yet their goals are connected. She contributes to his reputation and to the health of their household. Others listen to her. What she does well is appreciated by her husband and her children and makes her praiseworthy in the city gates where all manner of prophesy and publicity occur.
- We don't know what will happen if she falls short of these unrealistic expectations. But what is interesting in this most ancient of biblical traditions is that she is capable of them.

What is *not* here in this proverb – that a woman is meant to suffer and sacrifice because she is a daughter of Eve. Instead, strength and dignity are her clothing and she doesn't fear the future, she laughs at it.

How did the notion of femininity and strength change over the centuries?

- Early Christians – women are to submit to their husbands, to suffer and to make sacrifice because they brought about the downfall of men. Above all, despite the fact that the early church survived because of wealthy and influential women, they were not to teach or speak in temple.

Two different mothers.

I had two different mothers who influenced my life.

My own mother never knew her father. She was raised first by foster parents and then by a close configuration of women; her single mother, aunt and cousins. After a few years, she was sent away to a succession of boarding schools until she entered college. When she was eighteen, my grandmother married a man who adopted my mother. My grandparents worked together. My mother always worked outside the home. But I always had the sense that she wanted to be taken care of by my father as powerfully as she wanted to be able to take care of herself.

My mother-in-law had a more stable childhood. Her mother worked while she was growing up; both out of necessity but also because she enjoyed it. After college my mother-in-law worked for a year until her own marriage. She left her job because, she would say, in her day, married women didn't work.

News to me, my father-in-law would say. She never stopped working inside the home. She was a consummate partner and wife to her businessman husband; kept a lovely and organized home and life for both of them and their sons. She cooked and sewed and decorated and supervised and volunteered her considerable executive skills to a variety of charitable organizations. She organized her life around taking care of others; or perhaps taking care of herself by taking care of others.

Two very different women growing up and living in very different circumstances. They had a choice. Their own mothers had been granted the right to vote.

As a consequence in large measure of women being granted the right to vote,

- both of my mothers were educated.
- Both worked hard and contributed to a good life for themselves and their families.
- Both chose how many children they wanted to have and when to have them.
- Although they made their choices before their choices were sanctioned by government, their relative wealth, their access to medical advancements, and their relationships with their spouses allowed them to tacitly make those decisions.

Millions of women were not so lucky. Millions are still not so lucky. Women, especially women of color, still struggle against efforts to keep them from the ballot box, to keep them underpaid, to keep them undervalued. To strip them of their power to influence society and change the course of their lives for the better.

[History of family planning]

Yesterday was the 43rd anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision on Roe vs. Wade.

[History of Roe versus Wade]

There is virtually no dialogue between pro-choice and pro-life advocates in the public sphere. "As a result, there are many questions that have never been resolved. Of these, perhaps the most important is the precise timing of the beginning of human personhood. That is, when -- between the processes of conception and childbirth -- does a new human being exist with full civil rights? Included among these rights is the most important right of all: the right to live."

- Both sides would like to reduce the number of abortions;
- one through legal measures that create barriers and pressures to discourage women.
- The other through education, better living conditions, emergency contraception and good health care.
- One side believes that a good and moral woman must willingly sacrifice herself and her family for a new potential life,
- and the other believes that a woman can choose and still be good and moral. One side is committed to preserving all life, one side is committed to preserving the quality of a life.

Where do we stand as Unitarian Universalists? We support a woman's right to choose.

Anti-choice angry rhetoric and violence have forced many women into silence, isolation and loneliness in dealing and living with this issue. Today, the capacity to terminate a pregnancy is becoming increasingly difficult for women because of federal and state legislation intended to create barriers: waiting periods, informed consent laws, bans on later term abortions even when the mother's life is at

risk, parental involvement laws, and the Hyde amendment: a legislative provision barring the use of certain federal funds to pay for abortion unless the pregnancy arises from incest, rape, or to save the life of the mother.

The position of our denomination is that a pregnant woman needs to be able to make an informed choice, and have access to compassionate guidance, as she decides whether to parent, to make an adoption plan, or to terminate a pregnancy.

We see the choice of whether to have and raise a child to be part of a larger issue of women's health, improved economic picture for us all, and a better quality of life.

All due to the goodness of women, and all the good that women can do.

There are times in our lives when making a decision does not mean that we will always feel better about it afterwards. We may not feel better about ourselves. It is more faithful to support one another through these times, to offer compassion, to offer companionship – walking the path with each other instead of telling each other where to go and what to do. May we have the courage to be gentle and strong and to listen for the love in it all.

Follow up reading:

UU World: What is reproductive justice?

Women need more than a right to choose. Unitarian Universalists are joining a broader movement seeking reproductive justice.

Darcy Baxter | 2/18/2013 | Spring 2013

Between a Woman and Her God: Clergy and Women Tell Their Stories, a Sourcebook for Legislators, Clergy and Activists. Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, © 2005.