

When I was at West Los Angeles UMC, Wayne was a very active member of the church. He was single, in his 40's and contrary to what he was willing to admit, Wayne was set in his ways. Even so, he wanted to be in a lasting relationship. When asked what the ideal candidate would be like he had a laundry list of attributes and abilities that rivaled the abilities of the Capable Wife outlined in Proverbs 31. For Wayne most of his possible partners had what he called "baggage." My reaction was, "we all have baggage. We just hope that in a life partner we find someone whose baggage complements our own." My comments feel on deaf ears. I don't know of anyone able to meet the standards on Wayne's list let alone the standards set for the Capable Wife in Proverbs 31. And so I must confess that this scripture is a stretch for me to preach from today.

However, as I was reading Professor Raymond Van Leeuwen's commentary on these verses I was relieved to learn that as the Book of Proverbs was addressed to the men of the time, and as throughout history men have demeaned women as being the weaker sex, one goal in presenting this vision of a Capable Wife was to help change the mind of the readers about women. Women are not weak. Women are not to be ignored. Women are capable. And men need to let go of the concept that women are the reason for temptation. Men need to take responsibility for their desires, their thoughts, their words, and their actions.<sup>1</sup>

Even so, I can't help but equate the words in Proverbs 31 with the description of the perfect 1950's housewife. I am sure some of you may have tried to live according to these 1950 jewels of wisdom. I know my mother tried. The standard in 1950 included:

Have dinner ready when he gets home.  
Take time to freshen up and center yourself. Put on lipstick before he arrives.  
Make sure the clutter has been picked up.  
Clean up and quiet the children.  
Don't have the house filled with noise – like a washer or dryer running.  
Don't greet him with complaints or problems. Let him share his day first.  
Make him comfortable. Have his favorite drink ready. Speak in a soothing voice.  
Make the evening his. Don't complain.<sup>2</sup>

I have to say such expectations make me want to scream. These standards deny the importance of the work done at home. Both the Proverbs 31 woman and the 1950's housewife appear to set one-sided standards for greatness. Where is the wisdom of such perfection? So it is a bit encouraging that in Proverbs it states wisdom, like a capable spouse, is truly hard to find.

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<sup>1</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol. V, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1997), 263-264.

<sup>2</sup> The Ultimate House Wife, accessed online 17 September 2018 @  
<http://www.ultimatehousewife.com/2013/02/1950s-housewife.html>

Then again, the Capable Wife approached the ordinariness of her day with joy, whether it was cooking or cleaning, tending the crops or caring for others. And that might be something we need to consider in our own lives, approaching the mundane with joy and thanksgiving. The Book of Proverbs does underscore that when one is wise there is no separation of the sacred and the secular. All of life, everything we do, is meant to be an act of worship and devotion to God. Greatness is equated with service to God.

Now the disciples would have known the wisdom teachings found in the Book of Proverbs as these sayings would have been shared with them as they entered into adulthood. So it is a bit surprising that as they were making their way back to Capernaum after being on the road with Jesus, they entered into a debate about greatness. Who among them was the greatest? I think this conversation was designed to help rebuild their egos. The road trip was frustrating for them as they had been unsuccessful in casting out demons and healing people in Jesus' name.

So when they got back to home base, most likely to the home of Simon Peter, Jesus asked them about their conversation. But like children, hoping they had not been caught with their hands in the cookie jar, the disciples did not respond to Jesus' question. But Jesus' knew what they have been up to. Jesus knew they had been debating which one amongst them was the greatest.

So Jesus responded to their guilty silence by reversing our worldly understanding of greatness. To be great, he said, to be first, one must be willing to be last and a servant to all. In other words get your egos out of the way and your delusions of grandeur out of your heads. Being first in line or first in anything will not lead to greatness. Greatness is about serving others. Greatness comes with humility.

And then Jesus goes on to completely upset the order of things by embracing a child. Now for us, this is no big deal. But at the time the children would have been sequestered away. They would have been under the purview of the women of the household. A child would not be present with the men and their teacher. A child was socially invisible. A child was considered to be inconsequential until they entered adulthood around the age of 13. This attitude towards children was so pervasive that childless Roman citizens would adopt adults rather than children to be heirs to their estates.<sup>3</sup> By taking a child in his arms, Jesus is telling the disciples to welcome a child into their lives, is to welcome Jesus into their lives. For the disciples, to embrace this teaching, they must let go of much that was deemed normative by their society.

And so it is for us. Jesus' words about greatness are a challenge for all of us as we must look at our own conventions that prevent us from treating all people with dignity, even those whom we are serving and helping in the community. Now while there are some questions as to whom the following quote should be attributed to Jesus'

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<sup>3</sup> New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol VIII, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1995), 636-637.

instructions, to embrace those deemed insignificant have been updated as follows: “A nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members.”

Which I think is a fantastic way to measure greatness. Unfortunately with all our talk of greatness we have not improved much through the course of history. As a society, as a nation, we still judge and determine a person’s worth based on their dress, their faith tradition, their sexuality, their gender, their national origin or their race.

Greatness is a questionable when you consider the prevalence of domestic violence in our country. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, in the United States, on average 20 people per minute are abused by an intimate partner. This equates to 10 million men and women abused each year.<sup>4</sup> And as to children, based on the research of the Lucille Packard Foundation for Children’s Health, of the nearly 50,000 children living in San Luis Obispo County over 20% of the children live in food insecure households, meaning they do not know where their next meal will come from. And based on the cases actually reported, 8.2% of the children in the county have been victims of abuse or neglect.<sup>5</sup> We have to wonder about our understanding of greatness, individually and as a community.

But the reality is we will not be able to change society until we are able to assess our personal definitions of greatness by looking within, to our personal biases, our prejudices, and our understanding of why we serve others. What assumptions do we make about a persons ability to serve or their worthiness to be served? Are we able to see all people regardless of economic-socio-political status as children of God and so treat them with dignity and respect? Or do we consciously or unconsciously consider ourselves to be above others?

A few weeks ago I heard an interview with psychologist and professor Dr. Dolly Chugh, about her new book How Good People Fight Bias: The Person You Mean to Be.<sup>6</sup> While she did not mention the Proverbs 31 woman, she did talk about how we all want to be considered good people. She discussed how we all have different definitions of what it means to be good. But rather than focus on being good she believes we need to strive to be, what she calls, “goodish.” I find this a strange term, but I understand the purpose of using a term that is not loaded with assumed meaning – like wise or good or good enough.

For Dr. Chugh, a goodish person is one who is willing to listen and learn from others. This includes those times when we are approached about words we have spoken or actions we have done that were offensive to others, even if we unconsciously did them.

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<sup>4</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, “Statistics: National Statistics,” accessed online 19 September 2018 @ <https://ncadv.org/statistics>.

<sup>5</sup> [kidsdate.org](https://www.kidsdata.org/export/pdf?loc=361), “Children in San Luis Obispo County,” accessed on line 19 September 2018 @<https://www.kidsdata.org/export/pdf?loc=361>

<sup>6</sup> WHYY: Radio Times, “The Psychology of Good People,” as heard on Sirius NPR Radio on 14 September 2018, accessed online @ <https://whyy.org/episodes/the-psychology-of-good-people/>.

As she points out, many of the assumptions we make in life, many of our judgments of others or events, are based on actions and words and events from our past that are part of our unconscious memory.

If we are a goodish person, rather than become defensive or argumentative, we ask the question of the other party, “help me understand your perspective, how I have offended.” According to Dr. Chugh, a goodish person takes responsibility for their actions, seeks to learn from their mistakes so they are able to move forward in life.

For us as Christians, such “goodishness,” such greatness is about being grounded in the ways of God, being open to learn and grow and care for the earth and for others and do so with joy. When seek to live this way we achieve a balance in life that avoids what Professor Van Leeuwen calls, “a severing of the ordinary from a wise love and service of the Creator and creation, which if allowed to occur eventually descends into confused worship and a degradation of creation.”<sup>7</sup> A degradation of creation results in a degradation of community because we are focused on seeking greatness in terms of the ways of the world rather than seeking greatness according to God’s definition.

So as I thought about Jesus’ words to the disciples, as I thought about the attributes of the Capable Wife, I felt compelled to rewrite portions of Proverbs 31 in a way that would make it accessible for each of us.

A capable person who can find? They are far more precious than jewels. In the heart of their partner there is trust and gain for them both, each working for good rather than harm.

A capable person speaks with wisdom. Kindness is on their tongue.  
They look well to the needs of the household, shunning the bread of idleness.  
The family rises and calls them happy. They praise each other.  
Many have done excellently but few surpass such greatness.

Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but one who reveres the Lord is to be praised. Give them a share in the fruit of their labors and let their works be praised at the city gates.

May we all continue to grow in our reverence of God with our whole being, finding joy in the mundane. May we work together, share with others, and care for others, for the benefit of all creation and for the glory of God. Amen

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<sup>7</sup> The New Interpreter’s Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol. V, 264.