**“A Capable Wife Who Can Find?”**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman**

**St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, 9/9/21**

**Scripture References: Proverbs 31:10-31; Mark 9:30-37**

As many of you have likely observed, there are aspects of my marriage to David that don’t follow the usual stereotypes of husband and wife. It is David who cooks, and me who loves meat and potatoes and all foods unhealthy; It is David who is the consummate host and me who belches at the table. I upend the wifely norm so much apparently, that at our wedding, our beloved priest looked at David as we held hands and started *the* climactic question of our wedding vows with, “David, do you take this man to be your..” and then stopped abruptly beet red with embarrassment.

So, you can likely imagine how torn I was about whether to include the Proverbs passage that we heard in today’s service, or to go with one of the other choices the lectionary gave me for Old Testament readings. I anticipated the rolling eyes of so many of you, and my own(!) at it’s opening question. “A capable wife who can find?” The description of said capable wife included the same old patriarchal stuff women and our male allies have come to know well—a trustworthy woman who is happy doing her husband and children good, cooking for them in the early morning and spending much of her days sewing. Further, it objectifies the wife—it affirms her as something to be bought—noting that whatever her husband has had to pay for her in dowry, she is worth it—worth more even than precious jewels.

And yet I kept coming back to our Proverbs reading because many of the actions it delineates as those of a capable wife, call to *me* as a wife here and now—these are the counter-cultural ones…things like providing, buying land(!), believing confidently in herself, and speaking wisdom. The book of Proverbs was written *for men*—as wisdom for how to live deeper lives of faith.[Yoder, p.241] So, although it may seem like a patriarchal, unattainable model of the perfect woman that every man should seek, it was actually presented to men not as a model for the wife they should seek, but rather, as a model for how they, *themselves*, could live more wisely. As Christine Yoder argues in the Women’s Bible Commentary,

“…this celebration of woman and her everyday enterprises—her so-called “women’s work”—envelops a book *intended for men* about living wisely in the everyday. Her attributes, commitments, and skills are its frame. What is more, because the woman is identified with wisdom and “fear of YHWH,” “women’s work” is set apart and named as the beginning, indeed the standard, of faithfulness…**the labor of women is here elevated, theologically legitimated, and claimed as the preferable means of moral and theological instruction of the whole community**.” Yoder, Christine Roy, Women’s Bible Commentary, pp. 241-242

Our passage was not intended to affirm the patriarchy—as men held over and above women--but quite the opposite—to upend the patriarchy and call men to live more closely with God by living more like women. *The first shall be last and the last shall be first*, indeed!

Our Gospel passage this morning is similar, except it expresses a counter-cultural elevation of the gifts and labor of *children*. As one commentator wrote,

“The shocking element in this episode cannot be appreciated by modern readers. Our social conventions have exalted childhood as a privileged time of innocence, and this romantic view is usually imported into these passages. However, the child in antiquity was a non-person. Children would have been with the women, not hanging around the teacher...to insist that receiving a child might have some value for male disciples is almost inconceivable.” [New Interpreter’s Bible, Mark Commentary, p. 482]

Just as the Proverbs reading, this passage upends the patriarchy as the site of greatness and, instead, lifts up the counter-cultural notion that spending time in the perspective and space of children, not even considered full people yet in Jesus’ time, will lead these men to live a life closer to God. There it is again--*the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.*

We could spend our time together this morning contemplating the characteristics of children—things like incredible persistence, curiosity, wonder, play, the quiet, holy “flow” they often get into when exploring or playing, their righteous anger and fierce arguments for justice (but it’s not fair!!). But that exploration, as spiritually important as it is, is not where I feel called to go with these readings on this particular morning in these particular times.

Where I feel called to go is more broad than that…it is beyond the specific set of characteristics or perspectives that our readings name as leading us deeper into the presence of God, and, instead, to what these readings call us to more generally…and that broader call is to the hard work of expanding our vision and experience of what is holy, and our vision and experience of where and in whom God’s transforming love is most accessible.

Let me say it again…for me, the broader call of our readings is to expand our criteria for what is holy, and our *experience* of where and in whom God’s transforming love is most accessible.

Proverbs called its male audience to see God’s transforming love as abundantly accessible in the work typically expected of women. Jesus called his male audience to see God’s transforming love as abundantly accessible in the presence of children. These readings call us to the same work of expanding *our* vision…to seeing God’s love as most accessible in the counter-cultural or marginalized perspectives and people of our day.

So, what hard vision-expanding work are we called to? Well, as a town, a state, a country, and as a parish and denomination, *I* think we are called to see more clearly and *affirm* non-white ways of being as holy, and as making God’s transforming love differently accessible. As I continue my own anti-oppression work, I perceive more and more fully how the values of white people like me are used as the metric for what counts as success, what our goals should be, even how we go about being church—I see it particularly in my work as Secretary of the Diocese, but I also notice it in myself as I function here as one of two white priests…In myriad ways I fail to see, never mind let myself be changed by God’s transforming love as embodied in non-white perspectives.

I had a powerful experience of this in planning our upcoming Diocesan Convention. I had chosen the theme of Interdependence, patting myself on the back for what I thought was a particularly rich place for spiritual growth. In order to flesh out what sort of a workshop series might come of that theme, I invited a very diverse set of thought partners from around the Diocese to join me in a series of brainstorming sessions. As our opening “ice breaker” I asked everyone to go around and say their name and then share a recent experience when they became aware of their interdependence in some way. A couple of us who are white shared a particular moment when we realized how much we depend on others or on Creation. And then it came to the indigenous person in our session, and she said, “I can’t really think of a particular moment because, as an indigenous person, perceiving interdependence is a way of life—it is how I see the world.”

My perspective radically shifted at that moment, and I was hit with a new insight that I can only name as holy. As a white person, I swim in the waters of *in*dependence—to behold a way so different that perceiving independence wasn’t even possible, has truly transformed me—it has re-molded, I think quite lastingly, not only my awareness of my own interdependence, but also how profoundly my whiteness likely shapes my understanding of God…I am hungry to explore that more deeply.

There are myriad ways God is calling us to expand our vision of what is holy and around whom the liberation of God’s love can be experienced more fully.

I think we’re also called to see God’s transforming love as abundantly accessible in the presence of Creation and our awkward and uncomfortable attempts to call for its protection; in the presence of convicted felons or in those with addiction; or even in counter-cultural moments of protected family time—like ones where we skip the club soccer game because it feels like too much and play video games together instead.

So, I leave you with two questions:

How do these readings invite *you* to expand *your* vision of where God waits to love you?

And Who is Jesus encouraging *you* to welcome, in order that you might “live [more] wisely in [*your*] everyday?”