



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 19, 2021

Scripture Passages: Proverbs 31:10-31; Mark 9:30-37

+I speak to you in the name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Proverbs 31.

Well you knew I'd have to preach on that, didn't you? Couldn't let this one pass by. Not this month anyway.

Well, let me start with a quote from some good scholarship on this passage: Brent Strawn is the scholar and he says this: "Part of the preaching task, at least according to [Ralph Waldo] Emerson, is "to convert life into truth... life passed through the fire of thought." Part of the truth about life is the patriarchy of the ancient world — including the biblical world. Part of passing that life through the fire of thought is to think critically and theologically about such patriarchy, including such patriarchy in the biblical world. Such a task is not restricted to the clergy in seminary classrooms, but is one for the priesthood of all believers, . . . if they are to be thoughtful and faithful Christians in the contemporary world."

Couldn't agree more. But I'd also add that we have to pass this text and all others in the first Testament through the refining fire of the Gospel – or the Good News - of Jesus Christ as an interpretive principle.

So we're going to do that this morning. I'll get to that in a sec.

But just let me say, that as scripture has brought us here this morning, I am concerned. As a mother of four precious – now grown – children, two of whom are daughters, I am so very deeply concerned about the treatment of women in our world at this present moment. And I am concerned about my daughters but equally for my sons.

The news headlines have had me just reeling this last couple of months:

- Young women not safe at Canadian universities - I can hardly stand to imagine their experience - and of their parents - the betrayal of their safety is hard to bear.
- The long and oft-reported abuse of young women in the Gymnastics world – and their painful frustration at not being heard.
- And where do we even start with the systematic and brutal oppression of Afghan women and others globally? We watch helplessly while our siblings are targeted for gender-based persecution, violence and suffering and it's too much to bear.

Even though study after study tells us that oppressing women makes no economic sense. Nor does it lead to peaceable cultures within our world. Quite the opposite – as a terrific article in the Economist showed earlier this week.

So it's rather an urgent concern locally and globally. It's an urgent concern in our families, our communities, and our institutions.

So back to scripture: what does the bible say about all this? Plenty – and we have a prime couple of examples in our readings today.

Proverbs 31. Often a text that is used to describe the patriarchal ideal of a good or a capable wife. So, passing this text through the fire of thought, we have to acknowledge, that as ever in patriarchal texts – written from the point of view of the dominant male perspective - we get a particular view of women – one that often doesn't take into consideration women's priorities. But more often, we get absolutely no view of women at all. And no sound of their voice either. We often have to search – with the third eye and ear of faith – to see and hear women in scripture.

But before we dismiss this text out of hand with its exhausting and exhaustive qualifications for what a good or capable wife is, let's have a deeper look at it because it's surprising in a few ways.

Notice that she's an entrepreneur – and praised for it. She has an independence as well – a life beyond her husband and the care of the home. She's also not defined by her ability to have children. She is a good mother, but she's much more besides. And she is not defined by her beauty, or her shape, her weight or her looks in general. The writer of Proverbs 30 has studiously avoided that. It's clear that her attractiveness lies in her industry, in her virtue and the content of her character but most of all in her respect and reverence for God. This is, in fact the point of the whole passage. To define the content of faithfulness.

One could wish there was a balancing passage on the virtues of a capable husband. (wink) But there we are, . . .

So we've seen this passage with thoughtful eyes – aware of the bias of the ancient near east but also recognizing that this is a passage that is about more than gender politics – it's about kingdom priorities – and kingdom priorities are pretty different to this world's priorities.

Which brings us to Jesus.

Let's look at Jesus' take on patriarchy – a system of principality and power of this earth. And if you think that the bible doesn't say anything helpful about this, then you're in for a surprise because Jesus, the son of the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit has plenty to say.

Let me give you a few examples of how he treats women:

The woman with a 12 year haemorrhage. Jesus is on his way to heal a little girl – he's walking through a crowd of people and someone touches his clothes. He feels it and looks around to find this poor woman. This poor woman who St. Mark says has suffered much at the hands of doctors thinks if only I can just touch the hem of his cloak, . . . I'll be well.

Now, if talking about women's health issues remains difficult today - and we all know it does - and if women do not get the same specialized consideration and care that men do - and we know that's true - and if women are not listened to as they should be - and we all know that's true - bless Simone Biles and her teammates' bravery in highlighting that major issue yet again this past week - imagine what that must have been like for this woman in the ancient near east. To be afflicted with constant menstrual bleeding for years - in an honour shame culture - in a culture where you were considered unclean for this kind of ailment. It was debilitating on several levels. The woman with a flow of blood by being healed by Jesus, received not only a physical healing but a restoration to wholeness and life, potential; and a restoration to community.

But what's really remarkable if you remember, is that Jesus sees her, hears her, heals her and even exalts her. "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace." That's not a patriarchal response - that's a godly response. You see Jesus seems to see through human systems and goes to what's important – what's real.

Another one, because I'm sure you're getting my theme here.

The woman with five husbands and a partner – the story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus and the disciples are on their way back to Galilee to get out of the Pharisees way for a bit. He's tired, it's hot – baking hot - but he sits down at a well – a gathering place for the community, but of course nobody goes out in midday to draw water unless they have to – or unless they need to avoid other people. And along comes such a one – a woman who had had five husbands and was with a man who was not her husband now.

Let's just think about her for a minute. Why would any woman have five husbands and a partner when her security and standing in the community depended on being married. Why would any woman want five husbands and a partner? No seriously. That's not a joke. What societal forces would make that either desirable or necessary? Perhaps a few of these reasons might create those conditions:

Without a man, any woman was vulnerable. So vulnerable that she didn't exist as an independent unit in law – she was chattel. And she would have been particularly vulnerable to divorce. It was extremely easy for a man to divorce a woman – almost impossible for a woman to divorce a man. It's unlikely that this woman had been widowed five times, there were probably at least a few divorces in her past.

And does Jesus judge her? Nope.

Instead, he discourses with her; engages her. He reveals to her the living water of salvation. And he breaks about a hundred cultural and religious rules in order to do so: he was a Jewish, single man, speaking to a multi-married, Samaritan (Jews and Samaritans did NOT mix) woman in public! Despite all that, he doesn't condemn her lifestyle but meets her heart-deep needs.

And as one commentator says, to understand this woman's vulnerability under patriarchy really deepens this "intervention of grace." For Jesus, no one is unworthy to receive grace and love.

This behaviour is profoundly anti-patriarchal. I could go on, but you get the drift.

And today's gospel is no different.

We have the disciples arguing over who is the greatest again. Jesus tries to tell them to stop the competition, the power-mongering, the jostling for position and prestige. They don't hear him and so he gives them an object lesson in the ethics of the kingdom, in God's laws with regard to the vulnerable. Sitting down, he calls them to gather round. And then he says this:

"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Keep in mind that children were in the same general category in ancient near eastern law as women.

So instead of treating children and women like chattel; instead of feeling entitled to their bodies and their labour, instead of treating them like things,

Jesus elevates them, honours them but most of all loves them - in their generality and in their particularity.

And if by now you're beginning to realize how profoundly challenging this Jesus guy was to his culture and to the gender morays if his day - well, you bet he was. He is just as challenging today. But thank God for the Good news of Jesus Christ that directs us in the ways of righteousness and love.

And if our Christian vocation us to become more and more like Christ, that means a few pretty crucial things: it means that by striving to understand Jesus, know Jesus, we will be changed.

Because the Gospel that he lived among us to proclaim and live out in object lesson after object lesson about the radical love and acceptance of God – a love that excluded no one - that became more and more acute until it ended up at the cross; that love trumps the principalities and powers of this world. The good news of Jesus Christ redeems and upends those systems that oppress and steal away our full personhood and potential in this life. That's the wild love of God transforming the staid, controlling nature of human institutions. And it's exciting and fresh and full of joy and potential.

This is what will bring life and health and healing and restoration to our world. This is the path through which we are co-creators with God of the kingdom here among us. It's in this way that as another poet I am fond of – William Blake - says, that God resides within each human breast.

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