

Rise Up And Call Her Blessed

Proverbs 31: 10-31 (Selected)

Who can find a woman of noble character,
for her value is far more than rubies,
the heart of her family has confidence in her,
she brings them good and not evil all the days of her life.

She extends her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hand to the needy.

She is clothed with strength and honor
and she can laugh at the time to come.

She opens her mouth with wisdom
and loving instruction is on her tongue.

She watches over the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children rise up and call her blessed.

“Many daughters have done valiantly
but you surpass them all.”

Charm is deceitful and beauty is fleeting,
but a woman who fears the lord will be praised.

Give her credit for what she has accomplished
and let her works praise her in the city gate.

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May 12, 2024

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

This past Thursday morning my alarm woke me up at 4:30 a.m. By 6 a.m. I was in the car and headed to Buffalo to visit my mom in celebration of Mother's Day. In the car I had with me a card, a dozen tulips purchased from White's Flowers the day before, along with a gluten-free lunch of shrimp and vegetable pasta salad, coconut cupcakes, and fruit which Linda had lovingly prepared and packed.

It is about a five hour drive to Buffalo, made even longer on the return due to the east bound lane of the Thruway being shut down owing to several accidents, so I had *ample* time to consider my own mother, the mothers among us, and all those who have been mothers to us. Certainly, there are some obvious things which need to be said on the occasion of Mother's Day. After driving for 10 hours in car, however, a few other not-so-obvious things also occurred to me.

II.

I am sure that a great many of you share my own belief that there is no person on the planet who plays a greater role in shaping who we are as people, and getting us where we need to be going, than our mother. Yes, fathers are critical as well, but moms are *moms*; as most dads would certainly, and quite gratefully, agree. So, on this special day, we pause as a nation to offer our thanks and appreciation for those who have been mothers to us, regardless of biology, for the tenderness, nurture, support, and guidance that moms provide to their children, and those who are as children to them. While the day calls for cards, flowers, presents, and celebratory meals which are appreciated (and encouraged) the *best* gift we have to offer our mothers is to live well the life they have so lovingly provided us. *(That, along with a nap or a few quiet moments and a good cleaning of her car.)*

III.

Whereas the societal notion of “manliness” seems to be able to stand alone, or apart, from the role of father, “womanliness” is almost always inextricably tied to motherhood. This is the knot I would like us to try to untangle today; though perhaps not in the way you might first imagine.

Now, believe me when I tell you, I can definitely hear the “click” whenever I step on a metaphorical landmine while standing here in the pulpit; as I did just now. Sometimes I do so intentionally in order to direct your attention (or make sure I have it) while on other, rare, occasions I do so out of clumsiness. In either scenario, though, I know enough to stand *very* still until the moment passes or I can extricate myself from the situation. The last thing any of us wants is a mess on our hands. There are times, however, when certain ground must be covered; but we do so by treading *ever* so gently.

IV.

Other than the 23rd Psalm, it is quite likely that there is no scripture passage proclaimed more often in this sanctuary in recent years than today’s sermon text from Proverbs 31; which is particularly interesting considering I have never in my life preached on it until today. Proverbs 31 is a text we often use on the Park at the funeral or memorial service for one considered a “Church Mother.” (There is that “click” again, did you hear it?)

In order for you to understand this in context, I need to take you back in time to 2008. 16 years ago, Donna Doig had just completed the rigorous and required training to be a Commissioned Ruling Elder (CRE), or lay minister, in our denomination. On April 29th of that year, and with great joy, the Session approved and issued a call to Donna Doig to be commissioned as the one and only Associate Pastor in the 217 year history of our church. This was a watershed moment for us, and Pastor Donna immediately began to



bring an impactful and fresh perspective to the work and mission of our congregation.

V.

Just a few months later, in August of that year, we lost a much beloved and long-time member with the death of Willie King; mother of Barb. While quite diminutive in physical size, Willie was a larger than life figure to so many. Funny, quick-witted, kind and compassionate, Willie was also *fearless*; as I, myself, discovered when she summoned me to her house after learning I (her Pastor) was tending bar down at “Dave’s” (now The Stadium). If there was ever a person worthy of the title, “Church Mother,” it is Willie King.

In a practice we would continue for many years, Pastor Donna and I co-officiated Willie’s memorial service. As we began to put together the liturgy, or order of worship, Pastor Donna asked to include this Proverbs passage as the parting words to be read at the end of service. This, to me, was sheer brilliance on her part. I was not even familiar with the passage. I can tell you, it was a powerful moment witnessing Pastor Donna, as a woman, read these words to all those gathered as she praised the works of Willie King in the city gate. So began a new tradition at our church.

VI.

This past week, another group of women from our congregation met to continue the, now, 24 year tradition of holding monthly Women’s Circle meetings here at our church on the 2nd Wednesday of the month; to which every woman in the church is welcome and invited to attend. In the early years, Circle met in homes. In recent years, though, these have taken place in Lorna’s Lounge; named for another Church Mother, Lorna Webb. Each month they meet for fellowship which is uniquely female, and to discuss a topic selected by one of the women who offers to lead the discussion. Past topics have included kindness, listening, one’s relationship with nature, community, the gift of being a woman, community, awe and wonder, and nostalgia. The topic for May was Women in the Bible, and Vicki McLean led the discussion. While it is the case that what goes on in Lorna’s Lounge, with both the Women’s Circle and Book Group, stays in Lorna’s Lounge, Linda does share general information with me from time to time.

VII.

While the Circle women knew the female headliners in the Bible such as Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah, and had a basic understanding of their stories, they realized a whole *host* of Biblical Women were unknown to them; the great majority of them *unnamed*. This is uncomfortable truth of the Bible is something we have talked about before during worship. It is one of the reasons that this past year we began a new tradition in our church of reading aloud in unison the names of all past recipients of the Woman of the Year Award during Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday. The other thing that came out of their discussion, while not necessarily surprising hurt my heart to hear nonetheless, is the struggle these women of our church having in finding their own voice within the Biblical canon.

VIII.

What I find so ironic and interesting is that while these women hear only a faint echo of their own unique voice within the Good News of Jesus Christ, here in the body of Christ, the church, it is the rousing chorus of these *same* women's voices that are heard most loudly and most often. It is my experience having been the minister at three very different and distinct churches, and my general observation of a great many more, that it is almost *always* the women within a congregation who shoulder the greatest weight for the church. Whereas it is hard to hear them in the biblical narrative, women's voices in the work and mission of the church ring out loud and clear as unmistakable and undeniable.

IX.

Of course, here at our own church, this did not all of a sudden happen in just the past 25 years, before that there was Presbyterian Women and Postscript Club; about which a few of our older Church Mothers, like Ella Morter, can tell you a great deal. In fact, looking back on the two written histories of our church, the first prepared by Rev. Stubblebine and published in 1907 on the occasion of our church's centennial, and the second prepared in 2007 by our own Dr. David Hornung for our bicentennial, which built upon and expanded Stubblebine's work, we find numerous examples of the women of this church making their voices heard.

It was women who are credited with saving the newspaper clippings which served as the basis for Stubblebine's book, thus preserving our very history. Of the seven charter members of this church five were women, each recorded with their *own* name: Wealtha Foot, Betsy Donegly, Milicent Conkey, Jane Ross, and Phila Richardson. The stained glass window in the sanctuary is given in memory of the Women of the Church. The first bell to hang in our steeple was purchased by the women of the church, and the second by Martha Manley, who formed the Ladies's Aid Society; which we've rehung in the past few years.

X.

When finances started to get tight owing to the cost of building the "new" church in which we now reside, it was the church women who stepped up to fundraise and retire the debt. In 1870 a company of women met to organize what would become The Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society to support mission work in Mexico City, Persia, India, Siam, Utah, a Farm School in Asheville, NC, as well as parochial schools for African Americans in Virginia and North Carolina. This is just a small sampling of the ways in which the women of this church have been a driving force behind its work and mission for over two centuries.

Interestingly, as I read through these histories I noted that it was often, if not always, that the women of the church were credited right alongside the men:

The history of a church is a record of the lives of its noble men and consecrated women. The First Presbyterian Church has always been greatly favored of God in the character of the men and women who have constituted its membership. To reproduce, even in limited form the striking incidents in the lives of these men and women would be worth while, but unfortunately many of them live only as a precious memory in the minds of their descendants.

XI.

You will note in this sermon my introduction and use of the title "Church Mothers"; as, I am sure, it caught in your ear as a "click" each time it was uttered. I have long adhered to the belief in the power of language to shape reality; not only narrative to describe and record, but also poignant and pregnant words, phrases, and titles which call into question our assumptions and challenge us to reconsider how we understand the world.

I remember when I was in seminary, one of the core courses we were required to take was “Church History.” I spent hours in the classroom, and in study, learning about the so-called “Church Fathers”; which refers to ancient and influential Christian theologians and writers (all men) who established the intellectual and doctrinal foundations of Christianity from the late 1st to mid-8th centuries when Christianity was in the process of establishing itself as the state church of the Roman Empire. There was never any mention of “Church Mothers” who actually made real and built upon such foundations to breath life into the church.

XII.

The good news is we are beginning to change this. We are reshaping our reality in ways more befitting the truth of our experience. For two milenia in the larger church, and in the first two centuries of our own church here on the Park, it has been women, as Church Mothers, who have borne the real weight of the church and, in so doing, created for themselves the space and place to discover and speak their own voices which they might find missing when it comes to scripture. Moreover, these women are having their own voices heard; particularly by one another, and in support of each other.

One of the greatest strengths of our congregation is that we are multigenerational. Here we have adolescent women caring for little girls (and boys) in the nursery. Those who have raised children joyously helping new mothers just beginning. Women sharing their wisdom and experience with other women; offering support, lending an ear, providing guidance, and caring of the matriarchs among us as they make their journey home.

XIII.

Today is Mother’s Day, an occasion to honor women of noble character who are clothed with strength and honor; those women who are our mothers, and those who have been mothers to us. Women who open their mouths with wisdom, have loving instruction on their tongues, and who can laugh at the time to come; mothers who have birthed us, and Church Mothers who have nurtured us. Women who watch over the ways of her household, and women who have watched over the ways of the household which is our church.

Many daughters have done valiantly, but these mothers here in our midst, and those Church Mothers in our past, surpass them all. As their children we rise up this day and call our Moms blessed for all they have done and do for us; and offer our warm embraces, tender kisses and fond memories as our way of saying, "Thank you for being my mom."

XIV.

This day, as a congregation, we also rise up and called blessed our Church Mothers. We do so by name so that through *our* voices we may acknowledge that *their* voices have been both found and heard echoing through our lives.

Margaret Cornell, Bernice Taylor, Edith Sturtevant, Billie Crowell, Anne Piskor, Eunice Urban, Inez Butterfield, Edythe Elmer, Betty Wells, Alice Huddleston, Grace Hall, Harriet Smith, Irene Miller, Rosemary King, Helen Selleck, Marion Poole, Eleanor Erickson, Peg Stalder, Janet Patterson, Ruth Chisholm, Lisa Peacock, Elsie Dana, Ruth Stokes, Margaret Maybee, Ethel Browne, Etta Hyler, Jean Shepard, Ruth Schairer, Barb Brown, Miriam Pries, Shirley Wells, Phyllis Pierce, Ginny Witherhead, Tyke Miller, Thelma Rodee, Willie King, Betty Peckham, Marylou Scott, Mickey Williams, Mabel Pritchard, Barbara Garrett, Shirley Seeley, Becky Bowman, Barb Klemens, Carlene Baffro, Joyce Bell, Margaret Alexander, Rose Marie Mattice, Lorna Webb & Ellen Janack.

May our lives, lived well here in this church which each of them has so lovingly provided, be our gift to these Church Mothers in honor and thanksgiving. Amen.