

Sermon

Proper 20B September 22, 2024

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

When quoting the Bible, what's the most important thing to remember? Context is everything. It doesn't do any good to quote scripture without knowing the context. For instance, it would be incredibly harmful to quote Matt. 18:8 - "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" - without understanding the context in which it's being said. Which, by the way, is a whole monologue from Jesus about protecting and caring for vulnerable people.

Nor should you use the Bible for blind advice. You can't open it, point to a verse, and expect that to answer your question or problem. Doing so may very well result in that old joke where a guy, depressed about a bad decision he had made, closed his eyes, opened the Bible, pointed, and found himself reading Matt. 27:5 - "Throwing down the pieces of silver, he went and hanged himself." Thinking that was a bit extreme, he opted to get a second opinion. So he closed his eyes, opened the Bible, pointed, and read Luke 10:37 - "And Jesus said, 'Go and do likewise'."

Context is everything.

Which brings me to our lesson from Proverbs today. Just reading or hearing today's passage you might think this is a passage about the perfect wife. Or maybe you see it as a biblical aspiration for young girls or women. And those are some lofty aspirations: trustworthy, productive, a good cook, a shrewd businesswoman, physically fit, generous, well-dressed, and happy. It reminds me of that old commercial for a perfume: "I can bring home the bacon . . . fry it up in a pan . . ."

These are lofty aspirations to be sure. But read in context, it really has to do with healthy relationships. Overall, Proverbs reflects the generational wisdom of a community designed to instruct people in how to lead a wise and upright life. And since schools as we know them didn't exist, Proverbs often served as the home-school curricula, or life lessons, passed down from one generation to the next.

In this final chapter of Proverbs, a mother imparts these words of wisdom to her son, the prince, before he grows up to be king. What we miss in our lectionary is the first part of what the mother has said, which is primarily about avoiding strong drink and remembering to speak up for the lowly, the poor, and the needy.

In context, Chapter 31 of Proverbs is about the relationship of a king to his people. This bit about a capable wife reinforces the fact that if your personal relationship isn't strong, you can't serve well as king.

The verses we hear today are focused on finding a capable wife because the mother wants her son to be a capable king. In context, these verses are about finding a capable spouse. And that changes the meaning. This is no longer a list of traits that women need to have to be a suitable wife, this is now part of the wisdom of healthy relationships

Trust your spouse. Do good not harm.
Do not spend your time getting drunk.
Be an advocate and a voice for those who are voiceless.
Invest wisely. Maintain your health.
Care for your family.
Learn of wisdom and pursue kindness.

In all of this, we must remember to keep things in proper perspective. Part of that is to see others not as how they can benefit you, but how you can serve them for the good of all. This is sage advice for everyone, not just for a guy looking for a capable wife.

While the lessons today weren't designed to go together, they actually do rather well. Proverbs discusses what is useful for a good relationship with your spouse. The gospel addresses what is useful for a good relationship in community.

While on the road to Capernaum, the disciples argue over who is the greatest among them. When they get to the house they're staying at, Jesus says, "What were you arguing about back there?" Nuuthinn.

So he says, "Look, here's who is great in God's eyes – those who serve others. See this kid? Welcome him. Welcome the questions. Welcome the energy. Welcome the chaos. See him in others. Treat others as innocent, inquisitive, energetic, chaotic children. That is, treat them with love and patience."

I've said this before and it seems to be the one thing you will always remember about me: Families are weird. That includes biological families, adopted families, and

definitely church families. Both Proverbs and the Gospel give us an idea of how to behave. In our own families, have a level of mutual respect, love, and care for each other. These are not only the qualities of a capable wife, they are the qualities of capable people.

In our church family, let us look to serve those both inside and outside our parish. Let us welcome the child, those with questions, those with energy, and the chaos that will inevitably bring with love and patience.

And let us do all this in the name of the One who welcomes us, our questions, our energy, and whatever chaos we each bring to the family of God.

May we strive to be capable people of the Lord.

Amen.