

Valour
St. Mary's and Holy Trinity
September 22, 2024

Lord may only the truth be spoken and only the truth heard. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So. I'm at the dining table. It's Mother's Day. The man of the house says grace. As part of the blessing, he reads Proverb 31, the ode to an ideal wife. A grandmother, a mother, and two daughters at the table. Now, as this ode drags on, they all shift and hunch and hang their heads a little lower than you might expect for a prayer. Then the women sit quiet and uneasy until conversation leads in a direction other than Mother's day. What was going on there? Why did an anthem of praise for women feel so awkward?

Proverbs 31. It describes this wife. She's trustworthy. She's good to her husband. She's hard-working and diligent. She feeds her kids well. She manages her household staff – because apparently she has staff. She prospers and purchases land – because apparently she's got that kind of money. She's strong. She's business savvy. She's skilled with her hands, generous to the poor, prepared for the winter, well-dressed, dignified, able to laugh, speaks wisely, fears the Lord. She's admired.

I asked my wife Tania if she had any tips for preaching on this passage. She said read Rachel Held Evans. My wife is smart. So is Rachel Held Evans.

Proverb's 31, Evans points out, is the favourite of a booming book industry on Christian womanhood, and it's mainly used like a check-list to judge how Christian a woman is based on how well she mothers, keeps house, and, well, lifts up her husband. Rachel Held Evans says she "grew up thinking of the domestic super-heroine of Proverbs 31 as just another impossible standard by which to mark my shortcomings as a woman."

But eventually she did that thing that gets so many women in trouble with cultures that try to keep women small and quiet. She *read* the Bible.

Lesson #1: Proverbs 31 is the concluding chapter of Proverbs. This is interesting. Proverbs starts out as a father's wise life teaching to his youthful son. Throughout the book, wisdom is personified as a Lady, and the son is supposed to seek her. At the close of the book, however, we get a picture of a particular woman who exemplifies, in her particular context, all the wisdom that at first seems to be just between a father and son. "Proverbs 31" Rachel Held Evans writes, "should not be interpreted prescriptively as a job-description for all women. It's purpose is to celebrate wisdom-in-action." The passage describes one woman's practice of all the wisdom that youthful son was meant to learn from his wise father in the past 30 chapters of Proverbs. It's celebration of wisdom-in-action, a kind of wisdom that applies across gender lines.

Lesson #2: Rachel Held Evans had a Jewish friend, Ahava. Ahava taught her that Proverbs 31 is often memorized by men rather than women in Jewish tradition, and Ahava's husband sings the passage to her every sabbath meal. It's a song meant for men to learn and use to express gratitude to women, not as a measuring stick to guilt-trip them.

Lesson #3: This is because it doesn't matter so much *what* the woman in the ode does, so much as *how* she does it. Our NRSV translation plays it too safe. The first verse says: "A capable wife who can find?" Okay. Well. Hold on. The Hebrew word for wife here "*eshet*" is interchangeable with woman, like *Femme* in French. The word "capable" in Hebrew "*chayil*" also means "valorous." So, Rachel Held Evans's Jewish friend Ahava uses this phrase to cheer her Jewish friends on when they get a promotion, have a baby, act kindly: "eshet chayil!" "Woman of valour!" So, the first verse also means, "A woman of valour who can find?" So, it doesn't just celebrate wives; it celebrates wise women in general. At the same time, Bible also celebrates "men of valour." It about the valour of wisdom, as the *how* or the *attitude* of wisdom-in-action.

Lesson #4. There's a woman in the Bible far more desperate and poor than the Proverb's 31 woman, who is also celebrated as a woman of valour. Ruth is the poorest of the poor, widowed, an outsider, childless. She prospects no land, exchanges no fine clothing, and keeps no immaculate home. She sweats and labours to glean leftover grain in the fields. But *before* Boaz marries her and

changes her circumstances, he declares, “The people of my town know that you are an eshet chayil, a woman of valour.” It's not what a person has, but how they do it.

So, what is this valour, then? Who comes to mind sooner, King Arthur or the Lord Jesus? If the one with a sword and round-table of knights comes to mind, you're like me and like Jesus' dumb disciples too. In the Gospel passage this morning, Jesus has again told them he will not fight, kill, and conquer, but be betrayed, killed, and rise. The disciples think he's being metaphorical, and they pretty much just start arguing about who is going to sit next to Jesus at his round table. But they have the wrong idea of valour. And so do we. Valour isn't the kind of greatness that beats others in the same game of us and them, the fight for recognition and political power. As the disciples are showing off their biceps and scripture memory, Jesus shakes his head. And he shows them up with a small act of true valour. True valour can do small things, even things perceived as failure. He doesn't pick up a sword or go on a loud rant. He picks up a random child and holds it kindly. He doesn't act like his masculinity or strength is at all threatened by this. True valour can be a servant of all and do the least important jobs, and still have a glory, perhaps hidden, that comes from being close to God and held by God, like Jesus holding the child.

Jesus shows what true valour is because no matter what the world does to him, he won't stop being who God made him to be and doing what God sent him to do. He won't stop loving. Won't stop serving. Won't stop being true. He can't be

shamed out of it, argued out of it, rejected out of it, beaten out of it, or crucified out of it. Even when he is killed for being who he is and doing what he is meant to do, God raises him. His resurrection is a promise from God that all our acts of true valour will be returned with little resurrections in this life, and a final resurrection in the next.

But let's not close thinking about how we need to be more valorous. Instead, let's remember that Jesus loves his church like a bride and celebrates her. Let's hear Jesus, saying to us each individually and together as a community, "woman of valour!" "man of valour!"

Amen.