

Proverbs 31:10-31

“A capable wife, who can find?” Sounds a little like Yoda. The interesting phrasing is due to the fact that our reading from Proverbs today is part of an acrostic poem. Each succeeding verse starts with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 is the same way; that is why it is so long. Thus, what we have here is poetry. So if any of you wives were starting to think you were inadequate, relax. This is not a list of characteristics required of any wife. In Jewish culture, it is sung by a husband in honor of his wife. It is not an objective list of requirements but a subjective tribute to one who is loved.

There is a ... movement? in some parts of Christianity to set up the woman described in Proverbs 31 as the standard for all wives. I think doing that does a great disservice to women. The essence of a woman is not how well she takes care of her husband. A wife is not merely an extension of her husband. The ideal is that two people come together to form one entity. The persons become two halves of a whole. At the risk of being cheesy, Jerry McGuire had it right: the two should complete each other.

It is not good for man to be alone. This realization on God's part in the second chapter of Genesis marks a turning point. It actually portrays God as having to rethink his plans. The man God had made was not complete in himself. So God tries all manner of things to try to find an appropriate companion. That is where, at least according to Genesis 2, animals come from. God made them in order to be a helper for the man. When none of them worked, God went to plan B. Instead of starting from scratch, God uses spare parts from the man in order to make a woman. While it sounds kind of “Bride of Frankenstein”-y to me, it's what worked for the writer of Genesis. Still, the imagery is clear, the union of man and woman is a making whole of what is separate.

I have joked in our Bible study class on Wednesdays that Genesis 2 shows women to be either an afterthought or the pinnacle of creation, depending upon one's point of view. I certainly favor the latter understanding, but there are those who think it the former. Paul uses a similar argument in his first letter to the Corinthians. “For a man ... is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.” So there you have it ladies: If one of the animals presented to Adam to name had been a chimpanzee smoking a cigar and carrying a six-pack, you might not even exist.

As much as I admire the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, I do prefer how another Bible, *The Message*, renders this passage: “Don't, by the way, read too much into the differences here between men and women. Neither man nor woman can go it alone or claim priority. Man was created first, as a beautiful shining reflection of God—that is true. But the head on a woman's body

clearly outshines in beauty the head of ... her husband. The first woman came from man, true—but ever since then, every man comes from a woman! And since virtually everything comes from God anyway, let's quit going through these "who's first" routines." Perhaps I just have itching ears, but that rendering seems much more in keeping with how our Lord Christ treated women than the other.

Our Lord loved women, and women loved him. It was the men who deserted him on Golgotha; it was the women who were there to the last. It was the men who were hiding in fear on Easter; it was the women going to the tomb and seeing the resurrected Christ. It was Thomas who doubted; it was Mary Magdalene who proclaimed the resurrection. Far from being second-class persons or mere extensions of men, God created humanity, male and female, in the image of God. Paul did get it right when he wrote to the Galatians that in Christ there is no male or female.

Proverbs 31 can be a hymn of praise to a faithful companion, or a set of impossible standards for a servant. The order of creation is justification for the subjection of women, or reason to see women as final necessity for it all to be "very good." We read into scripture what we want sometimes. That is what makes it so difficult to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" what we find in the Bible. It is nearly impossible to set aside our preconceived ideas or try to read with an open mind. We think what we think, and we make scripture say what we want it to say. Who has the right answer? Well, I do, of course. But that's the problem, isn't it? We think we already have the answer and we just find bits of the Bible to back us up.

But the Bible, as the written word of God, is not there to give support to our arguments. It is there as a means for God to speak to us. It is a record of one segment of humanity's response to God. It was written thousands of years ago in at least three different languages – none of them English – in a time and culture so foreign to ours that it is hard to even grasp it. And yet, despite the difficulties, God does speak to us in Scripture. The same thoughts and ideas and situations still happen today. The same longing and anguish of some of the psalms, the same joy and celebration of others. The whole gamut of human emotions is found in just the psalms. And there is plenty more Bible besides that.

It takes humility to read the Bible. It takes the ability to acknowledge "I could be wrong." It takes a willingness to listen to other voices, other perspectives. It takes an openness to the Holy Spirit to guide us. The Bible is not just a book. It is certainly not "Basic Instructions before Leaving Earth" as one church sign put it. It is a manifestation of God's presence in the world. It is a means by which God speaks to us. It is more than just a collection of stories, poems, and essays. It is a terrible two-edged sword that must be handled with respect. It is a dangerous book. As Miss Maudie so wisely noted in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of (another)." As we Episcopalians like to say, "We take the Bible too seriously to take it literally."

The Bible contains all things necessary to salvation. It is the Word of God written. It is not a

weapon to use against our enemies. It is a means by which God speaks to us. It is not a means to support our biases and prejudices. We read the Bible with open hearts and open minds. And we recognize that faithful Christians can come to different conclusions even when reading the same Bible. But God knows our hearts and minds, and God will be the ultimate judge of how well we did. Until that time, then, brothers and sisters, let us love one another. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*