

Sermon: The Challenge of a Capable Wife

Year B, Proper 20

[Proverbs 31:10-31](#); [Psalm 1](#); [Job 38:1-11](#); [Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22](#);
[Jeremiah 11:18-20](#); [Psalm 54](#); [James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#); [Mark 9:30-37](#)

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Months ago when I picked out this Scripture reading for today, I thought I might do something a bit humorous with it. I mean, this capable wife is so capable. She's a successful entrepreneur in multiple businesses (Proverbs 31:16, 24), she serves home cooked meals with exotic ingredients (Proverbs 31:14), she makes her family's clothes (31:24), she's respected by everyone (Proverbs 31:28-29). It says *She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong* (Proverbs 31:17) so apparently she even goes to the gym.

This capable wife isn't capable. She's perfect. I figured I could do a little riff on all the ways being married to a perfect person is exhausting. How much easier it is to live with someone who has their own flaws. You married people would roll your eyes at each other, the way you do. Then I could grab the text from Mark about welcoming the child, that we expect children to be works in progress, with flaws, and we make space for them to be their own selves.

That was my intention.

But I ended up spending much of this week helping my folks cleanup the mess left by a computer problem. We've gotten everything set to rights, I think. But I spent the business hours of the week getting accounts straightened out and automatic payments re-routed. It was in the evenings and early mornings when I worked on the worship service. So I came to this text about the capable wife when I was drained. It wasn't funny anymore. It just made me more and more angry.

No one can be that perfect. Why put something like that in the Bible? I checked on the commentaries, and found out that "capable" is kind of an understatement. A better translation of the Hebrew might be "strong woman," a "woman of worth," a "warriorlike woman."¹ That didn't make it any better, because now she had to be tough as well as perfect. There was an argument that said that this was a female ideal implying there was a male ideal that was just as impossible to meet.² That didn't make it any better to know that both men and women had standards of perfection that nobody could meet. There was an argument that this capable wife was the divine goal, that we all should want to marry ourselves to that divine goal.³ Why would we?

Wellesley College has Alumnae Achievement Awards every year and they invite all of us to attend. I went once. It's a big to do and honestly, the women who win them are amazing. But I will never go again. Because the only thought in my head by the end of the evening is: "What

¹ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Proper 20, Exegetical Perspective, Proverbs 31:10-31" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 75.

² Telford Work, "Proper 20, Theological Perspective, Proverbs 31:10-31" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 74.

³ Work, 76.

have I been doing with my life?" That's why I'm skeptical about the argument that we should all want to be married to a goal of perfection.

Let's be clear about this. #1: Only God is perfect. No human is perfect. #2. Jesus calls us to live in the real world, this world, full of lousy commentaries and rotten people and nice bank ladies with cranky computer systems. That means Jesus is calling us to live in the real world with marriages made up of two very not-perfect people. To read the passage from Proverbs as if, somehow, with enough application of will someone can get to be like this capable wife is not a faithful reading of the text, in my opinion.

And while I'm on this topic, when I wasn't dealing with banks and credit card companies, when I wasn't reading commentaries and Scripture text that was making me a little crazy, I was listening to the news about the aftermath of the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. Maybe because my antennae were all worn out this week, I've got to say, we have got to let go of this pretense that people can be perfect. Our judges can't be perfect, our psychology professors can't be perfect, our politicians can't be perfect, our reporters can't be perfect, our presidents can't be perfect. Trying to pretend that they are is cruel and self-destructive. And when someone has the guts to admit to not perfect, they should not get ridiculed or mocked or jeered before hundreds of people at a political rally because they were brave enough to live in the real world. So in my opinion, acting as if the tensions and failures in our political processes arise from someone else because my side, my people, my team is perfect – that's not just crappy politics, that is poor theology.

So what do I do with this capable wife? I looked at her again, and setting aside the sheer quantity of her accomplishments (they made me tired just to think about them), I noticed something. Everything she's doing here is small scale and for others. She's paying exquisite attention to detail for other people's needs. Now I want to argue that she needs to take care of herself too. But I can see why this Wonder Woman text is paired with the text from Mark. *He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* (Mark 9:35) And yes, our expectations that we have when we welcome a child are much more aligned with #1. Only God is perfect. #2. Jesus calls us to live in the real world.

When we live inside our marriages of imperfect people, are we welcoming each other realistically, as we would a child? We can expect a child to know how to behave, to self-regulate their emotions, to pay attention to the needs of others all at an age appropriate level. And we can expect a child's skills to grow with age and experience.

So, here's my final point in this week when being a capable daughter and capable minister was pretty tough. #1. Only God is perfect. #2. Jesus calls us to live in the real world. And #3. That means you. Expecting yourself to be perfect is not faithful. Expecting yourself to live as if this world is not riddled with completely imperfect people is not faithful. Inside your marriages, inside your families of mothers and fathers and daughter and sons, there is no one who can be capable like this woman from Proverbs. But everyone can pay attention. Everyone can serve each other. Everyone can make sure they are taken care of too. Maybe you take turns being the capable one. Maybe you split up the work so each of you is capable in different areas. Maybe you stake out new areas where you need to be more of a child than your partner. That's the challenge of the Capable Wife: how do you make space for the perfection of God without letting unfaithful expectations seep in the middle of your imperfect, real world marriage?