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“Some Kind of Wonderful”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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Proverbs 31:10–31; Psalm 1; James 3:13–18; Mark 9:30–37

The last track, the culmination of U2’s album

All That You Can’t Leave Behind, published in 2000,

is the beautiful, lyrical song “Grace.”

Bono says he was inspired by numerous female prototypes who together embodied the much-needed concept of grace in that pre-9/11 world.

Grace, she takes the blame

She covers the shame

Removes the stain...

Grace finds goodness in everything

Grace, she’s got the walk...

Grace, she carries the world on her hips...

What once was hurt

What once was friction

What left a mark

No longer stings

Because Grace makes beauty

Out of ugly things

Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.

Mary Gitata, one of our beautiful Kenyan members who immigrated
with her boys to the United States on the week of September 11, 2001,
says this song reminds her so much of her own mother
whose name happened to have been Grace.

If these values were needed in the pre-9/11 world,
can you imagine how much more we might yearn for them today
in our violent world which has engendered massive migrations of people?

I know you've seen the moving videos of the innumerable mothers and fathers
carrying hot and hungry little children on their hips,
carrying the future on their hips
as they seek freedom from violence and its ensuing poverty.

You probably saw the photo of the limp little boy, Aylan,
the precious Syrian child who washed ashore, dead, on a beach in Turkey.
That scene captured my attention and tore at my heart
because I now have a grandson about that same age
who sleeps in that same position in his crib.

And, disturbed like me, you probably wonder what amount of grace
it would take to cover that sting; what amount of grace?

Is it too much to expect these values to be embodied by any one single person?
And yet we sing them, we recite them as poetry, we dream them as a prayer,
as a longing of the soul, as the apex of our contemplative journey.

And such was the intent of the authors of the book of Proverbs,
the sages in the royal court, perhaps of King Solomon,
who sought to instruct the next generation
coming into positions of responsibility, leadership and compassion.
This is what a good life looks like, the sages and counselors try to confer.
This is the goal of your education: to have you embrace wisdom
as if you were going to married it, as if it were your pearl of greatest price,
as if it were going to be your wedded spouse.

And interestingly for us, this collection of wisdom teachings received its final editing in Israel's early post-exilic period when swarms of Hebrew people were migrating like today, exhausted from years of displacement and exile in Babylon to find sanctuary once more in their native homeland.

In times of turmoil and political upheaval, high ideals expressed in songs like *Grace* and in poetic forms like Proverbs are like balm in Gilead for those who are moving from disorientation to reorientation in a broken and fearful world.

The poem that is the last tract, the culmination of 31 chapters on the album called *The Instruction* in Hebrew, but translated for us as *Proverbs*, is a poem which expresses an ideal personae, "A Woman of Worth."

The word for wife and woman in Hebrew is *isha*, for husband and man, *ish*.

Not only is it a poem, but it is an acrostic poem,

a poetic form where each line begins with one of the 22 ordered letters of the Hebrew alphabet: *Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, He...*

I don't think I've ever heard this poem read or explicated anywhere other than at a woman's funeral.

I know my father insisted upon it being read at my mother's funeral, and I know some of you have used it to memorialize your very cherished loved ones, and rightly so.

But as guiding instruction for living the good life in our present and future, instead of looking back on having lived the good life,

I think Proverbs 31 has something to teach us still.

The instruction, in this case, is presented to the young King Lemuel

by his mother rather than his father, the first and only occurrence in Proverbs of a mother's insight and perspective on wisdom.

In order to understand the full import of the acrostic poem,

I think it's necessary to get a running start by looking at chapter 31 as a whole. There are warnings to the young royal in verses 2 and 3 about wasting vigor on women who have the potential to ruin a king.

We have to remember that political marriages were the rule in ancient times, and often foreign wives and their entourages existed in the courts of their husbands as political powerhouses, as little pitchers with big ears, who could fell the king with one little shared word, should they so choose.

Then there are warnings to the young royal in verses 4 and 5 against intoxication with the caveat that it's okay for the poor and perishing to drown their troubles, but not for a young king.

And then, directly preceding the poem is this imperative to the king to be:

“Advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly;

defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8–9).

For which, to such a noble and overwhelming calling, a king is going to need the kind of support and backing on the home front that the ensuing acrostic poem is going to call for.

“A Woman of Worth,” the poem begins, “who can find?”

To be, or not to be, that is the question?

Does such a person, does such a composite of people, does such a perfect partner exist to help someone in leadership live out his or her calling?

This composite of a woman of worth is some kind of wonderful!

She's one hard worker—she does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her verbs are all action verbs: she seeks, she works, she brings,

she rises, she provides, she buys, she plants, she girds, she makes,
she sells, she teaches, she laughs.

Her industriousness supports her spouse, so much so that he praises her;

her children, bedecked in crimson, call her blessed;

her grace overflows into the marketplace and the community.

From *Alef* to *Tav*, from A-Z, she is larger than life!

This woman of worth reminds me of the larger than life Mother Ginger,

a character in *The Nutcracker* ballet, a man usually dressed as a woman who carries the world not on her hips, but under her generous skirt and releases them:
a large brood of happily dancing children.

I saw a wonder woman just like this at Wrightsville Beach last weekend

where Hedge and I had traveled to attend a wedding.

She made her way from the house to the water's edge

with a loaded backpack on her back and a beach umbrella strapped to it,
a canvas bag slung over one shoulder filled with towels and toys,
pushing a stroller with a baby in it, topped by a cooler,

I suppose, filled with drinks and snacks.

My eyes took a snapshot of her as we passed each other on the beach.

And I couldn't help but compare her to all of the migrant mothers and fathers

I have seen in the news these past few weeks,

carrying babies in slings on their backs or chests,
dragging older children by the hand, supporting elderly parents by the elbow,
while lunging for sandwiches up for grabs, tossed out by police officers.

I am reminded by these scenes that much of the Old Testament,

much of our Judeo-Christian history is the story of mass migrations of people,
the exodus and the exile being central to our primal narrative.

And that one of the bible's greatest affirmations of faith is

*My ancestor was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt
with a few people and lived there and became a great nation,
powerful and numerous.*

But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor.

Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors,

*and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression.
So the Lord brought us out of Egypt,
with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm
with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders.
The Lord brought us to this place and gave us this land,
a land flowing with milk and honey;
and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you,
O Lord, have given me (Deuteronomy 26:5–11).*

The amazing grace of the Lord who has helped our people overcome these many dangers, toils, and snares results in gratitude and generosity for the children of God who see and acknowledge this bigger picture. For I am reminded by these scenes that my own ancestors also were wandering Arameans, by-products of the 19th century potato famine in Ireland, who migrated to Scotland and then eventually to the United States.

The *ish or isha* of worth, who can find?

Even if she (or he) is incredibly industrious and active all of the time, even if she (or he) cares exceptionally for her immediate community of spouse and children who rise up and call her blessed and praise her, is that sufficient to be considered “worthy?”

Even if she (or he) protects her brood while the rest of the world swarms around her in alarming streams of displacement, does that deem her role as family maven, one of worth?

Do all of her active verb actions redeem her even if she fiddles with the beach umbrella while Aleppo burns?

There was a powerful, poignant political cartoon in *The Durham Herald Sun* last week that depicted a beach scene with the little Syrian boy, Aylan, lying face down in the surf on the left, and a man in a three-piece suit, a world leader, with his head buried in the sand on the right.

The *ish or isha* of worth, who can find? What makes one wise in the world's eyes,
in God's eyes, the poem asks?

Scripture redeems her or him for me with a couple of couplets.

From Proverbs, the first is this: "She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy" (v. 20).

In other words, she allows her world to be rocked by the world outside.

And thus, she supports her spouse in his higher calling

"to advocate for the voiceless, for the rights of the poor,
to speak up and judge fairly,

defending the rights of the poor and needy" (vs. 8–9).

She is his partner, and he hers, in carrying not just their own children on their hip
but in carrying the world's children on their hip.

Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.

And the second redeeming quality is this:

"Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,

but a woman (or a man) who fears the Lord is to be praised," Proverbs says.

Proverbs ends where it began, with the fear of the Lord, the reverence of the Lord,
the awe of the Lord, the wonder of the Lord,

and our ensuing gratitude and humility before the Lord,

being the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of a good life.

And the knowledge of the Holy One as our understanding (Proverbs 9:10).

Standing openly before God, "in the deeply sane recognition that we are not God,"

and standing openly before our neighbor as advocate and as defender

is the beginning of wisdom. Amen.

(Ellen Davis. *Getting to Know God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, p. 103)