

You Surpass Them All
from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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Reading: Proverbs 31:10-31

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We don't turn to the book of Proverbs for a sermon text as often as we probably should. We have no bias against the book. Perhaps it suffers from placement directly behind the poetic Psalms we know so well and turn to so easily. Or maybe we move beyond Proverbs because there are only so many wise sayings we can absorb at one sitting. After awhile they begin to sound like chapters from Kahil Gibran's "The Prophet" or the messages inside Chinese fortune cookies. For example, here are a few lines from the thirteenth chapter:

"The light of the righteous burns brightly; the embers of the wicked will be put out."

Wealth quickly come by dwindles away, but if it comes little by little, it multiplies."

“Good intelligence wins favors, but treachery leads to disaster.”

We can only absorb so many of these wisdom sayings before the verses begin to blend in our minds.

The tone of Proverbs 31 is different. The words are more descriptive and less prescriptive. The writer, the mother of the King, is telling him to marry a strong wife. She is describing a woman who is outstanding in her community. She is the pride of her husband and children and held in high regard among those in the community. She enjoys the trust of her husband, she provides for her family’s needs, she buys property and plants a crop, she hardly ever sleeps, she is generous with the poor and accepting toward the outcasts of society, she tailors her husband’s fine robes, she lives one day at a time and is not anxious about the morrow, she keeps a sense of humor. “When she opens her mouth, it is to speak wisely, and loyalty is the theme of her teaching. Her sons with one accord call her happy; her husband too, and he sings her praises: ‘Many a woman shows how capable she is; but you surpass them all.’” (Prov. 31:26-29)

Given that today is Mother’s Day, it might occur to you that you have known women like this. This writer could be talking about my mother and, perhaps, about your mother also. Today we would call this woman Super Mom for she shows remarkable skills at administrative coordination, community organization, family counseling, efficient use of her time, organizational leadership, ability to operate in a man’s world as well as a woman’s world, theological reflection and faithful practice. Children will give thanks for such a mother and husbands will acknowledge that they would be lost without her. To call her merely “capable”, as the text does, is an understatement. This woman is extraordinary. And let us be sure to

note the context for this celebration of ability: A self-sufficient household where they produce just about all they need to live.

A member of our extended family read this text at my mother's funeral several years ago. I had never really heard the text before that day. I'm not sure why. What struck me then, and now, was how entrepreneurial this woman of Proverbs 31 was. It is as though, if she were living today, she bought land in the Napa Valley, planted vineyards, harvested the produce, made wine and had people coming from all over California visiting her vineyard. Meanwhile she was president of the local Sierra Club chapter, was in the first class of Leadership San Francisco, went to all of her kids' school plays and never missed a soccer game. She was active in her church and taught in the church school and still had time to lecture on entrepreneurship in the business school at Stanford. And still she ran an organized household, entertained her friends, cooked holiday dinners and read before retiring to bed.

Why are we so amazed at this capable woman of Scripture when we are surrounded by similar women in our own lives? Perhaps it is our notice that she does all these things in what was and, in many places still is, a patriarchal society. A "man's world" in other words. This woman holds her own, makes her contribution, and moves on. We know women like her who buy and sell, teach and administrate, practice and heal, legislate, adjudicate, stipulate and create. We are blessed by them and blessed to know them. We do not have to look far to find them in our own constellations. They make our society the stimulating environment it is. They are our mothers, our wives, our grandmothers, our aunts our sisters, and our mentors. No wonder someone decided to give them recognition on a day such as this. We can move far beyond Hallmark and sentimental and commercial

interests in Mother's Day. Here, in this text, is a celebration of courage, energy, imagination and love.

What more can possibly be said about such women that has not been said already in Proverbs or in the latest account of heroic mothers in Haiti or Rwanda? Probably nothing new can be added but something extremely important needs to be said. Each of us needs to reflect on the people, the women, who played formative roles in our development and give thanks for their influence. Even if the women who first come to mind are not perfect, more neurotic than heroic in our experience, more distracted than attentive, we still do well to give them recognition and praise. Why, you ask? Because there is so much that each of them did and gave and sacrificed that we will never know. Even what we do know of their lives gives us only a sketch of their biography-length stories. Until we read their letters of thirty or fifty years ago or until someone tells us about their early years we don't realize how much we owe these people of our past for who we are in the present.

My cousin, Catherine Thomas of Atlanta, has just sent to me, a collection of letters from my mother to her mother written over the last sixty years. They were cousins who grew up together in South Carolina. This correspondence extended over their lifetimes and each of them lived well into her eighties. To read these letters is to hear my mother's joy over new phrases my brother has constructed at the age of three. It is to hear her observe that my father is "very professional at work" (he was a pharmacist) "but just a big kid when at home." To read these letters is to appreciate how she filled her days caring for us and still assisting my dad at the drugstore during the Great Depression and, later during the war, when help was scarce. It is to hear how much they enjoyed having family and guests spend the weekends with them and to know how deep was the faith they

passed on to us. Indeed, as the writer of Proverbs said, she “surpassed them all.”

When my mother was in her early twenties she traveled from California to Missouri to marry my father. It was 1933, the bottom of the Great Depression, when there was only enough money for one railroad ticket from California to Missouri. My mother gathered the emotional strength to tell her family good-bye in Los Angeles in order to travel back to Missouri for the wedding which was to be at Hollister, Missouri in an outdoor service on Presbyterian Hill, conducted by my grandfather.

My parents had met in Florida where my father was a student at the University and my mother was living with her family in St. Petersburg at the time. Her family owned orange groves and businesses there, all of which they lost in the crash of 1929. Within a year of that economic tragedy my mother’s parents and their four auburn-haired daughters took what belongings they had, climbed into a Lincoln touring car and drove to California, the land of promise.

She was twenty years old and, with her father, was the other principal driver. As a kid, that was always my favorite part of the story. My mother who, in my lifetime, never quite seemed to master the challenge of high-speed Interstate highways, had skillfully wrestled a 1928 touring car across two thousand miles of two-lane western highways to the city of Los Angeles. And then she learned to find her way around that growing city too.

In California they put what money was left into orange groves in the San Fernando valley and struggled to hold on to a small orchard. After my father proposed marriage there was only enough extra cash

for one ticket back to Missouri. None of her family attended the wedding. I can't imagine how painful that must have been.

My mother bid her family good-bye at the old Santa Fe station in Los Angeles and began the three day trip back to the Midwest. She changed trains in Kansas City, heading for the Ozarks of Missouri. As the train neared Hollister my mother asked the conductor at what time they would be stopping at the station. "Oh," he said, "we don't stop there. We only slow down enough for you to jump off and for me to throw your bags behind you." And she, traveling for the first time in the wilds of Missouri, believed him.

She and my father spent the next sixty years together in Missouri where she continued in my father's judgment and, later in ours, to "surpass them all."

I tell you this story believing that, no doubt, you too can tell similar stories of faith, courage and emotional strength from your family history. These are the stories that mold us and tell us who and whose we are. They lead to theological reflection in which we give thanks for those who have given us their best and taught us to learn from their triumphs and from their mistakes.

I come from emotionally strong stock. A lovely "California refugee" and a "tough Missouri native" who, by faith and grace, made something work that continues to bless their children and grandchildren. I am forever grateful to them for the gifts they gave us and, particularly, for the hope-filled faith they always demonstrated.

My father was always emotionally strong but I have come to realize, of late, that it was my mother who was the stronger. She knew loss and the sadness that came with it. She was an Agnes Scott girl who never saw her senior year because the money ran out. She

bore the pain of leaving one home in the south in order to establish another in the far west for a few years, only to leave that one for a small town in Missouri, a state she had never even visited. She did not look back nor did she complain. She loved my father more than any man expects to be loved and he called her “blessed”. She knew what was best for all of us and she did her best to give it: faith, hope and love. Especially her love.

Humorist Roy Blount, Jr., trying to get a fix on his mother’s considerable influence on him, writes in his book, *Be Sweet*: “She used to say, ‘I love you to pieces.’ I guess I’ve spent the rest of my life picking up the pieces.”

I think that is true for many of us. We spend a lifetime realizing our gratitude to particular individuals who spent their lifetime giving themselves to us. As we “pick up the pieces” the pattern of their influence becomes more clear and, in particular and serendipitous moments, we gain understanding about ourselves, as well as about them.

They gave us life.

Thanks be to God.