

**Homily, St. Andrew's  
Proper 25B, Sept 20, 2015  
Proverbs 31:10-31**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

“The Good Wife” is a hit TV show about to begin its 7th season. The show began with the premise of a politician - Illinois State’s Attorney Peter Florrick - disgraced in a scandal involving both sex and fraud. Along with betraying his family by sleeping with hookers, he gets convicted of fraud and goes to jail. This means that his wife, Alicia Florrick, must return to work to become the breadwinner and hold her family together. Alicia had given up being a lawyer 15 years earlier to support her husband in his career and to raise their children and now, in the face of her humiliation, she has to begin again.

She is deemed “The Good Wife” in the beginning because she stands by her husband despite his betrayal. The image is of the distraught but forgiving wife literally standing behind her husband at the press conference where he admits his sins and resigns. But as the show develops and she discovers who she is in a new way, Alicia gains a strength she didn’t know she had along with a public profile that earns her the nickname “Saint Alicia.” When Peter gets out of prison and seeks to return to public life, Alicia has become his greatest asset in a new way and he ends up needing her more than ever to get re-elected. And so the meaning of “The Good Wife” shifts and grows and becomes something so much more than how it began.

Today we hear an ancient description of “the good wife” from the concluding passage of the Book of Proverbs. It begins with a question: “A capable wife who can find?” and then goes on to describe what amounts to the perfect woman: She does her husband good; she works with willing hands; she gets up while it is still night to cook for her family; she makes astute business decisions; she reaches out to the needy; she makes fine clothes for her family; she sells her wares in the marketplace; she teaches kindness... in a word, she is super-woman! She does it all and she makes her husband look good in the process. It’s a bit like the image of “the good wife” that the TV show develops and deconstructs in turn.

When I encounter people who are familiar with this passage from Proverbs, most either love it or hate it. Some love it because it’s such a good description of their mom or their sister or their close neighbour. Others hate it because it’s an image of the perfect wife that pretty much puts all the rest of us regular women to shame. Prefaced with “the bible says...” this passage could unfortunately be used as a big stick to show why any other woman simply doesn’t measure up. But poetry is never simply literal and some in-depth study, including its context and role within the Book of Proverbs as a whole, opens it up to reveal new meaning.

The “Ode to a Capable Wife,” also known as the “Hymn to the Valiant Woman,” is in the form of an acrostic poem... that is a poem where each line begins with the next letter of the alphabet. We read poetry differently than we read prose because we know that poetry, like any art form, exists to express more than the literal combination of words. With poetry, the message is much more than the sum of its parts and so this poem is much more than a checklist of tasks done by a perfect woman.

That said, the poem is rich in action. There is a great deal of repetition not always apparent in English translation. In Hebrew, repetition is not about a lack of creativity in word selection, but rather it is a rhetorical technique to highlight the point being made. In the case of this poem the word most repeated is from the verb root for “to do” or “to make.” It appears 5 times, translated as “work,” or “works”, “make”, and “have done.” This means that productive activity is of key importance to the point of the poem.

In the centre of the poem, a connection is made between what the Woman of Valour does for her family and how she gives to others: “she puts her hands to the distaff, and her hand holds the spindle; she opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.” In literal Hebrew translation there is a couplet speaking of her hands, palms, palms and hands. The same hands that produce goods, also care for the needy. There is a paralleling of the importance of what this woman does in and for her household and what she offers to others. The hands that grasp to produce, open wide to provide for all in need.

Also of key importance are the linguistic and thematic connections to another woman highlighted in the Book of Proverbs: Woman Wisdom. Woman Wisdom is an enigmatic character who is central in the first 9 chapters of Proverbs. In the first chapter, she “cries out in the street” and “in the squares she raises her voice,” to call the passers-by to abandon their foolish ways and embrace wisdom. In chapter 8, Woman Wisdom is there at the beginning of creation, “the first of his acts of long ago,” and she was there when the whole world was created, dancing with delight at the new human creations. It is going too far to interpret Woman Wisdom as fully divine, but she certainly has a special relationship with God the Creator. And the connection between her and Jesus in the flow of wisdom literature is clear, if not direct, with the clearest connection being in Matthew 11 when Jesus is referenced with a conclusion: “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” (v.19) Notice the importance of productive work in this Gospel reference... It is Wisdom’s deeds that are the source of her reputation.

The parallels between Woman Wisdom of chapters 1 to 9 and the Woman of Valour in chapter 31 are undeniable. In the first line of our poem, the Woman of Valour is described as “far more precious than jewels,” which is the same description used of Woman Wisdom in chapter 3. Both women are into housebuilding... in chapter 9, Woman Wisdom puts on a feast: “Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table...” Wisdom is a hostess extraordinaire. The Woman of Valour likewise provides food for her household, makes fine clothing, and “looks well to the ways of her household...” (v 27) This poem is truly remarkable because the everyday work of women is basically made synonymous with Wisdom. I might even go as far as to say that as Jesus embodies, incarnates, God the Creator; our Woman of Valour today embodies, incarnates, the Wisdom that was the first act of creation.

The theological core of Wisdom’s teaching in Proverbs relates to “the fear of the Lord.” Indeed, this theme for the Book of Proverbs is found very near the beginning of chapter 1: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (v 7) The concept of “the fear of Lord” isn’t about feeling afraid, it is about reverence for God, God’s power and God’s love. It’s a sense of awe that inspires obedience. Our Woman of Valour today embodies the teaching of Wisdom throughout Proverbs about the fear of the Lord not because she fears for her household, but rather because she honours and reveres God in all that she does.

The message is about making all that we do a spiritual practice of a living faith. It is about approaching every task, all our work - both in the home and in the world, as sacred. If our poem says anything today, it is that any line between sacred and secular work is misplaced. The sacred is found in the everyday and we too embody Wisdom, the wisdom of God, when our day-to-day activities are done in reverence to God. Nothing is left out, for the acrostic poem speaks to honouring God with the fullness of our lives - from A to Z.

And so at the end the Book of Proverbs comes the fullness of Wisdom's teaching expressed as the conclusion of the Ode to the Capable Wife. The result of her practical and faithful work in the fear of the Lord is the instruction: "let her works praise her in the city gates." If there is some melding of identity between Woman Wisdom from the beginning of Proverbs with this woman, there has been an important shift. The Book began with Wisdom crying out at the city gates to choose wisdom ways. But the Book of Proverbs ends not with words, but with action... it is the deeds of our Woman of Valour that praise her. She doesn't have to say a word, for her works say it all. In all that she has been doing, caring for her household and reaching out beyond it, she has embodied wisdom and wisdom's teaching and she becomes known and recognized for it publicly.

Alicia Florrick started as "The Good Wife" because of her commitment to her family and she becomes known because of what she does beyond her family. The Woman of Valour is likewise praised for both her work within her family and for her work in the community caring for the poor. Maybe it sounds like too much but then there is something so compelling about the promise of being praised, of being known, for what we have done... how we have contributed to the betterment of the world by loving people both in our immediate circle and beyond it.

And so may we care for those around us and those beyond us in the pervasive and practical ways God calls us to actively live our faith. May we practice Wisdom with reverence for God in each moment and through every task of our everyday lives. And in the end, may our works praise us in the city gates.