

“Divine Wisdom”

First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Proverbs 31:25-31

New Testament Lesson: James 3:13-17

On Monday, CBS announced that Norah O’Donnell will be the new anchor of the CBS Evening News and serve as managing editor. Katie Couric, who was the first woman to anchor the CBS Evening News, congratulated O’Donnell by Instagram, saying she is “the third woman to be the solo anchor of a network evening news broadcast . . . , an important and needed step in representing more than half the population.” (Diane Sawyer at ABC News is the other woman to have done so.) Just three women in the entire history of broadcast news.

What should we make of the roles women have had in society, and the breakthroughs for women that are occurring more and more, even if it is at a glacial pace? Where does the disparity between men and women originate, why is it there?

Ancient, spiritual wisdom tells us that the purest expression of masculinity is characterized by logic, rationality, strength and leadership. Whereas femininity is characteristically kind, generous, wise and supportive.¹

That’s not to say that men are all logical and women are more kind. We each have the capacity for all those characteristics – logic and wisdom, rationality and kindness, strength and generosity, leadership and being supportive. Rather than being all one way or the other, think of it as a tendency that we each balance to one degree or another. In other words, there are plenty of very strong and logical women and lots of wise and supportive men.

And yet, society as a whole tends to put women in one category and men in another. This is even more so in places where women still lack basic, human rights because of gender discrimination. So, it’s interesting for us today, on Mother’s Day, to look at what the Bible says about the defining characteristics of men and women, and who comes out on top!

Let’s start by looking at the title of today’s Old Testament Bible passage.

¹<https://www.beyondtheordinaryshow.com/spiritual-dictionary/divine-balance-masculine-feminine/>

At verse 1, it's titled as "The words of King Lemuel," given to him as advice from his mother, or as an oracle from his mother. It's not surprising that this ruler, King Lemuel was a man. That's how society was back then. But what is surprising is that King Lemuel got this bit of wisdom from his mother. Or really, not that it came from his mother, but that the author of this Biblical goes out of his way to say that the wisdom came from a woman, even if it had to be put into the mouth of a man for us to learn about it.

Surprising, but not really. If we look across the Bible as a whole it is full of stories about women rising to power and influence. And most of these stories serve as a corrective to how society tends to treat women. For instance, it's no coincidence that in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ruth comes right after this final chapter in Proverbs about the qualities of a godly woman. Ruth is one of the most faithful and godly women in the Bible. Other powerful, godly women in the Bible include Deborah who was set as judge over Israel, Esther the Hebrew Queen, Lydia the business woman and Christian trailblazer, not to mention all the women from lower places in society who were instrumental in God's plans – the virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene among them.

The Bible goes to great lengths to acknowledge and promote the role of women. And not only that, but to use both male and female qualities to reveal to us the fullness of God's being.

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you," says God, in Isaiah 66. Isn't that cool? God is saying, "Do you remember how Mom made you feel - or whoever that nurturing person was? How safe you were? Remember how she would draw you close and then draw you in? Well, she learned it from me," says God, "and that, my child, is how I care for you."

So, when we hear descriptions of womanhood in today's passage from Proverbs, those are also reflections of God. "Strength and dignity are her clothing," says Proverbs, "and she laughs at the time to come." God's strength and dignity – and God's blessing upon our future, our time to come – these godly qualities are reflected in this passage about a woman's best qualities. It takes all of us – men and women, boys and girls to even begin to reflect the fullness of who God is.

Further, it says, "Her children rise up and call her happy." Now, in most other translations, it says, "Her children rise up and call her blessed." They call their mother blessed because she is the source of their blessings, just as God is the source of our blessings.

And let's face it folks, when it comes to being guided and blessed in life, who better than a good and faithful mother? *Who ever heard a mother say any of the following things to her children, things like:*

"How on earth can you see the computer screen sitting back so far? Come on, get up there real close." Or how about, "Sure, just leave all the lights on. It makes the house look so cheery." Oh, and I love this one: "Let me smell that shirt. Yeah, it's good for another week." And then once you get the shirt on, how about this: "I don't have a tissue with me ... just use your sleeve." Who here has ever heard any of that from mom?

Dad, maybe. But not mom. No, Proverbs speaks of a woman worthy of her children's praise, not because they always like the rules, but because they truly are blessed by her care and concern, just as we are blessed by God's care and concern for us. So on behalf of all children, thank you, moms, and all the loving, motherly women here and throughout the world. Of course, it's not just the children who appreciate mom. Proverbs says, "Her husband, too, ... praises her," saying, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

The praise we see here is similar to the praise of God found throughout the Bible, where God is described as more excellent and greater than all else. So, when it comes to men and women and who comes out on top, there's no real surprise – it is God who comes out on top, with both men and women taken together as a reflection of the fullness of God's being.

And God has a warning to men in regards to women, a warning that sadly is still needed today. Proverbs says, "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." This means women are not to be judged by their outward looks, guys – and gals. No, women like all people of all ages are to be judged by their faithfulness to God.

Nothing good ever comes from objectifying women – or men – based on their appearance, or their gender. The true measure of a person is his or her character – do we reflect the best of who God created us to be. Or do we let stereotypes limit a person's full potential?

As a society, we are called to value and respect women as equal partners. As it says in Proverbs, "Give her a share in the fruit of her hands," "and let her works praise her in the city gates." A full share of the fruits of her labors and praise in the city gates.

The city gates were the center of society! And that's just how central women are to our success and happiness as God's people.

As it says in Genesis, God created humankind in his own image, "... Male and female he created them." We are created in the image of God, and at our best. So let us all – male and female – reflect that image of God in who we are and how we relate to the world around us. Happy Mother's Day; Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, in your eternal and divine wisdom you made us for relationship. We celebrate the people you have brought into our lives, especially our mothers.

For all those who teach us to love, we praise you. For those who inspire us to be generous, just and kind, we thank you. For those who nurture our relationship with you, we rejoice.

And, for those who disappoint us, we ask for grace to be compassionate and forgiving. In all our relationships may we live the truth of your love for us which knows no bounds.

We pray all this in the powerful name of Jesus, your son our savior, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**