

## In Praise of Women Who Lead: Uncommon Wisdom in Proverbs 31

The main focus of today's message

Proverbs 31 contains not just a reframing but also a revolution in viewing women as leaders of faith and serves as a call for the church to welcome and value women's varied voices and experiences as both necessary to spiritual formation and critical to the flourishing of the church and our world.

### Introduction

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost is a unique opportunity for us to approach the much-maligned Proverbs 31 with fresh eyes and hearts. Vestry crafters, homemakers, brides-to-be, and busy mothers the world over have too often had to settle for reading Proverbs 31 as nothing more than an opportunity to discuss the intricacies of family and, more specifically, heterosexual marriages and their place in society and their conservative traditional roles. But, read with open hearts and a newly awakened sense of wonder, Proverbs 31 offers the world an appreciation for women's strength and capability and only begins to represent the diverse roles women play in the lives of communities of our congregations. One would think that such a depiction of a 'capable wife' would not need to be read through cultural and historical stigma to be appreciated fully for its content and subtle meaning amidst the other scriptures for the day from the lectionary. Yet on this day, there is Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, and Mark 9:30-37.

### The Uncommon Wisdom of Proverbs 31

What would it mean rather to be a woman whose value was more than rubies, who was strong, dynamic and capable? But that is just what the woman showcased in Proverbs 31:10-31 is. This 'capable wife' is not someone who, as is often imagined when this passage is read out in church, sits quietly in the kitchen peeling vegetables; that's the able wife. This able wife is an entrepreneur ('she examines the field and buys it'; 'she studies the merchants and makes a profit'; she would never spend a dollar that she couldn't make herself), a businesswoman ('she extends her hands to the poor') and a prudent administrator ('she considers a field and buys it'). The text leaves us with a question about sound, decisive leadership.

These are the traits of a woman of worth and strength: She is trustworthy, hardworking, prudent and compassionate; She provides nourishment for her children and nurtures them; She demonstrates what authentic leadership means in terms of caring and proactivity. She manages her resources and trades wisely. She has the insight and courage of her convictions, which stems from her deep awe of God, who keeps her humble and wise in her actions and decision-making.

theologians in Christian history and within our Methodist heritage, starting with such voices as Phoebe Palmer, a Holiness movement pioneer.



She and Anna Howard Shaw, an ordained minister and suffragist, charted a path for women in laity and leadership. They remind us that women's voices have ignited our faith by advocating for women's roles in ministry and influencing the church and society with their theology and activism.

All of this dovetails perfectly with the mystery of the righteous so beautifully described in the opening verses of Psalm 1: Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And His law he meditates day and night. Like the capable wife of Proverbs 31, these are the righteous who are firmly 'established in the fear of the Lord'. Within this very Psalm that sees the capable wife as a blessing, those blessed by God who deliberate on God's Word are seen as 'like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper'. Authentic leadership has a solid foundation of spiritual integrity and moral clarity.

### Women's Leadership in the New Testament

The following epistle readings, especially James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, emphasise the place of wisdom and humility in leadership. James tells us: 'Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.' We see that wisdom, embodied in the kind of woman that Proverbs calls 'a capable wife', finds practical application in her character, actions, and relationships within the home. We see that the leader who walks in wisdom walks in humility, considering the welfare of her congregation above her own. Women church leaders today can take inspiration from this because they are called to model the same virtues that characterise a capable wife.

And in Mark 9:30-37, when Jesus turns on his heels on the road to Caesarea Philippi to teach his disciples about greatness, the lesson flips the patriarchal notion of power and authority upside down: For whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. In saying this, he called a little child and had him stand among them. And taking him in his arms, he said to them: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' I have encountered too many women leaders to assume they don't know this or that it doesn't profoundly inform who they are and how they exercise their leadership in ways that are often invisible to the rest of us. I have learned that rather than seeking the limelight or displaying strength of will, they are more likely to operate through the habits of grace: service, loaf and monotropism, and invitation to play. By relying on those habits of grace, women can be and do in practice what Christ has already proclaimed and demonstrated, which could make for an ideal leader.

### Celebrating Women Theologians and Their Contributions

We must open a worship space that reflects and honours the voices and contributions of women from our congregations past and present—but especially from the long, rich tradition of women



Furthermore, women have enriched our worship both through hymnody: Fanny J Crosby, who wrote more than 8,000 hymns, and Anna B Warner, author of 'Jesus Loves Me', are just two examples. These hymn writers have given the church classic songs of faith, resilience and hope. Indeed, Crosby's 'Safe in the Arms of Jesus' and Warner's 'Jesus Loves Me' echo many of the women of Proverbs 31. By honouring their contributions, we celebrate the women whose songs inspire us and encourage our congregations to sing

#### The Call for Continuous Recognition and Support

Its message has even more to say than a sermon preached on one Sunday in March because it calls for a commitment to a year-round engagement in recognising the leadership of women's ordination, creating mentoring opportunities, and pulling up stools for women at the round table so that the whole church can embody a diversity of voices and talents, a sign of a life-giving and rich faith.

Also, in reflecting on the virtues of the 'capable wife,' we are reminded that leadership is not tied to having an exceptional job or title but to cultivating particular virtues in general: resilience, compassion, and wisdom. The church encourages all congregants—men and women—to exercise leadership within its mission.

#### Conclusion

To conclude, Proverbs 31 reminds us of the critical roles women play all around us in our faith communities and that it's time to reclaim the wisdom of the ancient scribe and return it to its original home among the words of Psalm 1, to James 3 and Mark 9, to pull together the threads of all the remarkable verses cited above, and see them as a shimmering tapestry of parallels, illuminating the dangers of those old ideas about women's leadership, as well as offering everyone a chance to return to our shared beliefs about the gifts and wisdom of all women in the life of the church. The next time you hear a woman preach or lead prayer, say a blessing for her and all women leaders.