“Women of Valor”*
Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr.
Senior Minister

September 19, 2021

From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr.
Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of
“Women of Valor”*

Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

The Monday after Mother’s Day, 2014, the late Rachel Held Evans, author of *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, wrote this in her blog:

“It never fails. Every year, (on this day), I receive a flood of messages from women who spent yesterday morning grimacing through yet another Proverbs 31 sermon.

The pastors usually mean well. They want to honor women on Mother’s Day, so they turn to the biblical passage most associated with femininity, the one
that culminates with what may be the most cross-stitched Bible verse of all time: “Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.”

But for women like me who grew up thinking of the domestic super-heroine of Proverbs 31 as just another impossible standard by which to mark my shortcomings as a woman, the passage can come with some… baggage.

That’s because, too often, we focus on the Proverbs 31 Woman’s roles as a way of reducing womanhood to marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, when really, this passage is about character that transcends both gender and circumstance.” (Rachel Held Evans, blog, Monday, May 12, 2014).

Ms. Held Evans went on to explain that Proverbs 31 is much more complex than most people acknowledge. Most of us find ourselves grimacing with the simplistic “perfect” image of the “good wife.” But we should know more about this passage before we toss it in the pile entitled: “passages from the Bible from which to run away or ignore.”

**First, Proverbs 31 is a poem.** The subject of a twenty-two line poem found in the last chapter of the book of Proverbs, the “woman of noble character” is meant to be a tangible expression of the book’s celebrated virtue of wisdom. **The male author is essentially showing us what wisdom looks like in action.** (The astute reader will immediately make a connection between the Proverbs 31 Woman and “Woman Wisdom,” found in the earlier 30 chapters of Proverbs.)

Packed with hyperbolic, militaristic imagery, the poem is an acrostic, so the first word of each verse begins with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet in succession. This communicates a sense
of totality as the poet praises the everyday achievements of an upper-class Jewish wife, a woman who keeps her household functioning day and night by buying, trading, investing, planting, sewing, spindling, managing servants, extending charity, providing food for the family, and preparing for each season. Like any good poem, the purpose of this one is to draw attention to the often-overlooked glory of the everyday.

Rachel writes, “As a poem, Proverbs 31 should not be interpreted prescriptively as a job description for all women. Its purpose is to celebrate wisdom-in-action, not to instruct women everywhere to get married, have children, and take up the loom” (Ibid).

**Second, the “Target Audience” of Proverbs 31 is Men.** In *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, Rachel Held Evans explains something she learned from her Jewish friend Ahava. In Ahava’s culture, it’s not the women who memorize Proverbs 31, but the men. (I have never heard of a Christian Men’s Gathering focusing on Proverbs 31… 2000 years into this gig - it’s about time) Ahava says “They memorize it, they sing it as a song of praise to the women in their lives – their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, and friends. Ahava’s husband sings Proverbs 31 to her at every Sabbath meal.” I know Jewish friends who do this as well! In fact, I have seen it happen at Shabbat dinners with friends.

This poem is NOT prescriptive. It is NOT even instructive (except for a male audience when it reads, “Praise her for all her hands have done.” And yet many Christians interpret this passage prescriptively, as a command to women rather than an ode to women, with the home-based endeavors of the Proverbs 31 woman cast as THE ideal lifestyle for all women of faith.
An empire of books, conferences, products, and media has evolved from a subtle repositioning the poem’s intended audience from that of men to that of women. In the Evangelical Christian community, there is actually a book entitled, *Becoming the Woman God Wants Me to Be: A 90 Day Guide to Living the Proverbs 31 Life*. This was written to encourage women to stay in the house and dedicate themselves to working for the man.

This proverb has become oppressive because men (and women) have turned it from a song through which a man offers a woman praise to a task list through which a woman earns praise. Once again I say, don’t blame the text for the way we (most particularly men) have abused the text – and thus pile on more abuse of women, teens and young girls.

**Finally, and most important of all, Proverbs 31 Celebrates Valor.** The best translation of the first line of Proverbs 31 is not “a virtuous woman who can find?” Rather, it is best translated, “a woman of valor who can find?” (The Hebrew is *eshet chayil*, “woman of valor”; the male equivalent is *gibor chayil*, “man of valor.”) In Judaism, women cheer one another on with the blessing offered in this poem – celebrating everything from promotions, to pregnancies, to acts of mercy and justice, to battles with cancer with a hearty “*eshet chayil*”! (Think of it as something like the Jewish “you go girl.”)

Each one of us needs to celebrate women of valor. When fighting the battles of life – like overcoming cancer – you are *Eshet Chayil* – “a woman of valor.” When you get up each morning and create, care, lead, write, pray, drive your children around while they are driving you crazy - you are *Eshet Chayil* – “a woman of valor.” Men,
say it to the women in your life. Women, say it to yourself and other women in your life.

**Valor isn’t about what you do, it’s about how you do it.** If you are a stay-at-home mom, be a stay-at-home mom of valor. If you are a working mom, be a working mom of valor.

If you are a nurse, be a nurse of valor. If you are a CEO or a receptionist, if you are rich or poor, single, divorced, widowed or married – do it all with valor. *That’s* what makes someone a Proverbs 31 Woman, not creating a life worthy of a Pinterest board.

Proverbs 31 should not be tossed out. It should be interpreted correctly. It should be sung as song of praise to women not turned into a horribly burdensome task list of “to dos.” It should celebrate faithfulness instead of judge and afflict women. It should serve as a door rather than a wall.

When you open the door, you will see the many women of valor there – in scripture and in our lives. Proverbs 31 is not the first or the last time that the Bible presents – *Eshet Chayil* – “a woman of valor.”

**Read the book of Ruth.** Ruth was a destitute foreigner whose daily work involved gathering, threshing, and winnowing wheat. For most of her story, she is neither a wife nor a mother. *Circumstantially, her life looked nothing like the life of the woman depicted in Proverbs 31.* Ruth didn’t spend her days making clothes for her husband. She had no husband. She was widowed. Ruth’s children didn’t rise up and call her blessed. She was childless. Ruth didn’t spend her days exchanging fine linens
with the merchants and keeping an immaculate home. She worked all day in the sun, gleaning leftovers from other people’s fields, which was a provision made for the poorest of the poor in Israel. And yet guess what Boaz says of Ruth before she gets married, before she has a child, before she becomes a wealthy and influential woman: “All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character” (Ruth 3:11). The Hebrew that’s used there is “eshet chayil” – woman of valor.

Ruth is identified as a woman of valor, not because she checked off some Proverbs 31 to-do list by getting married, keeping a clean house and producing children, but because she lived her life with incredible bravery, wisdom, integrity and strength. She lived her life with valor.

And how about the multitudes of “eshet chayil” – women of valor throughout scripture. Sarah, Deborah, Esther, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, Mary of Nazareth, Martha, Priscilla, Phoebe, and Tabitha to name a few – all women of valor.

This summer, I had the wonderful opportunity to have conversations with 20 women of valor across this nation and across Jewish and Christian faith. Their unique gifts, insights, passions, and callings have brought hope and healing to the world. Fortunately for you, I will not take you through my 30 hours of conversations with these amazing women of valor. I will share one with whom I had two great conversations.

Ruth Messinger lives in New York City with four generations of her family in one apartment (she says it is a spacious apartment). Ruth has been a political leader in New York City, a Borough President of Manhattan and in 1997 the Democratic Nominee
against incumbent mayor Rudy Giuliani. But, beyond politics, Ruth was President and CEO of American Jewish World Service for 18 years. She has been named as one of the most influential American Jews. Currently, Ruth serves as the inaugural Social Justice Fellow at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Social Justice Activist-in-Residence at the Jewish Community Center of Manhattan.

The reason I had two conversations with Ruth was because during the entire first conversation she only talked about her amazing mother – Marjorie Weiler – a true woman of valor. In an hour of zoom, I never heard about Ruth talk about Ruth. The second hour wasn’t much different because she didn’t like talking about herself. But what Ruth shared was a blessing and truly amazing. When asked about her inspiration in life, she quoted Abraham Joshua Heschel, “In a free society, where wrongs are done, some are guilty, but all are responsible.” She explained that we all have an obligation to do justice, to right the wrongs. She gets push back from “the kids on campus” (meaning the rabbis she teaches) about the word Obligation. They see it as oppressive to be obliged to do something. She responds, “then the prophets were oppressive,” and speaking directly to me, “then your Jesus was oppressive.” Ruth continues, “obligation is a good thing. It means that I feel the urgent need to engage with you and respond to you and interact with you. Our society is fragile in so many ways for so many people. We need to be obliged to feel their pain, to respond to their needs, to make this world a better place. No obligation is oppressive. It is liberating.”

She concluded about the obligation of doing justice, “Scripture is very clear. Justice is never about completing the task. Justice knows
that once an outcome is reached, it will be challenged. So, we are
told, ‘justice you must pursue.’ It is the pursuit of justice that is the
calling of every person of faith.”

“Eshet Chayil” – a woman of valor. Women of valor are everywhere
in our lives. I pray this day that Proverbs 31 doesn’t get tossed
onto your pile of passages that you don’t like and would rather not
deal with – because there is more to this powerful poem than a
misogynistic misinterpretation could ever give us. The challenge of
reading the text is always digging deep enough to see the gift that was
intended and to take away – especially from this text – that each and
every one of us has been blessed by “Eshet Chayil” – women of valor
in our lives. Let us embrace this truth for our lives and give thanks
for all who have liberated this text and thus all of us. Amen.

* I want to recognize and thank the late Rachel Held Evans for her May 12,
2014 blog from which I drew many of my reflections on Proverbs 31 today.
Author of four books and an inspiration to many present and former
Evangelical Christians, Rachel was a gift to this world as she led many
women and men to deeper faith. Sadly, Rachel died in 2019 at the age 37. I
dedicate this sermon today to her and thank her posthumously for helping
me and others reclaim the gift of Proverbs 31.