

September 23, 2018
Osler Mennonite Church
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Sermon: Facing Goliath

How many times did the word hands appear in this text? (7)

I'd be curious to know what you were saying to yourself as you listened to the reading of Proverbs 31. At first glance she is SUPER WOMAN!

Is there anything she can't do? She has it all.

Is that what this passage is about?

A model for women's work?

Is it a command for us to follow?

Let's look a little closer than the surface and see what floats to the top.

The first word that describes the Proverbs 31 woman, as she is sometimes called, is translated as an excellent wife, a capable wife, a noble wife or a truly good wife, who can find. These are unfortunate translations of the Hebrew word: chayil. chayil means valour. A more accurate translation would be: a woman of valour.

It is a military term as in: Judges 11:1 the Gileadite was a valiant warrior. It can also mean someone of strong moral character as Ruth is described in Ruth 3:11.

As we read through the passage we find another military reference which doesn't quite come across in the English translation. In v11 the husband does not lack booty. In other words, when the husband comes home from war he brings booty, he brings the spoils of war.

In v 15, the woman provides prey for her household. In other words, she goes out and hunts for food.

These kind of references move us out of the home environment and lead us to thinking of battlefields, bringing back the spoils of war, adventures in hunting.

What are images of war and hunting doing in a poem about woman's work?

The valorous woman is described with words that sound vaguely like they could be said of God -

v17 the woman girds her loins with strength

Psalm 93:1 The Lord is robed, he is girded with strength.

v15 she provides statues for her young women.

Aren't statues something God gives? In Genesis 26 God blesses Abraham because he obeyed God's commandments, statutes and laws.

v26 the teaching of loving-kindness is on her tongue which is the same word we use to describe God's lovingkindness and mercy.

What are images of God and covenant doing in a poem about woman's work?

There seems to be more going on here than meets the eye.

One clue is in the repetition of words.

We discovered the word "hands" was used 7 times?

Seven is an important number in the Bible beginning with Genesis 1, the seven days of creation.

Seven is a number that depicts wholeness or completeness. These 21 verses is the whole story. This is a complete picture of an ordinary woman going about her daily work using her hands. This image here (*point to the worship table*) is a wonderful depiction of this work.

Her hands work eagerly, they search out flax, plant a vineyard, she spins wool to make her own cloth, her hands reach out to the poor, and clothe her household with elegant crimson wool.

She works with her hands.

This is important.

It is not an accident that hands are mentioned 7 times in this carefully crafted poem.

Another way this poem shows completeness is that it is an acrostic in the Hebrew. Each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet from aleph to tav, which would be like our A to Z.

We are ending up with a lot of pieces and questions. Maybe it would help to step back for a moment and take a look at the bigger picture.

What is happening in Judah during this time period - the Iron Age.

This is the time period after the exile in Babylon. Judah, which includes the area around Jerusalem.

The land is under Babylonian control, whom I call Goliath. All the centres of power are gone or destroyed. There is no king, no temple, no priesthood.¹ There are no leaders. Even the prophets seem to have been silenced.

The king of Babylon is making them pay heavy taxes in the form of wine, oil, grain and woollen cloth. So much so that there is hardly anything left over for the people to live on. Many have ended up hocking their land and even their

¹ Ellen F. Davis. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*. p17

children in order to survive. The men have been conscripted for the army and so there are very few of them around.

What do you do? What are the stones in your sling with which you face Goliath?

The stones in your sling are your hands working in a household based economy. Household is the other word that is repeated. In this economy the labour of women, their managerial and social skills is the wisdom needed to face Goliath. The Proverbs woman provides food for her household, she clothes them, she looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of sloth. Sloth, in the rest of the book of Proverbs is not only bad, it is a destructive, deadly sin. This woman is the opposite of sloth, she embodies good work. Work that is needed to keep the economy alive.

This is not a poem to highlight one woman as a model to all wives, but to show the significance of the *household* in Israel who is living under the empire of the Goliath.

Building up your household and working with your hands is how you take a stand and resist the economics of the empire in an environment such as the Persian empire in the 5th century or global capitalism in the 21st century."²

For the poet to use images of war and hunting suggests that this gain has been as hard as being in a fight.

For the poet to use images of God and Covenant language suggests she is offering the same kind of religious instruction as the absent priests and prophets. Teaching that builds up her household and community.³

This is a poem that encompasses way more than women's work. The last word of the poem is addressed to us:
Celebrate her for the fruit of her hands;
and let her works praise her in the gates."

Ellen Davis says: In 5th century Judah, celebrating all of that was a defiance to the great king of Persia and his predatory imperial economy."⁴ I would suggest that working with our hands is also a way to face the predatory imperial economy of consumerism in our day and age.

When we value the work of our hands we begin to value others who live on the edge who survive by the work of their hands. "The more materialistic our society becomes the less time any of us is likely to spend personally working with our

² Ellen Davis lecture at CMU, 2007

³ Davis, p152

⁴ Davis, lecture at CMU, 2007

hands..... Making and caring for good things is the gentle path toward recovering wholeness in our work."
It helps ease loneliness, builds strong local communities.

"In the wake of hurricane Rita hungry people gathered in the hall of Austin Heights Baptist church. It happened that the people who had the resources to feed others were not the people with high paying jobs, not the professionals at Austin Heights Baptist. Most of the food came from people who had gardens and deep freezers and pantry shelves full of food they had grown and prepared and set aside for "the day of trouble."

I wonder what would happen if we replaced the word wife in Proverbs 31 with community.

A valorous community, who can find?

it is far more precious than jewels.

the community seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands.

the community rises while it is still night and provides food for its households.

the community considers a field and buys it

with the fruit of its hands they plant a vineyard

the community opens its hands to the poor

and reaches out its hands to the needy

the community leaders are known at the gates

and sit with the elders of the land

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,

but a community who fears the Lord is to be praised.