

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

In 1993, William J. Bennett published *The Book of Virtues*, subtitled “A Treasury of Great Moral Stories.” Calling it a “how to” book for moral literacy, Bennett wrote that it was “intended to aid in the time-honored task of the moral education of the young.” To fulfill this intention, he gathered stories, poems, and essays and grouped them into chapters according to the lessons they presented: “self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and faith.”

Bennett had served as Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under the first President Bush, and as Secretary of Education and Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under President Reagan. I could speculate that his experience in these positions and the insights he gained from them led him to publish this book, although he doesn't say that. But in the introduction to the book he says these words, which still ring true today: “Today we speak about values and how it is important to “have them,” as if they were beads on a string or marbles in a pouch. But these stories speak to morality and virtues not as something to be possessed, but as the central part of human nature, not as something to have but as something to be, the most important thing to be.”

Bennett's book brings together the wisdom of a variety of traditions: writings from Greek mythology, from history, and from the Bible among others. Every culture and every age has used literary texts to teach people how to live virtuous lives. These texts are called “wisdom literature,” and can be traced back to ancient cultures like those in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The wisdom writings of scripture share the specific central assumption that God made the world, creating order within which humans must learn to live with each other. There are a number of books in our Bible that are considered “wisdom” literature: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament; Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha; and James in the New Testament.

A good friend, a wise man who is a Methodist minister, reads one of the thirty-one chapters in the Book of Proverbs every day. Its words are so filled with common sense, so pertinent, that the book seems like it could have been written in our own time. Sayings like “Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin.” Or “Laziness brings on deep sleep; an idle person will suffer hunger.” And my own favorite from Chapter 3, verses 5 and 6, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Thumbing through Proverbs, it seems to be a long collection of insights and helpful hints for living right, relevant but often grouped together randomly with no sense of order.

But that's not the case with the passage we heard today. We've probably heard these words from Proverbs 31 before, perhaps at the funeral of a beloved woman who departed this earthly life for God's greater glory. Or we may have heard it on Mother's Day, when a preacher reminded us that godly mothers deserve our praise and respect, that the work given to wives and mothers should be respected by all of us, just as it's honored and respected in in this passage of scripture.

While that is true, the virtues of the precious, capable wife described here sound to me like a twenty-one verse description of Super Woman. Reading this passage reminds me how I felt years ago as a young, working mother, when I saw the Martha Stewart show on television or came across one of her magazines. Martha Stewart seemed to be able to make anything from scratch, and not only that, she could make it better and more economically than anything she could buy. Anything except water—I don't think she ever figured out how to make water. All of this made my head spin. I could not meet those standards. In those days, it was all I could do to make dinner!

That is not to say that I don't admire a woman who is efficient and proficient in managing her life. I simply wasn't that woman, and I'm not now. So for me, for all of us, it's fortunate that the works of the capable wife described in today's passage from Proverbs are not the only thing for us to learn from her. Scriptural clues tell us there's more.

One of these clues is in the depiction of this worthy person as a woman, herself a person who would have had no standing in her community at the time Proverbs was compiled. In scripture, Wisdom is always portrayed as a woman, yet we know that wisdom is not granted only to women—just as we know that God cannot only be defined as a man. Wisdom is something that all of us would like to have, isn't it? And that goes back for ages. Solomon prayed that God would give him wisdom. And that's not a bad prayer. Because Wisdom isn't just enlightenment and it isn't just knowledge. Scripture depicts Wisdom as a practice, a way of life, really. It's not attained through education or privilege, but through discernment, by seeking "justice, righteousness, humility, compassion, and fairness."

Another clue that this Wisdom is not just about women is found in the realization that there's no comparison here of this woman and her husband. Comparing two people, whether they are married or not, lays the groundwork for competition, and possibly for conflict between them. There's no sense of that here, but instead a spirit of support and encouragement. "Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land." "Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her." That spirit of support and encouragement for one another is not something we are to demonstrate only to members of our families, but to everyone. God doesn't mean for women to only encourage men, or for men to support only women, but for all of us to support and encourage each other. The evidence is found in today's Gospel, as Jesus reminds the disciples that none of them was greater than the others: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." None of *us* is greater than others. Whether we are lay people, bishops, priests, or deacons, as the Catechism names the ministers of the church, we are all called to be last of all and servant of all.

But there is an important reminder, a caution for all of us in the works of the woman of wisdom—none of us can live up to God's expectations for us by striving, by being an over-achiever, by "doing" anything other than living in the example Christ set for us. That includes service, certainly. But it also includes Sabbath. God loves us not because of what we do, but because God created us and then assured us of salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. What God seeks from us are the characteristics that make the woman from Proverbs a person of wisdom: commitment to serve God, discipline, and obedience to God's desire and will for our lives. And doing so with a spirit of love and relying on the morals promoted by William Bennett: self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and faith. We do this, we live this way, not to earn the prize of everlasting life, but because of who we are and who we love—people of God who love the God who made us.

How do we claim Wisdom as our own? We can look at the beginning and then at the end of Proverbs for the answer: In Chapter One, verse seven, we read, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Then at the conclusion of the book, in Chapter 31, verse 30, we heard today "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." A person who fears the Lord is to be praised. One theologian wrote that this fear, this reverence for God, is found in "the deeply sane recognition that we are not God." And surely that is the better part of Wisdom.

William Bennett's *Book of Virtues* is dedicated "to the families of America from his own family." If the Bible were dedicated to anyone, it would be to us, to people of faith who struggle to live in the way God intends for us to live. With Wisdom, we find the "how-to," the unfailing instructions for living that begin with the fear of God. There cannot be a more important place to begin. *Amen.*