

More Precious than Jewels

Proverbs 31:10-31

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The last Sunday of October is celebrated annually as Reformation Sunday. This year is the 505th anniversary of the day that Martin Luther kicked off the Reformation by arguing that it is God who forgives sins, not the pope or the priest, and that God's grace is freely given. The United Church of Christ stands squarely in the Reformed tradition, a direct descendant of Luther's brave claims. Last year, on Reformation Sunday, I chose not to preach on the Reformation, and someone gently called me out on it, so today, we will hear a story from that time in church history.

I want to set this story of the Reformation in the context of the scripture we heard a moment ago, the final chapter of the Book of Proverbs, about the virtuous woman, the capable woman, the woman of substance and strength. Proverbs says, she is "far more precious than jewels," and no wonder – she does everything! She rises in the middle of the night to manage her household. She imports fine foods for her family. She purchases wool and flax. She spins and weaves and dyes to create the finest clothing for her household. She is also a business woman, purchasing a field, planting a vineyard, selling her goods for a tidy profit. This woman is generous. She opens her door to the poor and reaches out her hand to the needy. She is strong and dignified. She is wise. One scholar commented, "with all her virtues, one wonders what is left for her husband to do!"

This scripture is both reassuring and troubling for contemporary women. On the one hand, this passage recognizes women as more than appendages of the men in their lives, which is not typical for writings of this period. But on the other hand, this scripture establishes a standard that is simply not relevant for most women today, who must manage work outside the home, work inside the home, and rearing children, sometimes as single mothers, and almost always without the servants that the woman in this scripture has at her disposal.

So, let us hold this image of the woman of substance lightly and take just a step back to look at this passage in the context of the whole Book of Proverbs. This book is written as a moral instruction manual. It is full of contrasts, urging us to choose wisely in our lives, to follow the course of Wisdom rather than Folly. Wisdom and Folly are portrayed as women throughout the book, and this final chapter is the culmination of all this argument, and it is written not just to women, but to all of us. Choose the life of Wisdom, Proverbs urges, be like this woman of substance. Don't live foolishly. Instead, be strong and industrious and generous and wise, and you will prosper, this passage says.

Now let us take one more step back and see that the whole book of Proverbs is set within the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. Wisdom – Sophia – is always portrayed as a woman, and Wisdom is one way that God reveals Godself to us. Wisdom is a feminine side of God, one that we can't see very well when we read the Bible in English, because our nouns don't carry gender markers. But this description of Wisdom as a feminine aspect of God is clear in the original text, so the woman of substance in our scripture for today, is more than just a challenging ideal for women to follow, and more than merely a call to choose of life of Wisdom over Folly. This woman of substance is also a picture of God: God, who provides abundantly for her household; God, who is generous to the needy; God, who is wise. I like that image of God, and I love that understanding this scripture in the context of the whole Wisdom literature of the Bible takes the pressure off of all of us. We don't have to be perfect. God is perfect. Choose wisely this text says, but trust in God to be generous.

That is the first message of the Reformation, actually, that we don't have to be perfect because we can trust in God's grace to be freely given when we go astray. And that brings us to the very interesting life of Katharina von Bora.

Katharina was born in 1499 to a lesser noble family in Saxony. That's the area around the German cities of Dresden and Leipzig. When she was five years old, her father sent her to a convent to be educated, and when she was old enough, she became a nun. When the struggles for Reformation broke out, word made its way into the convent, and Katharina was one of several nuns there who became interested in the Reform movement. They sent word to Martin Luther that they wanted to escape the convent, so on Easter Eve, 1523, Luther sent help in the form of Leonhard Köppe, who regularly delivered herring to the nunnery. Katharina and her co-conspirators escaped from the convent in the back of

his wagon, hiding among the fish barrels and covered by a tarp. They arrived in Wittenberg, where Luther taught. It was a dangerous time for these refugees. A student at Wittenberg wrote, "A wagonload of vestal virgins has just come to town, all eager for marriage. God grant them husbands, lest worse befall."

Luther contacted the nuns' families to ask that they take them back home, but the families declined, because it would violate church law for them to do so. So, Luther began to arrange marriages for each of them. Katharina had a number of suitors, but she turned them all down. She told Luther's friend and fellow reformer Nikolaus von Amsdorf that she would only marry Martin Luther or von Amsdorf himself. She wouldn't settle for less.

Luther, a former monk, was not sure whether he should marry at all. He was afraid it would cause a scandal and harm the Reformation. But he eventually decided to marry because, as he said, "It would please his father, rile the pope, cause the angels to laugh and the devils to weep." So, Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora were married in June 1525. Their marriage was an example for the entire Reformation movement, and because of their choice, Protestant pastors today may marry and have families, for which I am truly grateful.

It was not just the fact that they married, but also the kind of relationship they had which was important for the future of the Protestant church. Theirs was a marriage of mutual respect. She called him "Herr Doktor" throughout her life. Luther called her "the boss of Zulsdorf" and "my Lord Katie." Katharina exercised about as much authority as the Woman of Substance in today's reading from Proverbs. The couple lived in a former Augustinian cloister, a wedding gift from one of Luther's political allies. Katharina managed the monastery's vast holdings, rising at 4:00 AM every day to breed and sell cattle, and run a brewery. That must have pleased Luther, since he was famously proficient at drinking beer with his students. Through these enterprises, Katharina provided not only for her family but also for the steady stream of Reformers and students who came to board with them or seek audiences with her famous husband. Katharina managed all of this while bearing six children of her own and raising another four children who were orphaned. Luther's influential teachings about marriage were based on the model of his own marriage to Katharina.

I wish I could say that she remained prosperous to the end, but that is not always how real life works. Luther passed away in 1546. He named Katharina as his sole heir in his will, but alas! His will did not conform to Saxon law. And so, she was forced to leave the properties that they had owned and she had managed for so many years. It was a time of war and pestilence, and Katharina suffered, as many suffered. In 1552 she fell from a horse cart into a watery ditch and sustained injuries that eventually led to her death. Despite the terrible difficulties and the injustice of her later years, she remained conscious of and grateful for God's grace in her life, the grace that God gives freely to all. On her deathbed, she said, "I will stick to Christ, as a burr to cloth."

Katharina von Bora was a wise woman. She was the very example of the Woman of Substance in today's scripture, and she trusted in God's grace in times of abundance and times of scarcity throughout her whole life.

May we, like Katharina, be guided by God's Wisdom. And may we feel God's sure and freely offered grace all the days of our lives.

Amen