

Homily, St. John's, September 23, 2018
Texts: Proverbs 31:10-31; Mark 9:30-37

One day a few years ago, Gayle and I had lunch at a Jewish delicatessen, and found ourselves seated next to a young rabbi leading a small group in a scripture study. It was a privilege and a fascinating experience to overhear a study done in the Rabbinic tradition, which is quite different from what we may be used to. Sentences, words, and even punctuation are studied intimately, in search of meanings which fall into four general categories: 1) The direct, literal meaning; 2) the allegorical meaning, beyond literal; 3) the comparative meaning, as in a meaning found in similar passages; and 4) the mystical, spiritually inspired meaning. This stands in contrast to the kind of study we may be more used to, in which we try to assign meaning to a larger passage without looking intimately for what its variety of meanings might be.

For better, and often for worse, Holy Scripture is open to any number of interpretations, sometimes depending on the predisposition of the reader. I said "sometimes" because of course I have never used the fiery words of the Hebrew prophets to prove that my progressive values are the right ones, just as I am sure no rich person has ever used Jesus' words "The poor you shall always have with you" to justify denying someone food stamps. Actually we do that often,

because we like to be supported by the authority of Scripture, so we might interpret according to what we want to prove, and sometimes misinterpret in so doing.

The passage we heard from the Book of Proverbs has been subject to misinterpretation and misuse for centuries, often by male preachers. We're in trouble right from the start, with the opening words: "A capable wife, who can find?" Already, we've heard a word -- wife -- that is limiting, and that creates in some minds a person who exists primarily in relationship to a husband, or, at the time in which this was written, exists as a man's possession. But the woman described is a paragon of nearly everything. She provides food for her household, she buys and sells property, she plants vineyards, uses her time well, teaches, sews and weaves, treats her servants respectfully, offers aid and kindness the poor, and -- lest we forget -- she helps her husband look good in the eyes of others. In assessing this passage, one Bible commentator said the reason this capable wife was hard to find might well be that she's too busy working to sit around waiting to be found! The person described in Proverbs looks to me like someone Jesus speaks of in Mark's Gospel, when he says: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

In fact, if we expand our interpretive lens just a little bit, we might see the virtues named in the Proverbs passage as gender-

neutral, a credit to anyone who practices them. I'd further suggest that the actions taken by the person described are a model of servant stewardship. I hold no claim to the right definition of stewardship, but here is mine. ***Good stewardship is the proper care and use of all with which God has entrusted us.*** This means we nurture (or care for) all the gifts God has given us, and then let them go (or use them wisely and well).

It's no exaggeration to say that whenever "stewardship" is mentioned in a church, our first thoughts often go to a financial pledge to the work of the church. In fact, you'll hear brief talks from St. John's members on each of the next four Sundays, as we enter our fall pledge opportunity, aptly titled "All Things New." Make no mistake about it, a pledge campaign is important to St. John's, because we do not receive grants or possess a large investment portfolio to sustain the people, programs, and building that have been placed into our care. On that note, I think we can take satisfaction in our stewardship of this place, through our recent effort to restore, renew, and more fully use the place we call our church home. For this we can thank several leaders, as well as people who give exceptional care to our church home week after week. Beyond caring for a building, we are called to be caring stewards of St. Johns' numerous ministries. On that note, if anyone in my hearing feels their gifts are not being utilized, or

feels a need for greater connection to the life of the parish, please see me, any Vestry member, or any staff member, because we can help solve that problem for you.

But stewardship has broader application. If we can live with my definition for a moment, stewardship is about ALL with which God has entrusted us. Most of the “all” under our care is easily identified:

- Our families
- The vocations to which we are called.
- The earth, whose care is our sacred responsibility
- The precious gift of time.
- Our bodies, and the care we give them.
- Our minds, as we are called to help them grow.
- Finally, and perhaps most important, the creative gifts that have been bestowed on us for our wise and fruitful use.

All these, and perhaps others, are areas of our lives in which we are called to be good stewards. But I want to introduce another kind of stewardship, and to do so I need to tell you about my friend Renee Fowler, long dead now, but still very much alive in my memory. Renee was a lively and happy person, with a laugh that lit up a room and invited rich laughter from everyone in her hearing. But I remember a time when Renee was profoundly sad. I asked her what was hurting her, and she said, “Sometimes I

wish we had giants who would pick us up and rock us and comfort us, just like we do for our kids when they're sad. We still need that when we've grown up, but there's no place to find it."

Which leads me directly to the moment in Mark's Gospel when Jesus takes a little child into his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me."

Once again, let's widen our interpretive lens just a bit and imagine that this scene, which we usually identify specifically as an example of Jesus' great love for children, is actually about us. You. Me. Us. The ones being held in Jesus' arms. It's not much of a stretch, if we take note of how often Jesus refers to his disciples and others as "children." Of course, the only problem is that Jesus isn't around to pick us up and hold us; is not the giant that my late friend Renee hoped for, at least not in the flesh. All we have is each other, which some may view as a poor substitute for Jesus, but if we can get our minds around the fact that we are inheritors of Jesus' amazing humanity AND divinity, it becomes easier.

Let me describe a course of action I'd like us to consider as an important part of stewardship, which I can best call the stewardship of one another: caring for each other, affirming each other's dignity, and believing in each other's essential goodness. That's actually quite easy when we're talking about our families

and intimate friends, but the further we move from our own circles, the more difficult it becomes. I'm shocked by the number of people (you can find them in the news every day) whom I would gladly dismiss, at the least, or pitch off a tall building at the worst. I confess that I am not yet able to live up to the words of Desmond Tutu, who said, "There are no outsiders, whatever their beliefs, whatever their color, gender, or sexuality." Nor am I yet able to live up to the words of one of St. Johns' recent confirmands, who wrote, "I believe we should treat everyone with kindness and respect, and work toward a greater understanding of all people, especially those we struggle to treat well or appreciate." I often fall short of what Jesus said in the Upper Room on the night before he died: "I give you this new commandment -- that you love one another as I have loved you." I don't know about the rest of you, but when I look hard at the fact that Jesus loved lavishly, unconditionally, and without exception, I realize I still have plenty of room to grow.

So far. So far. Because transformation is always possible. Because love -- given and received -- is always within our reach. Because each day, each hour, each moment is new and will form the moments, hours, and days that come after. I invite us to move forward as loving stewards of one another, to make real what the writer Annie Dillard calls "our complex and inexplicable caring for

each other, and for our life together here.”

This means that I am responsible for his wellbeing, and he is responsible for her wellbeing, and she is responsible for their wellbeing, and on and on until the world is made new and God’s Kingdom is made real.

This might sound like fantastical, pie-in-the-sky thinking, but only if we assume Jesus wasn’t serious when he told us to love one another. The world I see around me, of which I am very much a part, is awash with meanness and burdened with an unhealthy lack of love. We, I, can change that if we so choose, in our immediate surroundings, at the very least. In that light, I choose to take Jesus’ words not as commandment but as loving invitation, not as something I have to do, but as something I am privileged to do, and most important of all, as something for which there is no reward except the very doing of it.

I’ll end with this passage from theologian and writer Frederick Buechner in his novel “The Love Feast.” His character, the itinerant minister Leo Bebb says:

“The kingdom of heaven is a love feast where nobody’s a stranger. There’s strangers everywhere else you can think of. There’s strangers born out of the same womb. There’s strangers was raised together in the same town and worked side by side all

their life through. There's strangers got married and been climbin' in and out of the same four-poster together for thirty-five or forty years, and they're strangers still. And Jesus, it's like most of the time he is a stranger too. Even when he's near as the end of your nose, people make like he's nowhere around. But here, in this church, there's no strangers. And Jesus isn't a stranger here either.

To my old eyes, that looks a lot like an invitation to become the Kingdom of Heaven, in this very time and place.

AMEN