

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for September 21, 2003
Lessons: Proverbs 31:10-31 and Mark 9:30-37

PERSON, NOT PLACE OR THING

Do you remember being taught grammar in elementary school or, as it was called formerly, “grammar school”? Jog your memory. What is a noun? I’m not sure I can still recite the answer exactly, but “a noun is a word that names a person, place, or thing.” The idea of this sermon and, I believe, the message of the incarnation of the Son of God – of God revealed to us in the flesh-and-blood human being Jesus of Nazareth – is that you are a person, not a place or a thing. No human being is a place or a thing; each is a person. The implications of that statement would be enormous if we were all to take it seriously. Everything would be changed, from marriage and family life to politics and economics. Human societies would be transformed. The old would pass away as the truth of God made everything new.

Because of Jesus, you become a person to me, and I a person to you. Not a place. “Look at her; she doesn’t know her place.” “He’s a laborer.” “A common laborer.” No, he’s a person, and so is she, not only because together we are created in the image and likeness of God, but because the Son of God is one of us, and by faith we are one with him.

The second part of the truth is that God should be known and regarded more as Person than as place or thing. God is not heaven, and God’s place is not in heaven. God is very close to the people of earth, especially those who are suffering or being put to shame.

Our Old Testament lesson, which is the suggested reading for this Sunday, has been abused in the churches, and women have been abused with it. The traditional name for this reading from Proverbs was, “the perfect wife.” No version I could find of the Bible in English actually translates the word as “perfect,” but the internet as well as Christian preaching is filled with references to this reading as “the perfect wife.” Women, whenever you hear a label like that one, duck, because trouble’s coming at you. The New Revised Standard Version, however, translates the phrase more accurately as, “the *capable* wife or woman.” What’s the difference? There’s all the difference in the world. Let’s say you are a salesperson, male or female. We could just as well say an engineer, plumber, teacher, minister, or anything else that labels you by your occupation, but let’s use salesperson. If your manager were to hand you an article entitled, “The Perfect Salesperson,” wouldn’t you feel intimidated – about to be judged? After all, none of us can be the perfect anything. Perfection judges us. If, instead, the manager offered you an article called, “The Capable Salesperson,” you might feel intrigued, challenged, maybe even empowered. You can’t be perfect, but you can certainly be capable. The perfect minister does not exist and cannot, but

capable is something we can strive to become more and more. I can work on capable, but I can't even touch perfect.

To read this “capable wife” passage from Proverbs, we must translate – not from Hebrew into English, which is already done for us, thankfully, but from its original time and context into our own. God's word speaks to us where we are, not where people used to be thousands of years ago. Would we tell a modern American Christian man he had to learn to herd sheep if he wanted to please God? Would we say he needed to settle fairly with his neighbor if his ox gored the neighbor's ox? Who in Bridgeton has an ox? This is important, not silly. Does the commandment about gleaning – leaving some of your harvest on the vine or in the field so poor people can gather a little for themselves – apply only to farmers? Of course not. We need to translate that commandment from ancient agriculture into our world of business and commerce if we are going to hear it as God's word to us in our own time. Then, why would Christians try to force 21st Century A.D. women of faith into the mold of a “perfect wife” in terms of a woman's social context in anytime B.C.?

Look at this woman! She is capable: physically strong, financially astute, hard working but also good at delegating fairly. She “girds herself with strength,” and she is generous, especially to people in need. She can take care of herself and others. “She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.” Above all, she lives in wonder and awe before the LORD God. The word translated “capable” means capable, not virtuous, as older versions rendered it. It means strong and efficient.

Where's the message? Does Proverbs present this capable woman to us just so present-day women (and men, as well) can have an example to follow, a role model, an attainable goal? Or is there something more here?

Yes, the empowerment of a strong role model is here, but listen to the last verse: “Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.” How do we translate that charge? In ancient Israel, a woman did not necessarily enjoy the benefits of her own labor, nor was she necessarily given credit and recognition in the place where the prominent men gathered – at the city gate. Oh boy, can we translate this one into our world, and not only for women: let people enjoy the benefits of their own work, share the rewards of the society to which they contribute, and receive the recognition and respect they deserve. When the honchos gather in the company boardroom (our city gate), let the people who actually had the idea and who worked together to develop that idea into an efficient solution receive the credit and share in the benefit. Stop using people as things.

As we have seen again this week, this time with Wall Street, we have developed a *CEO-is-some-kind-of-god* mentality that discounts so-called “ordinary people.” We have become a culture of celebrity worship and top-gun adoration. Before God, there are no ordinary people and no

CEO's, celebrities, or top guns. The band does not play, "Hail to the Chief" in heaven. Jesus says the one who aspires to be great must take the path of service to others, not from a high and mighty position of power where service is mislabeled charity or philanthropy, but from the same position of humility and unassuming trust in God that Jesus took with us. The great are not those who strut or snap their fingers for others to serve them but those who honor God by respecting other people as persons created in God's image.

Why does Jesus stand a child before his embarrassed disciples? They're embarrassed because they have been debating childishly which of them is the greatest. In other readings from the gospels, Jesus says we must become as little children, but here he tells us to welcome the children. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name," Jesus says, "welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." The message here is a little different because it turns us more decidedly toward people not valued or esteemed in our society. See the other human being as a person, always, and not ever as a thing to be used or a type to be put in its place. Where is a person's place? According to Jesus, a person's place is with him in the family of God.

Jesus' teachings about greatness through service are not a side issue for faith, stuck in as good advice; this teaching stands right alongside the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. How we welcome the child, who represents all the people without power or prestige, relates directly to the crucified and risen Christ. Let the capable woman enjoy the benefits of her work. Stop putting obstacles in her path or labeling her to keep her in "her place."

It seems there is a lot riding on the way we treat that child, who represents Jesus to us. Remember, Jesus was never a CEO, a celebrity, a power player, an all-star, or a honcho of any kind. He still is not, and there's the rub. When he went to the cross, he rejected that kind of greatness and glory *forever*. Jesus is still, as the risen Son of God, the one who stands with the poor and nameless and sits among the so-called "ordinary people." With God, there are no ordinary people, only daughters and sons who need to come home. God is not impressed in the least with power, wealth, or prestige. To God, special means loved, but it also means capable – able to become strong and effective human beings, in Jesus' way.

Back to the nouns: you are a person, not a place or thing, and so is the human being next you, across the aisle or the kitchen table, and on the other side of town or of the world. Look at the child, at the poorest child who goes to our schools with so much conflict, fear, anger, and lostness already in a young life that learning is all but impossible and testing a humiliation. Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one such child on my terms welcomes me and, not only me, but the one who sent me." Amen.