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Trinity Episcopal Church

Proverbs 31: 10 – 31
James 3: 13 – 4: 3, 7 – 8a

Ps. 1
Mark 9: 30 – 37

“She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.”

These lines are, of course, from today’s passage from the last chapter of Proverbs. This passage is often known as the “Praise of a Capable Wife.” It certainly seems to be written from the husband’s perspective, and it has both positive and destructive implications. The potential for harm comes from seeing the wife only in terms of what good she can do for her husband and the outrageously high expectations it creates. How could any other woman possibly measure up? Afterall, she does everything, so that he just gets to lollygag in the city gates all day long with his buddies. [70s/80s Enjoli perfume ad, “I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan ... and never let you forget you’re a man!”]

At the same time, the positive take away is the rather remarkable list of what the woman does. She fulfills all the traditional duties of running a large household (e.g. raising the children, acquiring foodstuffs and preparing the meals, creating the fabric and then the clothing for her family, managing staff). In addition to all that, she has significant public and economic roles. She’s a capable merchant and businesswoman. She produces and sells things. She buys property, improves it and resells it for a profit. The only role that she doesn’t fulfill is that of one of the acknowledged leaders and power moguls – the *men* who sit in the gate all day.

By concluding the book of Proverbs, this poem serves as something of a bookend on a book of Scripture that begins with poems in which both wisdom and folly are personified by women. In Hebrew Scripture, wisdom is consistently characterized as a woman, and Wisdom’s guidance shapes the world as a whole. Roman Catholic theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, writes, “this ordering is a righteous one, [unfavorable] to exploitation and oppression. [Wisdom] hates the ways of arrogance and evil, [Wisdom] works to establish just government on earth.” Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, Wisdom is used to describe the nature of God, and is seen as the most deeply developed characterization of God’s presence and activity. The Hebrew Scriptures portray Wisdom as sister, mother, female beloved, chef and hostess, teacher, preacher, maker of justice and many other women’s roles.

This seems like such a fitting reading on the Sunday when we are recognizing and celebrating our very own Georgia saint, Deaconess Anna Ellison Butler Alexander. Earlier this year, around the time of the Revival in our diocese, we watched the video that Canon Frank Logue created to depict the life and ministry of Deaconess Alexander. Though she wasn’t a wife, Anna Alexander was every bit as capable as the woman described in the Proverbs passage.

Born about 1865 in MacIntosh County, the eleventh and youngest child of two former slaves, Anna grew up to become the only African American deaconess in the Episcopal Church. She might not have had any of her own children, but every child of the poor black families living in Glynn and MacIntosh counties became her child in a way.

In a time when not many white people were going to college, Anna found a way to go to St. Paul’s College in Virginia. She graduated and returned home to become a public school teacher. Education was her passion, but she was dissatisfied with how poorly the school system served the needs of the poor black families. So, like Jesus drawing out the otherwise invisible child to show his disciples

who needed to be served, Anna drew the African American children to her. Her sister, Mary, had established St. Cyprian's School in Darien, and for a while, she worked with her. Then Anna saw the need and started Good Shepherd Episcopal School in Pennick, west of Brunswick. Her brothers helped by building the clapboard-covered log structure used as both school and church.

It was a twenty-mile trip each way, between Brunswick through Darien to Pennick that Deaconess Alexander made every week, traveling on foot and by boat, and always wearing the distinctive attire of a deaconess. She taught the children to read and write using the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. And then, as the video says, she slowly depopulated Pennick one carload at a time as she drove the graduates of her school to colleges in Georgia, Virginia, the Carolinas and elsewhere. The children she had drawn to her grew up to become doctors, professors and many other things. She did this for 53 years. And it wasn't just the school that she created.

Working with the support of a white, male priest from Brunswick, she established Good Shepherd Episcopal Church in Pennick, presenting adults and children for baptism on a regular basis. She served boldly during a difficult time. In 1907, the diocese split into the Dioceses of Georgia and Atlanta. The Bishop of Georgia, C. K. Nelson, referred to Anna as "a devout, Godly and respected colored woman," but probably because he had a plan for her to be a leader in the African-American church community. That same year, the Diocese of Georgia decided to segregate Anna's congregation and the other African American congregations. They were not invited to participate in diocesan convention again until 1947, the same year that Deaconess Anna Alexander died. Forty long years of, once again, being virtually invisible to those in power. It was also years after her death (1970s?) when the church finally recognized women, working as deaconesses, as being in deacons' orders, that is, as being equal to their male counterparts.

"She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her happy..."

A capable woman indeed. A woman who might have succumbed to the place – or lack thereof, the invisible niche, that our society was handing her. But a woman who served the least of these with great dignity, tenacity and fervor. A woman who girded herself with the strength and the love of the Lord to transform the lives of countless people.

As far as we know, Jesus didn't ever have any children of his own, but perhaps he helped raise some of his siblings or their children. He certainly seems to take great delight in them in the few interactions that are recorded in the Gospels. Why children? Because in Jesus' world, and still in ours, children represent the most vulnerable of people.

In Jesus' world, less than half of the children survive to adulthood. And pretty much regardless of social class, children are on the bottom rung of the ladder. Children – especially girls – have no rights. Even servants can hold property, but children are nobodies. They're inconsequential until they reach the age of maturity. They have nothing to offer anyone. By taking this child (the language is gender neutral, so we don't know whether it's a little girl or boy) and placing it in front of him, Jesus is making visible the normally invisible, the overlooked – physically and every other way. Jesus is saying that God's Kingdom belongs to those to whom the world says nothing belongs.

The disciples are shocked. In a culture completely structured on patronage and benefactors, how can one be great if serving a child? It's clear Jesus' message doesn't sink in. In the very next

chapter of Mark, people bring their children to Jesus to have him bless or heal them and the disciples shoo them away. And soon after, James and John request positions of greatness from Jesus.

Jesus is clearly trying to tell his disciples, including us, that we are to serve those in need, completely disregarding their ability to reciprocate in any way. The world is still not a safe place for children. We have only to look at data for childhood mortality, malnutrition, abuse, lack of education (especially for girls), and the headlines over what is happening to children who come with their parents to our borders. In Bulloch County, on our doorstep, more than one quarter of the children live at or below the poverty level. At Portal Elementary, where Laurie Mascolo is principal, 77% of the children live at or below the poverty level. Deaconess Anna Alexander saw children through Jesus' eyes. She gave her life to raising them up – physically, spiritually, educationally, economically. She saw in them what many did not: the face of Christ.

Let us pray. Gracious God, deliver us from the presumption that we have the option to decide who deserves what each of us wants for our own selves and those closest to us. Give us the vision, the heart, the courage to receive every child – and not just those we know, or who look or sound like us – as a child of God, a member of God's beloved community. Help us to realize that the many blessings you shower upon us are *your* gifts and not our property. Help us to share those resources and provide for those who have none. Help us to evaluate every system, every power, every choice based on what it will do for the most vulnerable, not those closest to us. Help us spend the kingdom's treasures to help other human beings and all creation to flourish. Amen. +