

St. Andrew's UMC
May 10th, 2009
Proverbs 31
"For Mothers"

There are not many verses in the Bible that speak for mothers. Yet we know that God regards our relationship with mother highly, for God commands in the Ten Commandments specifically to honor one's parents:

"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

There is not really any reference in the Bible that specifically praises a mother: Proverbs 31 is just about the only place in the Bible where one might extol the virtue of a mother for her wisdom.

The whole chapter 31 contains the wisdom of a mother who advises her son on being a king and discerning a prospective queen. Up to the verse 9, it is about what a king should not do: wasting his energy on wine and women. But from verses 10, it is all about the criteria for selecting a wife fit for a king.

I thought it would have been interesting to see what a queen would look for in a husband. In the way the Proverbs 31 is written, the ideal wife is expected to do just about all the household chores and the business. Nothing much is left for the man to do. With the kind of expectation the Bible lays upon a prospective wife, I cannot help but wonder, how many women today would say, "Yes, that is exactly the model of the perfection I want to be!"

A mother was a wife first of all; in the olden times, men considered wives and children as same as other property and cattle. Just check the wordings of the same Ten Commandments:

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's."

A wife is placed in the same category of slaves, cattle, and other property—things that can

be taken. In the Ten Commandments, we are looking at an ancient document that preserved the mentality and practice of the men of the ancient times that are significantly different from ours. We must remember that it was only in the recent times that the rights of a woman began to be recognized as same as those of a man.

The times have changed, and the world begins to see things differently. If there were enough advices in the Bible for a man to select a good wife, the male dominated world had not prepared the modern men what the mothers knew for the whole human history, as I will show.

The concept of a family has changed quite a bit since the biblical times. It is now a commonly accepted fact that a wife pursue her own career. The wage earner of the house is not necessarily always the male. According to a study done a few years ago, the number of the household has increased more than 30% where the main wage

earner is the female.

This syndrome is not limited to the United States, but is also budding in a far away country across the Pacific Ocean, such as Korea. I was surprised to read from the internet news about the change: now Korean fathers are applying for the paternity leave. We are witnessing the increase in the number of men boldly going where no Korean man has gone before: the stay-home dads, Mr. Moms.

The first man who applied for it was a journalist. He confessed that he now had a radical new goal in his life: It was not the success in his career. It was to become a good father. A cabinet member of the Korean government shared the similar sentiment: When he became a father, he expected that he would be "born again" as a perfect father in the flash of a lightning. It did not happen. He said it took a long time for him to grow into the fatherhood.

Mr. Moms took care of the new-

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born babies and household chores, while their wives went to work and earned income. Then they slowly woke up to what it really was like to be a Mr. Mom. One father said that, as his child began to learn how to speak, he was often called, "Mommy." Another man said that he used to complain to his wife, when he returned home from work: "Why is this house a mess?" "Why are you so narrow-minded to lash out on the kids?" But these men had to discover that they were not quite ready for the burden of their newly found identity as a Mr. Mom.

One father took over raising the child. He did the household chores only for a few months, when he finally appealed to his wife as she entered the house off her work: "I cannot go on like this; this is just too hard on me." Another one revealed that he hit his son and yelled at him, while he was bathing him: "Why can't you stay still while I wash you?" "Why are you making it difficult for your dog-tired father?"

I would say that there is a glimmer of salvation for the Korean males: they are finally beginning to appreciate what it is like to wear the stay-home mom's apron.

If the different societies on both sides of the Pacific are waking up to appreciate the role of a mother, our Christian religion still seems to be slumbering. How is the role of a mother understood in the interpretation of God in the Bible?

Many Christians believe that God is a Father—a male. Since Jesus called God, Abba, which is an intimate way of calling a father, as in "papa," almost every one is certain that God is male. Who is going to challenge Lord Jesus who called God, Father, right?

If Jesus called God, Father, then, it was a metaphor: God is like a Father to Jesus. One must realize that God has no gender, unlike us human beings. If God is actually male, then this naïve question becomes serious: "If Jesus is God's Son, then, is Maria God's

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wife?" Does anyone here know who officiated the wedding between God and Maria?

In the Isaiah 66:13, we clearly hear God the Mother speaking through the prophet that *She* will comfort *Her* people in Jerusalem:

"As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you."

Here, God is unmistakably a Mother, but that metaphor did not catch on with Christians. The fact is: either God is both Father and Mother, or God is neither, and remains genderless. God wanted to establish a covenant relationship with us, and being the Father to us was only one aspect of such a covenant relationship.

The Bible as a whole does not limit the metaphor of God to the male imagery of a father. No human product, including the Bible, can capture the infinite attributes of God. There are other places in the Bible where God is portrayed as a female, or a mother, but we will not go into it,

for it is beyond the scope of this meditation. We just need to study the Bible more carefully, before we decide to limit God by assigning to God our own human traits and prejudices—in this case, only the male gender and traits, to the exclusion of the female ones.

Although we know that the Gospel writers did not regard women and children at the same level of the human worth as men themselves in the Gospels, we who are endowed with sharpest of the biblical intuition can discern that women's presence in the ministry of Jesus was a vital one.

We know that it was a group of women who financed Jesus' ministry. Jesus needed a major financial commitment from someone, in order for him to travel with his disciples and other followers from town to town, and for room and board. We can safely assume that there were at least 20 men and women who traveled with him at any time:

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"Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who *provided* for them out of their resources (Lk. 8:1-3)."

Without these women's financial commitment, Jesus could stay not one day away from Capernaum.

In Matthew 27:55, 56 the writer paints the scene at the top of Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified:

"Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had *provided* for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee."

The writer reports that many

women were there, looking on from a distance. Where were the men folk? Well, every single disciple fled the night before, when Jesus was arrested. John is the only one who claims to have been there at the cross.

Interestingly however, John's self-claimed presence at the cross (Jn. 19: 26, 27) is somehow completely unknown to other Gospel writers.

Matthew supports the account of Luke 8:1-3, which we have just read, by saying that many women "had followed Jesus from Galilee and had *provided* for him." But we must pay closer attention to how Matthew identifies those women who stood and watched:

"Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the *mother* of James and Joseph, and the *mother* of the sons of Zebedee."

They were not just women, but mothers, except Mary Magdalene.

As it was the women who made it possible for Jesus to continue

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fulfilling God's will on earth, it was the same group of women who stuck with dying Jesus to the end. And among them were the mothers who stayed with Jesus no matter what.

Women may be lacking in the physical power compared to men. But the Bible provides the important evidence that those early Christian women and mothers showed an extraordinary spiritual strength and will power that sustained the ministry and the church of Jesus Christ throughout the centuries.

Today we celebrate Mother's Day. There is a tremendous legacy that we can draw from the women of the Bible, even though it may be invisible to the unsuspecting, male-oriented eyes. Women were there when the needs arose, and put up the funds. Women were there at the empty tomb. *Mothers* were there at the cross.

Mothers are often under-appreciated even today, just as women had been, since long ago.

The wisdom of Proverbs advises us: "Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice (Prov. 23:25)." Let us live in such a way that we would make glad our parent's hearts. Not just on Mother's Day only, but let us live in such a way that our mothers rejoice every day.

I believe that that is the way to honor our parents. It will help us live long in the land that God had given us, as God commanded us.
