

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost
September 23, 2018
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Proverbs 31:10-31
Psalm 1
James 3:13—4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37



If you've been to England, you seen or heard those three little words. They advise rail passengers to take care while crossing the gap between the train door and the station platform.

For Americans, the three little words are iconic and evocative. We love the ubiquitous signs and the voice (and the accent). Print the logo on a t-shirt – a red circle with a blue line and the three words – and it's a souvenir. For the average Brit, presumably it's just a public advisory notice.

It occurs to me that a Bible ought to come with the same advisory notice: "Mind the gap."

In this morning's gospel, we hear a familiar story about that time when Jesus took a little child into his arms to make a point about what it means to be great. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." And then Jesus showed them what greatness looks like, by taking a child and placing the child in among them and then taking that child into his arms.

Even without any sort of translation, it's a powerful teaching – and the world would be a better place if we simply were more careful in how we treat the children of this world.

"Mind the gap," though, because there is a gap between our times and Jesus' ... and our sense of children is not a universal thing. And there's something more going on here than we might readily see.

In Jesus' day, children weren't welcomed so much as tolerated. I was reminded this past week that, even in medieval times, Mediterranean cultures put a relatively low value on children: Thomas Aquinas taught that in a raging fire a husband was obliged to save his father first, then his mother, next his wife, and last of all his young child. That's a different attitude than ours.

In Jesus' day, a family would love their own child, but not think too much of other children. A child was as an investment in the future, but until then, they were worth less than an adult who could help provide for the family. Even within a family, a child was on a par with a slave.

“Mind the gap” in order to notice that when Jesus takes a random child and places that child in the midst of a circle of adults and then embraces the child in his arms, that child is not inherently cuddly and lovable, deserving of care and affection; the child stands in for the powerless, the vulnerable, the ones with no voice or influence in the world. This isn’t a sweet scene, it’s a prophetic act, an enacted parable; it aims to turn the world upside down.

And what opens up a familiar passage may be even more important for us when we ponder the relatively obscure reading we heard this morning from the Book of Proverbs: “Mind the gap.”

For some folks, the point of the 31st chapter of Proverbs seems clear and self-evident. I don’t think they think there *is* a gap between an ancient patriarchal world and 21st century America. For them, this passage is a call for a modern woman to emulate the “Proverbs 31 Woman.”

I question if it’s achievable. I doubt it’s helpful. I doubt it’s even the point. But a man shouldn’t say so. I’ll let a woman named Rebekah Montgomery tell a story of her discouragement:

Between kids, husband, housework, church, and a job, I frantically ran to keep up. So on Mother’s Day, when I slid into my pew — late and totally exhausted — and listened to a sermon about the Proverbs 31 Woman who did absolutely everything with easy competency, my corsage — and spirits — totally wilted.

The more I listened, the more depressed I became. If the preacher would have told me that the Virtuous Woman wore a size 8, I think I would have given up on the spot. I would never measure up. Unless I dressed the kids the night before and stored them in Tupperware I couldn’t even get to church on time — let alone doing all that spinning, running a vineyard, and being noble. ⁱ

It’s a bit tongue-and-cheek. That may be helpful. Maybe it’s just good for a laugh. That wouldn’t be the worst thing we could do with it this morning. But maybe it’s not the best we can do.

Another woman named Rachel Held Evans offers a better way, I think. For her, it began as an experiment that turned into a book called *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*. She came up with a list of strict biblical guidelines she would follow for one year to achieve “biblical womanhood.”

Her quest took some amusing turns. She spent one week of the year calling her husband “Master” and being deferential towards him. (He got to pick which Netflix movie they watched.)

She spent a lot of time on her rooftop, one minute for every time she caught herself acting “contentious,” she said, since the Bible instructs that “it is better to live on the corner of a roof than to live with a contentious woman.”

One translation of one verse from this morning's reading from Proverbs says a virtuous woman's husband is praised at the city gate. So Rachel Held Evans drove out to the edge of town and held up a sign that said, "Dan is awesome!"



Some critics have accused her of making fun of the Bible. But she insists that was never the point. ⁱⁱ In her own way, she was just "minding the gap."

And in doing so, contends there's still something relevant in a text so far removed from 21st century America. She asked an Orthodox Jewish woman if Jewish women struggle with the burden of Proverbs 31.

"Not at all!" she said. "In my culture, Proverbs 31 is a blessing."

It's really a poem highlighting, as poetry so often does, the glory of the everyday. More specifically, it's a 22-line acrostic poem, one line for each letter of the Hebrew Bible, each line a word of praise. It's literally the ABCs of everything that is good about women.

That seems to me rather remarkable in itself for its times. In a culture that did not generally put much value on women, these words laud women for their strength and compassion ... and for the work they do: work that includes domestic tasks, the care and feeding of her family; and work that encompasses so much more – buying fields, managing a household.

And Rachel Held Evans' Jewish friend, Ahava, emphasized that it was never supposed to be a to-do list for women to learn and apply. It was written for men to learn and to memorize.

"Every week at the Sabbath table, my husband sings the Proverbs 31 poem to me," Ahava explained. "It's special because I know that no matter what I do or don't do, he praises me for blessing the family with my energy and creativity. All women can do that in their own way. I bet you do as well."

Which brings us to the final detail Rachel Held Evans emphasizes about this passage. It's a matter of translation. What gets translated for us a "capable wife" is not adequate. The adjective in various translations is "good" or "virtuous" or "strong and loving," but she notes that in the Bible the same adjective when paired with a man would likely be "valorous." *Eshet chayil* is high praise for a "woman of valor."

And her friend, Ahava, says that in Jewish culture the use of the phrase is invoked as a spontaneous blessing ... the Hebrew equivalent of "You go, girl!" So Rachel Held Evans uses it now to notice all sorts of women who might otherwise not be noticed and praised and blessed:

... cheer one another on with the blessing, celebrating everything from promotions, to pregnancies, to acts of mercy and justice, and honoring everything from battles with cancer, to brave acts of vulnerability, to difficult choices, with a hearty "*eshet chayil!*" — woman of valor.ⁱⁱⁱ

That's a far cry from a prescriptive text, telling women how they're supposed to live.

"Mind the gap." Three little words that help us pay attention to the gap between our times and ancient biblical times. If we mind that gap, we might hold the past more cautiously. And if we mind that gap, perhaps we can attend to the present times more deeply.

"Mind the gap." And notice that the real gap that needs to be closed isn't the one between our times and times long gone. The real gap that needs to be closed is the one between us and one another, between us and all that we hold sacred. That, for me, is the real take-away today.

Our reading from the letter of James ends with this word of encouragement: "Draw near to God, and [God] will draw near to you." But perhaps it would be better translated: "Draw near to the God who is already drawing near to you."

Jesus would have us see that God is already drawing near to us in the kind of people we too-readily ignore or disregard, we would dismiss, whom we tolerate at best, or tell to be seen and not heard. So, too, Proverbs 31 admonishes us to cherish those we all-too-easily take for granted, who do the tasks we demean or devalue.

Welcome these people, cherish them, for that is how we welcome and make room for God.

ⁱ Rebekah Montgomery @ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/women/please-dont-tell-me-the-proverbs-31-woman-wears-a-size-8-11547426.html>.

ⁱⁱ Anecdotes principally from a couple of reviews/features @ <https://www.npr.org/2011/09/25/140761994/biblical-womanhood-a-year-of-living-by-the-book> and <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/tenn-woman-lives-year-strict-accordance-bible-article-1.1191042>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rachel Held Evans, quoted by Glennon Doyle Melton @ <https://momastery.com/blog/2013/04/08/eshet-chayil-woman-of-valor-or-how-i-learned-the-hebrew-equivalent-of-carry-on-warrior/>. (See also Rachel Held Evans @ <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/3-things-you-might-not-know-about-proverbs-31>).