

PENTECOST XVII – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

Time for a confession. I had three choices for the first lesson, the other two a lot less provocative than this one, but the imp in me made me do it. I could have just ignored it and preached about the gospel and seen who among you might have had some opinions you needed to express at coffee hour, but then I read it through a few times, knowing that I had never preached on this text, and this is a good opportunity. In our Judeo-Christian heritage, this passage may be the true basis for all the male chauvinism that has been handed down to us over not just centuries, but over millennia.

It is really very interesting, and I am sure the author and later editors thought they were really doing a wonderful job in praising women, and parts of this are actually high praise and great respect. Let's look at what they say about "a capable wife." They do not call her "a good wife," although she is described as doing her husband "good, and not harm, all the days of her life."

A capable wife does the following:

- 1) As a homemaker, she spins, sews, knits and weaves and makes clothing for herself and her family. She begins cooking before dawn to feed the whole family. She manages a group of servant-girls. She trims the wicks of the lamps, so they burn far into the night, presumably when she is finishing her work for the day. She raises the children and treats them so well that they consider her a happy person.

- 2) As an entrepreneur, she considers property and buys what seems good to her, and then she rolls up her sleeves and plants a vineyard. Note that these efforts are like a workout, girding her with strength and making her arms strong. She develops a business selling clothing both wholesale and retail. She seems to be the primary breadwinner for the family.
- 3) Personally, she is generous to the poor and needy in ways that she can be of help with either her clothing, her food or her money. She is smart, even wise, and is known for kindness and dignity, and a warm heart that welcomes the future with joy.

Remarkable! What does it say about the husband? There is no description of what he does, or how he relates to the household. The authors do say that he compliments her highly, saying, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all." Because of all of this, the authors tell us, "Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land." In other words, he sits on his butt all day, making so-called "important" decisions.

When we consider this passage as a whole, what emerges is a description of her value based on what she does, and there is little indication of her value based on character and her person, except as they relate to work. A few decades ago, this was often seen as very complimentary and very broad-minded. In the period in which this was written, if a man divorced his wife, she got nothing, and it was up to her relatives to take her in and help her to survive if they had the ability. Yet in this passage, the authors urge that she should be given "a share in the fruit of her hands." That was a giant step in that period of history, but it doesn't begin to make up for their inability to see a woman, a wife, of equal value when compared with a man.

Today's gospel passage comes from a time when the attitudes and values we've just heard were still prevalent in the Jewish culture. Women, children and foreigners had little value, if any. We might say they had "potential value," a boy when he became a man, a woman when she became old enough to marry into a good family and bring her family some credit, and a foreigner if he worked for someone and brought a businessman a profit in that way.

That's the way men thought. They also thought in terms of favoritism and other hierarchies of value: who was the best, the greatest, the favorite of all. Here we see Jesus' closest disciples caught up in that kind of exchange between them, each one wanting to be seen as Jesus' favorite. In another passage on this same theme, Mother Zebedee, the mother of James and John, comes to Jesus and asks him to let her boys sit closest to him in heaven, one on his right and the other on his left. In that passage, the other disciples get mad as hell that she tries to do this, probably figuring James and John put her up to it. But Jesus tells them that this decision is not his to make, it is his Father's in heaven. But there is more to this, much more. There are no gradations of value heaven as Jesus and Paul and others describe it. Paul talks about "pressing on to the upward call of Christ Jesus," but he has no sense of preferment, claiming that in Christ there is no distinction between man and woman, Jew or Greek, slave or free, all are equal in God's eyes.

That's hard for us, isn't it? Isn't that at the heart of what is going on in country after country, culture after culture around the world right now? We humans have a passion to see ourselves as better than, more deserving than, holier than, stronger than others in this life. Oh, our hearts are big enough to include some others in the circles of the

chosen that we create. They might be family, or friends we made in childhood before we learned how to be exclusive and excluding. The circles we create will probably look like us, speak like us, think like us, and we want God to choose our circle as the best, the brightest, the most precious of all. And if God is not going to do that, if God is going to go along with this silly nonsense of equality and brotherhood and sisterhood that Jesus teaches, then the hell with God. Who wants a God who isn't going to put me first?

I want to quote something from a mentor that I have shared before: "Everyone wants a savior, but no one wants a lord." We rejoice in the gift of salvation, but we shudder at the thought of any expectations, especially the expectation that we will grow our hearts to be as generous, as liberal as God's heart.

There is something very important that I learned many years ago: "You cannot hold onto God's hand with one of your hands and hold onto your hatreds with your other hand." That includes our prejudices, too. God is not going to hate on our side. God is not going to look down on or exclude someone because I do.

I wish I could say I learned this once and for all, but I have to keep learning this whenever my heart slips into its old selfishness, its old prejudices. The good thing is this: I know that to be true. The challenge is to recognize the opportunity to practice this again every time I slip into such thinking. *Amen.*

+JLJ