

“LET HER WORKS PRAISE HER”

sermon digest

May 10, 2009

Proverbs 31:28-31

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Husbands, what commendations would you give your wives as mothers? The writer of this Proverb offers five commendations of his “capable woman/wife” as a mother--his “mother’s day card for her.” Of course, the word “household” in the following commendations includes but is not limited to her mothering work.

--“She provides food for her household,” v. 15

--“She clothes her household in warm crimson (REB double cloaks),” v. 21

--“She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue” v. 26

--“She keeps her eye on the conduct of her household” (Gerry would interject: “If she can!” It was hard to keep an eye on our two boys.) v. 27.

--(And one of the highest compliments of a mother) “Her **children** rise up and call her blessed (REB extol her virtues)” v. 28 (Mary D. Bowman, my wife Gerry’s early mentor, wrote a little book on mothering titled *My Children Rise Up and Call Me!*)

Of course, our writer left out many common works of a mother: morning sickness and labor pains . . . rocking a sleepless child through the night . . . kissing and putting band-aids on boo boos . . . potty training . . . teaching table manners . . . teaching how to take turns . . . teaching the ABCs . . . and a begillion other things.

What would you note as works that praise mothers?

I SHOULD THINK WE WOULD START WITH THE FIRST WORKS OF THE MOTHER—GESTATION FOR NINE MONTHS (LONGER THAN ALL BUT 12 MAMMALS¹ PER DR. GOOGLE!), AND THEN WHAT IS ACTUALLY CALLED WORK (WE SAY, “SHE IS IN LABOR”). Even with modern anesthesia, I have yet to meet a mother who advocated changing the word “labor” to describe birthing! Giving birth to children is certainly work—a work that we males cannot really identify with. How highly the miraculous work of gestation and birthing praises mothers!

And we should note this most basic work by mothers because, interestingly enough, for most of human history women did not receive their just due for their conception and gestation of children. For thousands of years, the woman was thought to be something like an oven into which a loaf containing all necessary ingredients was placed for baking. Even Protestant Reformer John Calvin, among most church leaders, believed this. Then in the 17th century, English anatomist William Harvey, who discovered blood circulation, said in his book on human reproduction that the woman did provide *some* “matter” to the process. But it was the man who gave this “matter” life and form with his special secretion that was so powerful that it was, claimed Harvey, “vivifying, endowed with force and spirit and generative influence.” It was not until the *end* of the 17th century that some scientists began to argue for an *equal* male and female generative role in reproduction.

I will not even try to describe such things as morning sickness, cramps, labor pains, pushing the baby out. But mothers, really, you *should* get some “affirmative action” for this work, plus huge reparations for the misguided theology that birth pains resulted from Eve’s sin. (An ancient theological-mythological explanation of a human mother’s birth pain compared with other mammals who seemed to have no such pain.) But, on behalf of all of us, especially us men, I do say: let your miraculous gestation and challenging labor in giving birth praise you mothers.

WE SURELY MUST INCLUDE A SECOND WORK THAT PRAISES MOTHERS—HER ROLE IN BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN HER CHILDREN. Every parenting book I have ever read emphasizes the importance of the baby being wanted and loved and needing gentle physical closeness. (You may have heard on PBS radio Saturday morning how other mammals like Dolphins also give their new-born similar supportive closeness.) Psychologist Erik Erikson presented in his book *Identity and the Life Cycle* a broad human life journey from birth to death. Erikson said that there is a crisis at each major turn in the road which we must negotiate successfully to move on with a sense of wellbeing and purpose. The first stage² is from birth to 18 months in which the baby must experience trust over doubt—trust verses doubt regarding itself and its world. Physical and verbal intimacy, especially from the mother, but also all others who give such mothering, is key to evoking the baby’s trust. By our loving presence and touch, cuddling and cooing, talking and singing, playing, etc., we emotionally say to the baby: Hey there, little friend. Welcome to our world. We are soooo thrilled that you have joined us. We are here for you. You are sooooo special, and you are really, really special to us. We’re going to do everything in our power to keep you safe and happy. We’re going to keep doing this till you can trust us, and then in time love us in return.”

The baby responds on the feeling level: “Ahhh, being outside the womb and in this strange world is not painful like it was when I slid into it. This strange world is occupied with some huge but caring creatures who’re happy I’m here. I’m feeling wanted. I’m safe now. I feel like I’m going to enjoy this world, these creatures. I’m giving it the opportunity to keep bringing on the love. I’m feeling hopeful and really enjoying life.”

If a baby does not receive such early mothering care, it will not develop self-esteem and self-confidence, it will doubt and not hope, languish instead of thriving. Virginia Axline, a play therapist, wrote a moving account of such a child, entitled *Dibbs: In Search of Self*. This child had everything material *but* no parental love. This left him so maladjusted that his teachers thought he was retarded. Finally, through Axline’s patient, empathic play therapy, Dibbs slowly began to gain self-esteem and sociability. Eventually, he went on to college where he continued to thrive, even becoming a leader in student government.

Thank God for such substitute mothering! One day a son and his mom brought an infant to Santa at WestTown Mall for its first picture with Santa. My heart nearly broke when the grandmother helped cradle the infant in my arm and said, “His mother is not here because she loves drugs more than her baby.” I replied, “I am so sorry. I am glad he has you.” I was especially attentive toward that

motherless child, and silently prayed for that mother, and gave thanks for that caring grandmother and her son. God bless all such substitutes for absentee mothers. May the guardian angels be especially attentive to that child.

Mothers, grandmothers, adoptive mothers, foster parents, nannies, babysitters, tutors, and all others who sub as or share in mothering, who do the crucial work of being physically and lovingly present in countless ways to children—you open the door and point the way and light the fire for their embrace of life, their self-esteem, wellbeing, and confidence. Let this work mightily praise you.

WE WOULD ALL INCLUDE A THIRD PRAISEWORTHY WORK OF MOTHERS—THEIR WISE GUIDANCE OF CHILDREN. “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue,” says our Proverbs writer (31:26).

When I was growing up in rural West TN, there was no such thing as a pre-school program of any kind. I think I had memorized my ABCs, but that was about it. My first taste of formal education was to be plopped down in a class of six-year-olds, in a room with second-graders, maybe third-graders, too. I came home from my first day of school and my mother asked how it went. I showed her our first-grade reader and started crying. Through my tears I told mama, “The teacher sent me home with this reader and wants us to have it read by tomorrow. And I don’t even know how to read yet.”

My mother dropped whatever she was doing, took the book and guided me to the front porch where we sat down in chairs side by side. She patiently explained to me that this was the book that would teach me *how* to read, and that the teacher just wanted me not to lose the book, to bring it back to class the next day to use to *begin* to learn how to read. This event is all the more significant because my mother was forced to quit school in about the third grade when her mother died and she had to take care of younger brothers and sisters. But she had somehow learned how to read. Now, present-day pedagogues might not endorse mama’s approach, but she opened the book to the first page and explained: “See, the way you learn to read is to take it just a word at a time. Then after you’ve learned some words, you can take just a phrase at a time. Then after that, one line at a time. Then a page at a time. You take one little step, then another little step. That’s how after a while you can come to read a whole book.” And she and I began to read the first word, then the second word, then the first phrase, then the first line, then the first page, of the first book I ever read. Neither of us could have ever imagined then what that front-porch motherly guidance would lead to. What a work of guidance that indeed praises my mother!

A thousand times over an effective mother offers such guidance to her children as they slowly grow their own wings with which later they soar independently in their own skies. Great praise to you mothers for your work of wise guidance of your children.

WE ARE COMPELLED TO ACCENT THAT WORK UNDERLYING ALL OF A MOTHER’S WORKS THAT PRAISE HER--THAT MOST FUNDAMENTAL WORK OF LOVE. We have a saying, “No love like a mother’s love.” And in many ways that is true. (No love like a father’s love, either, but you father’s will have your day a little later.) Mothers love though exhausted, when sleep deprived, when ill, when countless chores cry for attention, when children are downright hateful toward you, when you have not had any sustained solitude in months, among many other things.

Probably the most challenging love a mother extends is “tough love”—it’s tough on the child, but also tough on the mother. Listen to a delightful tough-loving mom of three, who authored a book on motherhood, the late humorist Erma Bombeck. From her article titled “You Don’t Love Me!”:

How many times have your kids laid that one on you?

And how many times have you, as a parent, resisted the urge to tell them how much?

Someday, when my children are old enough to understand the logic that motivates a mother, I’ll tell them. . .

--I loved you enough to bug you about where you were going, with whom and what time you would get home.

--I loved you enough to insist you buy a bike with your own money, which we could afford, but you couldn’t.

--I loved you enough to be silent and let you discover your hand picked friend was a creep.

--I loved you enough to stand over you for two hours while you cleaned your bedroom, a job that would have taken me 15 minutes.

--I loved you enough to say, “Yes, you can go to Disney World on Mother’s Day.”

--I loved you enough to let you see anger, disappointment, disgust, and tears in my eyes.

--I loved you enough not to make excuses for your lack of respect or your bad manners.

--I loved you enough to admit that I was wrong and ask for your forgiveness.

--I loved you enough to ignore “what every mother” did or said.

--I loved you enough to let you stumble, fall, hurt, and fail.

--I loved you enough to let you assume the responsibility for your own actions, at 6, 10, or 16.

--I loved you enough to figure you would lie about the party being chaperoned, but forgave you for it . . . after discovering I was right.

--I loved you enough to shove you off my lap, let go of your hand, be mute to your pleas and insensitive to your demands . . . so that you had to stand alone.

--I loved you enough to accept you for what you are, and not what I wanted you to be.

--But most of all, I loved you enough to say no when you hated me for it. That was the hardest part of all.

Who could argue that such love does not reveal the “feminine side” of God?

The one remaining work that I want to mention from my and my wife’s loss of our first son, and the loss of children by some of you, the most recent being the deaths of the son of George and Mona Stubbs and the son of Anna Kate Teague--this is **THE WORK OF GRIEF IN THE DEATH OF A CHILD**. Let us also include those of our church whose mothers have died, most recently the mothers of our

co-pastor Larry Dipboye and the mother of Rev. Susan Burgess-Parish. Special commendations to you who are doing the work of grief. Instead of my talking about this (we had a wonderful talk on grief by Dr. Steve Herbes last Wednesday evening), let us bow now for a moment of silent remembrance and prayer for you mothers (fathers and grand-parents included here, too) in your work of grief. . . .

. . . For those doing the work of grief, Lord hear our prayer. Amen.

Mothers all, may your many, many works praise you.

1. *Ass, Cow, Elephant, Giraffe, Gorilla, Horse, Otter, Rhinoceros (black), Seal, Sea Lion, Whale, Zebra.*

2. Erikson's 8 stages: 0-18 months of age, Trust v Mistrust / 18 months-3 years, Autonomy v Shame / 3-5 years, Initiative v Guilt / 6-12 years, Industry v Inferiority / 12-18, Identity v Role Confusion / 18-35 years, Intimacy v Solidarity & Isolation / 35-55 or 65, Generativity v Self absorption or Stagnation / 55 or 65 years–Death, Integrity v Despair.