

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 20, Year B
September 20, 2009
Proverbs 31:10-31, James 3:13-4:3, Mark 9:30-37

On Tuesday night, I was sitting on my couch watching TV when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something dart across my kitchen floor. My eyes popped. My heart jumped. It was like a big shadow, only furrier, and much more menacing.

I was alone. I was vulnerable. I may have let out a little shriek. I pulled my feet onto the couch. I immediately texted Brian, my significant other: "Agghh I just saw a mouse run across my kitchen floor and I'm freaking out."

He called me a few minutes later to assure me he was on his way over (having just finished working out at the gym near my apartment). I greeted him with the most pitiful face I could muster. I told him there was no way I was going back in the kitchen to do the stack of dinner dishes which clearly needed doing - at least not without putting shoes on and not without him standing nearby - ready to protect and defend me.

He looked at me supportively (or was that mockingly?)
...and then asked if he could eat the leftover ravioli sitting in a bowl on the counter.

So I offered him what I was to have for lunch the next day and went into my room to put on a pair of shoes and socks (the thought of a mouse running over my exposed feet was too much to bear).

I returned to the kitchen. Brian had finished the ravioli.

I went to the sink and started my dishes.
He went to the fridge and grabbed a beer
... and leaned against the counter looking very manly.
I'm sure if the situation called for it, he would have swooped me away to safety in the blink of an eye.

It was a perfect snapshot of gender roles circa 1950. Or perhaps 1750? I don't know; whenever women weren't considered to be strong and independent, whenever women were expected to provide for the men in their lives and then clean up afterward.

I think about Tuesday night and I laugh (just like you all did). We laugh because it is absurd.

Would a strong, highly educated, independent woman such as me really NEED a man to rescue her from a mouse? No.

Would a strong, highly educated, independent woman such as me really WANT a man to rescue her from a mouse. Yeah, kind of.

And for me, that's hard to admit. Hard to admit because I have very high expectations for myself, and they don't include allowing someone else to do my dirty work or rescue me from a situation from which I can surely free myself.

Consequently, I can see how this reading from Proverbs could be kind of dangerous. At first glance, I wasn't troubled by the reading. I thought it was a beautiful portrayal of a strong, smart, resourceful, charitable, dignified and God-fearing woman. Who wouldn't want to be described in the way this woman is?

Well, for one, someone who requires sleep! The person described here rises while it is still night. I will never measure up. Nor will anyone else, because the person described in Proverbs doesn't exist.

From the beginning, this passage from Proverbs describes the attributes of a "capable wife." I want, however, to continue to think and speak about the woman described here not as a wife only, but as a person.

And as people ourselves, I want us all – men and women alike – to think of all the ways the description of perfection we encounter here can be damaging to us and our spiritual journeys: our journeys to know and love God, to see ourselves as God sees us, and to follow God's hopes for our lives, rather than the road paved by our own expectations of what it is to be good and worthy.

"Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you," says the letter of James.

"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," says Jesus in the Gospel.

How do we hear these two pronouncements in light of the reading from Proverbs?

What are we attracted by in life? What are we drawn to? Perfection? Success? Self sufficiency? There is not a single person sitting in this sanctuary who could ever achieve the perfection suggested by the Proverbs reading. As one person said to me this week, this is nothing more than fantasy.

Yet, how many of us strive to be the best, or at least to be very very good at what we do? As workers, as parents, as students?

How many of us can easily see ourselves in the Gospel story, on the same road as the disciples, talking with our friends just as the disciples were talking among themselves.

We might not be coming right out and saying we are the greatest. But we can probably hear ourselves and our friends describing our accomplishments, the good decisions we made, the moment when we felt like super parents, the way we figured out the solution to a problem vexing us for months, the time we managed to have the family fed, the homework done, and the dogs walked all before 9:00 pm.

We would certainly be implying we were great. It is natural to want to look good among your friends.

It is easy to see ourselves walking with the disciples on that road. It is helpful to put ourselves in the story - to see just how easy it is to identify with the disciples. It is also helpful to put the women from proverbs in the story - to help illustrate the point Jesus is trying to make.

If the woman from Proverbs happened to be amidst the disciples arguing with them, she would surely have to be acknowledged as the "greatest." Not only is she a fantastic spouse, she runs her own business, she buys land, she reaches out to the needy, she speaks wisely.

And what do we know about the disciples? They are a bunch of followers. They have left their families behind. They have abandoned their fishing nets, their livelihoods. They try their hand at casting out demons and become frustrated at their efforts. Sometimes they find success. But other times Jesus has to bail them out. And, oh, how they never seem to understand what Jesus is teaching them. Compared to the woman from Proverbs, the disciples are a sad lot.

But they are faithful. And that is what matters.

As Jesus tells them, in his kingdom, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." You are not made to serve one person only; you are not made to serve your spouse, husband or wife. You are made to serve God and your neighbors. And you can't do that by being obsessed with being the greatest.

Greatness will get the disciples - will get us - nowhere – except farther and farther away from all those people who are not great, farther and farther away from the least of these, from those like the child Jesus embraces in the story, the child – the one considered at that time a non-person.

Far from all who are considered great by the world's standards, live the ones Jesus came to save; the ones Jesus came to help understand that being great is nothing compared to being beloved.

The problem, then, with others expectations and our own expectations of ourselves, which for me at least, can so often be unrealistic, is that we become so attached to them we lose sight of all that we have been given and neglect to be thankful for all we have. We are drawn to being perfect ourselves, when we should be focused on drawing nearer to God, who IS perfect in every way.

Draw near to God. Open yourselves up to God. Listen for what God wants you to do with your life.

God may not have any use for your greatness. But God may have many uses for your humility and your willingness to let go and be with all those average and beloved creatures of God.

And there is nothing wrong with knowing yourself as one thing only: Beloved.

There is nothing wrong with striving to be only one thing: Human, made in the image of God, and absolutely wonderful in God's eyes.

There is a story Barbara Brown Taylor, a noted preacher, tells of a time when she failed miserably at a project she was leading. She was, at that moment, feeling decidedly un-great. But then she began to reconsider these feelings.

As she says, "I began to wonder if my human wholeness might be more useful to God than my exhausting goodness."

I had only one response to her musings:

Amen.