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Varieties of Virtue  
Wisdom of Solomon 1-2; Proverbs 31: 10-31

What is righteousness, anyway? And how is it taught to us? That's what I've been wondering since I began to read the Wisdom of Solomon this week. Not to be confused with the more erotic Song of Solomon. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," begins Song of Solomon, and it gets only more salacious from there. No, today we're talking about Wisdom of Solomon. If you have a study Bible, Wisdom of Solomon is found in that mysterious middle section between the Old Testament and the New Testament known as the apocrypha. These are books included in early Greek translations of the Bible that most Protestants like us today don't bother with reading. In contrast with the salacious themes of Song of Solomon, Wisdom of Solomon is all about the question of righteousness. Who's got righteousness? How do we learn righteousness?

I can remember being a Boy Scout as a child. That was an experience that could be as liturgical as going to church. We'd line up in formation around the flagpole. We would end our meetings with a prayer and elaborate hand gestures. We were taught slogans and mottos and laws in a manner strangely close to catechisms taught in many church schools. Do your best. Be prepared. Do a good turn daily. On command we would be expected to recite the 12 points of the boy scout law: a scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, brave, clean, and reverent. I think of this as one way my community was teaching me about righteousness. Is righteousness to be all of these things at the same time? Any one of these things?

There were other models for me, too, about how to live a righteous life. When I became a student at Davidson College, I entered a campus culture shaped by an Honor Code first fashioned by confederate slaveholders. I remember a very severe lecture from an eminence of the faculty concerning intellectual honesty, the perils of plagiarism, and the privileges and freedoms we enjoyed that could be snatched away at any moment. If my memory serves, the title of this sermon was “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Registrar.” We were being introduced to a code of student conduct that covered our lives inside and outside the classroom. At the conclusion of this - sermon? - we were lined up two by two and marched forward to sign our names in a book we were told was as old as the college. So this is what it means to live a righteous life, I wondered, never to break the Honor Code?

Maybe you have similar experiences in your background where your values were shaped by a memorable experience, or by practices encouraged by your community. The creeds and confessions of the church you grew up in? Orientation to medical school? Boot camp in the army? Or maybe it was the wisdom and patience of a family member or a mentor shaping for you an enduring image of what it means to live a righteous life.

In my experience there is a wealth of images and examples. Integrating them into my own life is more than an exercise in memorization and rule following. It’s also about practice, reflection, and critique. So it is with the biblical examples of righteousness that we receive. There are many examples; we don’t take them uncritically, and the real spiritual work involves integrating them into our lives and our experiences.

What is righteousness? Well, it is a “capable wife” according to the book of Proverbs - empowered, industrious, and generous. The text has good intentions, celebrating the contributions that women make to their families, but in this choir it’s singing off key. We’re not comfortable with the rigid gender roles described

here or the reductive assumptions made here about who a woman is and what a wife does. Show me in the Bible the passage that begins, “A capable husband is hard to find.” Still, it’s hard to argue, if you read the text closely, that the woman described by these virtues is not one example of righteousness. It is a righteous life that worked for her, that meant something to her family and community, that endures in our memory. We have plenty of male examples of righteousness in biblical literature. But maybe we’ll just stick with Jesus as the most famous example. There is Jesus - meek, selfless, sacrificial - this must be righteousness. But are we talking about the same Jesus who insulted the Syrophoenician woman two weeks ago? Does he have to be perfect to be righteous? Or maybe it is not Jesus, but the Syrophoenician woman, who is our enduring example of righteousness. Maybe not the “capable wife” of Proverbs but the tenacious love of an impoverished mother reorienting the ministry of Jesus that is the image of righteousness we want to carry with us.

I’m just not convinced at all that there is one model of righteousness that we receive in Biblical literature. I’m not convinced at all that there is one model of righteousness in my own life that I should be following. Here in the same text we find a transcendent portrait of feminine power and love, not far from everyday characterizations limited by the typical norms of male privilege. Here in the same text we find the love of Jesus perfected in selflessness and sacrifice alongside occasions of selfishness and hard-heartedness. Here in the same text we find God’s gracious and merciful activity alongside inscrutable experiences of God’s anger and recrimination.

So the text reflects both on what it means to be God and discloses what it means to be human. There are in these words a variety of experiences and expressions that expand our imaginations for human life and divine activity. So I can accept that the text offers us an image of Wisdom as a capable wife so long as

we hold this image in the company of the many other examples of womanhood and manhood and personhood that are collected here. In truth there are as many ways to be righteous as there are ways to be human.

It makes me think of that now famous TedTalk by Chimamanda Adiche - you know, the one about the dangers of a single story? It's been viewed millions and millions of times. Adiche is a novelist with African origins who speaks about the repressive power of holding to one story as a vision for humanity. There are many stories, she says. Yet even she, who carries such a moving vision for the multiplicity of humanity, seems to fall short of her own aspirations. She's been sort of canceled online for offensive comments toward transgender and nonbinary people. Why is it that all of us seem so limited by the small visions of what is good that we have come to accept? Why is it that even our most compelling visions of righteousness always seem to leave someone out? The grave risk of living righteously is that you're just half-a-hiccup away from self-righteousness. We condemn ourselves by believing more in the single story we tell ourselves than the many stories that God's grace unfolds for us.

Love has many faces. Goodness has many gestures. Virtue comes in many varieties. So if we're reading from Wisdom of Solomon - or its more seductive cousin - or the capable wife, or the Divine Feminine in Proverbs, or the righteousness of Jesus or the righteousness of a Greek woman, God is blessing us with many portraits of good and faithful people. So that we can all see righteousness in ourselves, and the capacity for goodness and virtue in one another. Amen.