

The text we have from Proverbs in the Old Testament is unique; text like this doesn't get preached often in churches. But I am glad this is part of this week's lectionary readings.

As we know, in the Bible, women are usually presented as marginal characters-always subject to male control. Often, they are even nameless.

In this text from Proverbs, the woman is also nameless. But here this woman is described to be an exceptional, ideal human being every man on the earth would look for; we see nothing but praises for her.

¹⁴She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.

¹⁵She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household...

¹⁶She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

She is capable, gifted, and wise. Far from the stereotypical image of the housewife wasting her days on soap operas, this virtuous woman is the picture of sincerity.

Rather than being chained to her kitchen, she is productive, and she is a player in business world.

She is the foundation and center of the household and she is the one who makes the whole family happy. She is everything; she does everything.

While this woman is praised highly, however, see what the text says about her husband.

It says, “Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.”

That means he has nothing to do with her family; he is a jerk; he does nothing for the family; he is useless.

Then, what is the point? Is this part of the Bible suggesting any

gender distinctions in terms of roles in our home or society? In other words, is this text saying that women’s role in home and society should be this while that of men should be that?

Scholars do not think that is the case here.

Proverbs is all about wisdom.

In this book of Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman; in other words, the writer simply uses the term, woman, to mean wisdom or people of wisdom.

Webster’s online dictionary says: wisdom is

1 a : accumulated philosophic or scientific learning : **knowledge** **b** : ability to discern inner qualities and relationships : **insight** **c** : good sense : **judgment** **d** : generally accepted belief

2 : a wise attitude, belief.

3 : the teachings of the ancient wise men

The dictionary meaning of wisdom—something that has to do with our head.

However, the text for today says wisdom is not a detached and theoretical business; it is daily and practical; it should be something down-to-earth.

Wisdom is something that applies to every aspect of day-to-day life: relationships and business; eating, drinking, and sleeping; avoiding temptation and making a living.

When I had a Pastoral Conference in Congo this past July; this is one of the gifts I was presented with by the pastors at the closure of the meeting.

As I shared before, I taught a group of pastors who came across denominations from Bukabu, Congo. I very much enjoyed the time with them and they really appreciated me too.

During the closing session, a couple of representative pastors gave me an interesting presentation. One of them talked in front of all the pastors about what he had learned. Isn't that something?

He really gave me a summary of my whole lectures on the topic. I didn't know it was part of their culture. It was very nice for me to see students remember what I tried to teach. I would have given him an A if it was a seminary class.

And there was a second guy who had this in his hand: a wooden craft of Congolese woman.

He said, when you go back to America, please remember those hard working Congolese women; and he explained to me about this.

This woman has no shoes. But she is carrying a water bucket on head and an extra jar in her hand.

Women's responsibilities are not only to take care of many children at home, but to also put some food on the table.

So this poor woman works all day—God knows where—and at the end of the day, she also has to walk barefoot to get water. Sometimes, they have babies on their backs too.

Then, what about men? Someone said, “They are useless.” In Africa, there are no jobs; that means many husbands do not work. In fact, many women do not have husbands because they have died in wars.

It is the women and children who have to suffer the most.

But if you look at the face of this lady, she doesn't look sad or angry. She looks calm and resilient.

I think today's text tells us something important.

The book of Proverbs is an old document; we do not even know how old it is. But it has all kind of wisdom the Jewish people have passed onto the following generations. This is the wisdom they received from

God.

If the woman means wisdom in the text, I wonder, what the husband might mean.

Probably, he may mean something that bothers people who try to live diligently and responsibly?

The text says, "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."

Maybe the woman represents people who fear God and try to live faithfully. But the husband may mean all the obstacles God's people face in their lives?

Whatever it is, what we need is this “calm and resilient” attitude as this Congolese woman has;

Life is tough.

I went to the Circuit meeting last week. They said almost 30 % of churches are in danger in terms of membership and finances.

We live in a difficult time.

But whatever we do, we need to be wise; and being wise means that we need to work hard to provide ahead for our needs, so that we need not fear for the coming winter.

But the living of the wise does not stop there; they extend their generosity beyond the immediate household to the poor and needy in the wider community.

Not only that, we are reminded that the faithful and wise Christian living is not really looking up the heaven with a wish list of things we want to have; it is rather working as hard as we can not only to meet our needs but also to reach out to others who are in need.

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

For this lesson, Jesus did not try to give any lecture on this topic in a sophisticated way. He just held up a little child in his arms and said:

“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

He couldn't be more practical; and he couldn't be more down-to-earth.

This biblical wisdom is quite radical.

It comes from the fear of the Lord; but it is not just a thought or belief; it is an action.

It is doing: doing what God asks us to do; it is doing what Jesus showed us to do.

It is working hard to support ourselves; we need to work hard to take care of ourselves.

And then, we need to show something to the world.

The real wisdom is shown when there is care, love, and acts of reaching out to our neighbors.

With God's power, love, and mercy, I am hoping that we may grow in our understanding every day, that we all may become better people of wisdom. Amen.