

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
22 September 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“A Living Eulogy”

Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Proverbs 31:10-31

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

No, it is not Mother’s Day.

And No, you are not at a funeral.

But Yes, we just read Proverbs 31. If you’re wondering, it’s the assigned Old Testament text for today from the Revised Common Lectionary. In other words, I didn’t pick it; it picked me. But I’m so glad the Spirit led us together.

Because despite some verses that are decisively patriarchal when read in isolation¹²—this text is inherently a celebratory one...honoring women as fully human, deserving of respect, savvy, wise, creative, generous, and capable of excellence in ALL that they do as partners, parents, and professionals. Proverbs 31 speaks specifically of how the everyday acts of our

everyday lives collectively create good.

As Diana Butler Bass notes, “Although this passage is often hijacked by conservative Christians to keep women “in their place,” it is a surprisingly apt description of contemporary women -- and most especially, religious feminists.”³

This passage defies the typical debate of “stay at home mom” versus “working outside the home mom,” and says instead, “a woman can be a hardworking, creative, business-savvy entrepreneur AND do all the home-ec-y things of making clothes, cooking meals, doing chores for her house AND volunteer and find meaning in her life outside the home AND do it all with a contagious spirit of positivity, laughter, wisdom,

¹ Rising at night to provide food for her household (v15), her husband getting all the public credit and accolades (v23), her children singing her praises as a great mom (v28), and having to have someone give her a ‘share’ of all she has worked for (v31), for example

² Telford Work, “Proverbs 31:10-31: Theological Perspective,” eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown

Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, pg 74.

³ Diana Butler Bass, “Sunday Musings: Saying NO to misogyny,” *The Cottage Substack* (Sept. 22, 2024).

kindness AND not have her beauty or body objectified or complimented or commented upon, but rather have her faith be the thing that makes her worthy of praise. Well, thanks be to God!!

But if you're thinking, wait, how can ONE person do all that? Then breathe a sigh of relief because one person *can't* do all of that (at least, certainly not at one time!) There is no such thing as a "Proverbs 31 Superhero" so we need not try to live up to this unattainable perfection or impose on anyone else for that matter.

In reality, biblical scholars tell us that this text is most likely a *compilation* of qualities from many different women, personified in one entity as Lady Wisdom—a divine presence who has inspired people for generations.

Don't miss this now. The divine is personified as Wisdom and this Wisdom is a Woman! Or better said, the collective experience of *many* women.

Indeed, a *Thriving in Goodness* reading of these verses might suggest that these collective

experience that make up Lady Wisdom reveal that she "rises early (v15), not because of her subordination but because of her determination. She helps her husband, not because he holds power over her but because her work is fruitful [and meaningful to her] (vs11-12). Her business flourishes because of her initiative and creativity (vs13-14, 16). Her generosity is not coerced but reflects her kind heart for strangers in need (vs20) as well as her own children (vs21). She's energetic and strong because of her self-discipline [in taking time to focus on her own endeavors] (vs17-19). She's not an appendage of her spouse but a true partner...Indeed, in a world tempted to acknowledge only a woman's charm and beauty as her own (vs30), and grant only her husband public recognition and control over the family name and resources, her goodness [as revealed in her good actions] compels all to respect and reward her (vs 28-31). In all these ways and more, her virtue shines through the confining social structures of her world and impresses the [respect] of the Lord upon all who know her, regardless of their stations in life."⁴

⁴ Work, pg 76.

And, even more, this *collective embodiment of wisdom* in Lady Wisdom is defined as A Life Well Lived, a life that matters. Wisdom in the Bible is not enlightenment... Wisdom in the Bible is never mere knowledge, or book learning; it's not acquired through privilege and maintained through credentialing. Rather, in Scripture, Wisdom is a way of life that includes justice, righteousness, humility, compassion, and fairness.⁵ And this Way of Life Wisdom is attained through experience in *lived relationships*.

Just as the Apostle Paul reflects on how Timothy's grandmother and mother took part in his spiritual formation (2 Tim. 1:5),⁶ Proverbs invites us to reflect on the purposes of life and those who have affected our own spiritual journeys through their lives and impact, and through our relationships with them.⁷

Now for sure, Proverbs 31 reads like a song of praise to *one person*, and indeed, it is why it is often read at memorial services and funerals to honor a

beloved wife or mother who aced home-ec, raised her kids with love, was successful in her work life, supported her partner, was kind and laughed a lot, served in her church's Blessings or Family Promise ministries, and was strong in her faith. All that is true and it can be used in that way, but when read in context, and when we really examine it verse by verse, this is a text about relationships as a whole, and how Wisdom is not something we learn in books, but something we experience through our *connections with others*. Be it our business connections, our partner or sibling or familial connections, our parental connections, our community connections, our faith connections.

You see, the verses we read today conclude thirty-one chapters about Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs begins with Wisdom crying out in the streets, raising her voice at the busiest intersection, asking, "*How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will...fools hate knowledge?*" *Give heed to what I say; I will pour out my*

⁵ Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., "Proverbs 31:10-31: Pastoral Perspective," eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised*

Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, pg 76.

⁶ Carter, Jr., pg 76.

⁷ Carter, Jr., pg 78.

thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.” (1:20-23)

And then for thirty chapters, between those words at the beginning and the ones we read today, Wisdom speaks. She pours out her thoughts, she makes her words known. And her words are all about relationships—with God and others, but mostly *others*. It is through our interactions with other people that we gain wisdom, this virtue that she embodies, and for which she is praised in the final chapter.

Throughout Proverbs, Lady Wisdom speaks on the value of wisdom (ch. 2) and how it comes through fear (or awe) of the Lord and is of more worth than riches and gold (ch. 3). She speaks on the wisdom of God’s creation, and how to keep on the right path (ch. 3). She gives parental advice and partner advice, offering warnings about how not to mess up relationships (chs. 4 & 5). In her practical advice (ch. 6), she turns to nature for people to figure out how to work together: *“Go to the ants you lazybones! Consider their ways and be wise,”* (Prov. 6:6).

She does not shy away from uncomfortable conversations,

speaking to children about the false attractions of adultery (ch. 7). She reminds us she was with God at Creation (ch. 8), and she has built the Table around which we feast (ch. 9). And she lists off the Gifts of Wisdom (ch. 8); what she has to offer to us: righteousness, good advice, sound insight, love, justice, fear (or awe) of the Lord.

And *then* Lady Wisdom gives us *twenty* chapters of wise sayings that run the gamut in tone and purpose.

There’s the obvious: *“A gossip goes around telling secrets, one who is trustworthy keeps confidence.”* (11:13).

The therapeutic: *“Anxiety weighs down the human heart, a good word cheers it up.”* (12:25).

The prophetic: *“The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice,”* (13:23).

The directive: *“A soft answer turns away wrath, a harsh word stirs up anger,”* (15:1).

The spiritual: *“The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps,”* (16:9).

The relational: *“A friend loves at all times, kinfolk are born to share adversity,”* (17:17), and *“Better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious partner,”* (21:9).

The hopeful: *“Wisdom is like honey to your soul; if you find it, and taste its sweetness, you will find a future, your hope will not be cut off,”* (24:13-14, abbr.).

The straightforward: *“Partiality in judging is not good,”* (24:23).

The comical: *“Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly,”* (26:11).

The blunt: *“For as pressing milk produces curds and pressing the nose produces blood, so pressing anger produces strife,”* (30:32).

The humbling: *“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring,”* (27:1).

The call to action: *“Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute; defend the rights of the poor and needy,”* (31:9).

That verse, by the way, is the very last Wisdom Saying before

our text begins today. Framing, yet again, these words about personified Wisdom as relational, and the need for her presence in our world. We do not need more knowledge for the sake of knowledge. We need wisdom because it teaches us how to be in relationship with one another, how to care for each other. We need Wisdom to show us how to be The Good in the world so that through how we live and love together, we wisely create the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven!

And the reason I gave you this highlight reel of the book of Proverbs is because we cannot fully understand Proverbs 31, without knowing that for 30 chapters before it, a voice of Wisdom has been teaching us about knowledge that comes through *relational connecting*.

It’s empowering to know that Lady Wisdom herself is telling us that the wisdom we need to grow in, and the quality that is the most prized of all qualities, the most worthy to be praised is something accessible to us all—fear of the Lord (or awe or respect of the Lord). And THAT is what we learn by being connected to other people. Or to put it a different way, the wisdom in Proverbs reveals that

a deeper connection with God comes through a deep connection with people. We are the Wisdom-holders for the world!

But we don't just passively gain this wisdom from each other. As the woman in Proverbs 31 reveals, we actively give our wisdom to others through acts of service and love and provision and creativity and generosity and laughter and support AND we receive the wisdom of others in those same ways as well. Everything the Woman of Proverbs 31 does is for the sake of others—inside and outside her household, but the reason it is not demeaning or unhealthily self-sacrificial is because she knows herself to be part of that household and part of that community. She is not separate from them. She is them. They are connected.

So rather than Proverbs 31 being a laundry list of “achievements” for one person to be—a wonderful parent; a supportive partner; an accomplished artisan; a skilled household manager; a successful business person; a tireless worker; a kind soul; a

service-oriented person of faith; and a positive presence with a great sense of humor—perhaps, as suggested earlier, the point of this passage is to simply lift up some of the ways human beings can collectively work together for the common good. Perhaps this text calls for communities to consider together what our tasks⁸ are for cultivating the kind of wisdom that is passed on through generations—creating more and more Good in the world as *collective*, not on our own.

Because here's the truth: Nurturing families can be stressful, lonely work. It is work not for one person; it's work to take on together. Envisioning the future can be stressful, lonely work. It is work not for one person; it's work to take on together. Making wise use of the resources available to us can be stressful, lonely work. It is work not for one person; it's work to take on together. Caring for the hurting and broken of the world can be stressful, lonely work. It is work not for one person; it's work to take on together.⁹

Indeed, this text is not an eloquent hymn to a solitary

⁸ H. James Hopkins, “Proverbs 31:10-31: Homiletical Perspective,” eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised*

Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, pg 77.

⁹ Hopkins, pg 79.

individual, but a lesson in interdependence, partnership, and the contours of community.¹⁰ Wisdom lives within each and every person; and we are always sharing it and exchanging it with one another. We may look like an independent person on the outside, but we all know we are part of intricate systems and communities that have brought us to where we are today, communities that sustain us, and that will carry us into our future. That is true wisdom—to know and honor our connectedness to one another, because when we forget this, we will—and we do—perish.

I started out by saying it's not Mother's Day and you're not at a funeral. But do you know what day it is? The Autumnal Equinox! And with the first day of fall comes the beauty of fall foliage. In Colorado 'tis prime season for looking at the Aspen trees, and as you drive around and see their glorious yellow and orange leaves quaking in the wind, I want you to remember the connections that you cannot see with your eyes, those that are sustaining these trees underground. And, the sunshine helping them thrive.

¹⁰ Hopkins, pg 79.

What makes Aspen trees unique from most other trees is that: “One aspen tree is not an entity in and of itself. It is a part of a larger organism. A stand or group of Aspen trees is considered a singular organism, sharing a life force underground in its extensive root system. Their root systems extend for miles laterally, able to provide water to one another and share nutrients. Yet their most essential nutrient for growth remains the sun. Sunshine is essential. Aspens thrive in a lot of environments and they resist destruction and disaster because of their connection to one another. After forest fires, they are often the first trees to re-emerge. And! Aspens grow all the time—even in winter. Beneath the thin, white outer bark layer is a thin green photosynthetic layer that allows the tree to create sugars and keep growing when other deciduous trees are dormant. During hard winters, the green, sugary layer provides necessary nutrients for deer and elk. Throughout the year, young aspens provide food or a variety of animals including moose, black bear, beaver, porcupine, grouse and rodents.”¹¹

¹¹ Hannah Featherman, “Tree Profile: Aspen – So much More Than a Tree,” *National Forest Foundation*,

In other words, Aspens not only feed one another through their extensive lateral underground root system, they also share their nutrients with the critters of the forest—their surrounding community!

When Damon and I were married, almost 10 years ago (October 2nd!), we had an Aspen tree planting ceremony in our wedding. And we did so to symbolize all the things I just noted: that Aspen trees do not grow on their own, but need one another—so we each planted an Aspen in the same pot—and how our root systems would grow to support each other, drawing strength from each other, and also growing tall together to support and serve our community as well.

And, we added another layer to this ritual, because we wanted to honor the many communities and lands that had brought us to that moment. We had soils from the places we had lived or where our families were from, to symbolize that we were created in community, even as we were ourselves creating a new partnership, that would then

serve a new community together. Damon poured in soil or sand from New Jersey, Australia, Washington D.C., and Arizona; I poured in soil from Texas, Mississippi, Massachusetts, and Colorado.

The impact of community, and naming connections is important. But knowing we are connected to one another, and actually staying connected in an active, intentional way are two different things.

I think we all know that we have these lateral root systems that connect us to one another, but are we nurturing them, are we sharing nutrients with each other, in a way that helps each of us thrive?

Our connection to one another is enhanced by how we see the unique role of each individual person as part of the whole—whether we're talking about a family, a friend group, a church community, a service club, or a group of co-workers. How we praise one another and notice the things about each other that are worthy of praise; that *is essential to thriving and growth.*

We all need to know that we matter.

Or, to go back to the Aspen tree analogy, we all need some “sunshine” to survive.

If you think of the “good deeds” that we do for each other in community as our root system, nourishing us; then think of the “good words” we use to praise an encourage one another as “the sunshine” we need to grow and thrive as well.

Our need for these “good words” for our thriving is why I titled this sermon, *A Living Eulogy*. Eulogy simply means a speech or writing that praises someone highly. It’s just that because we only seem to give them when someone dies, eulogy has come to be synonymous with funerals. But wouldn’t it be wonderful if we shared these praises with the living? We need not wait until someone dies to tell the world (or them) what they mean to us.

One of my favorite things about Proverbs 31 is how detailed it is in its praise, revealing the true wisdom that is observed and learned through specificity: wool and flax, snow, laughter, etc. The love is in the details.

Think of 3 people—or organizations—still living, who, without which, you would not be where you are today, or *who* you are today. Have you told those people, recently, and in specificity what they mean to you? What wisdom, life experience, knowledge, gifts, or encouragement did you gain from them?

This kind of connection is vulnerable, I know. People might think you’re a bit odd if you send them a long effusive letter of praise, but wouldn’t you rather be odd and truly make someone’s day than realize, at their funeral, you wish you had told them what they meant to you?

You see, this theme of *Thriving in Goodness* is pretty simple. It’s really about realizing there are spiritual practices, there are *real things* we can do to bring about *real good* in the world—and to remind others (and ourselves) of our created goodness within.

So try giving Living Eulogies to the three people you thought of over the next few weeks. Can be through connecting with them in person and telling them. Or sending a voice memo, or over a call or Facetime. Maybe it is a

letter. But choose three people and let the praise flow. Maybe it's a teacher from high school, or maybe it's someone you literally share a home with. Maybe it's a neighbor who you see doing nice things for others. Maybe it's a Calvary-ite who you see serving in ministries that make a difference. Your Living Eulogy doesn't have to be 21 verses long; it could be, or it could be shorter or longer. The length is less important than the attention to detail and the specific examples of praise. Tell them not just that they matter to you but *how* they matter.

The more we praise others and notice and call out the good they are doing in the world, the more good we create in the world. Think about how you feel when someone says something good about you. It probably makes you want to see and say good things about others. And gradually the ripples of one comment of praise begin to be felt in larger circles and communities. What we say and how we say it matters. How we talk impacts our thriving. We need an overhaul in our public discourse and our political discourse for sure. It starts with each and every one of us. Each and every day. There is wisdom in choosing our words wisely. In

choosing words that build up relationships rather than tear them down.

Lady Wisdom shows us that speaking about the wisdom we learn from others and the love we see them sharing creates more wisdom and love in the world.

And if you don't know where to begin, use these prompts:

- When you did this, it taught me *that*...
- When you said *this*, it was what I needed to hear because of *this*...
- The way you do *A, B, or C*, reveals your *values of 1, 2, or 3*...
- Your presence means *this*...and makes a difference in *this* way...
- Your gift or skill of *X, Y, or Z* enhances our neighborhood/community...it does *this* or *that*...
- Or, you could just simply use Proverbs 31 as your template. Which is what I did today for YOU Calvary.

I choose Calvary as the community I want to celebrate and praise. And I literally went verse by verse in Proverbs 31 and wrote my own version with the same sentiment of each

verse, thinking about how it translated to our community. So, here we go!

A Living Eulogy for Calvary (Based on Proverbs 31:10-31)

A Calvary-ite of faith and love,
who can find? They are way
cooler than Taylor Swift or
Beyoncé, of more value than the
stock of Amazon or TikTok.
(v10)

The hearts of Small Group
members trust in one another,
and they gain support much
from each other as they share.
(v11)

The *Blessings* Volunteers do
good for the community, and
not harm, all the Mondays they
welcome and serve. (v12)

The Quilters and Knitters use
thread and yarn, crafting
compassionate creations of
comfort and blessing with
willing and skilled hands. (v13)

The Church Hostess is like the
best caterer in the city, gathering
food from many places to create
a spread to feed all, the Ushers
and Greeters guiding people in.
(v14)

The Preacher rises while it's
still night, to sermonize and
provide spiritual food for her
household of faith, her staff
organizing Asana tasks to
enhance ministry. (v15)

The Property deacons consider
the parking lots and the HVACs
and tech cables and buy the
things they need, with the labor
of their hands, they keep the
building up to date. (v16)

The Connecting Gifts with
Needs deacons gird themselves
with the strength of their
community, recognizing that the
gifts of many make the arms of
ministry strong. (v17)

The Staff Relations deacons
perceive that their staff is
beneficial, their Light shining
continually to inspire. (v18)

The Formation & Engagement
deacons are skilled in
cultivating opportunities to learn
and serve, diligent in planning
the ministries that provide so
much to so many. (v19)

The Family Promise
Coordinators and volunteers
open their hands and hearts to
the unhoused, providing
hospitality and hope,
conversation, meals and

transportation to families in transition. (v20)

The Congregants are not afraid when it snows, for the parking lot is plowed, the snow melt spread on side walks, and the building toasty warm. (v21)

The Worship Team places paraments out for each season, using cloths of all colors and textures to create ritual displays. (v22)

Calvary's Vision is known in the city of Denver, our Mission taking a seat at PRIDEfest, at Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence, at Stedman Elementary School with New Hope Baptist, at Tamarac Family Shelter community meetings. (v23)

Calvary's Financial Wellness deacons create Commitment Cards and Budgets and invite generosity, supplying our congregation with multiple ways to give. (v24)

Strength and dignity are the qualities of our Co-Moderators, laughing and bringing joy as they lead. (v25)

The Calvary Choir opens their mouths, singing wisdom and blessing, and our Church School

teachers, teach with inspiring kindness and knowledge. (v26)

The Vision and Discernment deacons look over the ways of the Calvary household, evaluating and moving us forward, not idling in sameness or habit. (v27)

The children of Calvary run up to the front on Sunday mornings, happy to be on the sanctuary steps; Calvary's youth give thanks for camp and connection, praising their leaders and teachers. (v28)

Many churches have done well in their contexts, yet Calvary, you've done excellently—responding to unprecedented challenges and change with grace, agility, love, and faith. (v29)

Fake smiles and pretty buildings ring hollow; but an authentically loving congregation who welcomes people as they are and who honors with awe the love of God and the belovedness of all people—is to be praised! (v30)

Give this church a share of the harvest they share with the world, and let their missionaries and partnerships and the people impacted by their service and

love praise Calvary online
 through Yelp and Google
 Reviews and through sharing
 our YouTube livestream link on
 social media and by inviting a
 friend to church! (v31)

You see how fun this can be?

And praise should—and does—
 feel fun!

When we offer Living Eulogies
 to individuals or communities,
 we help each other thrive. Our
 words of praise are like rays of
 sunshine for the soul. And when
 days are lonely and the world is
 scary and hard, these Living
 Eulogies can truly help us “*stay
 planted by streams of water,*” as
 the Psalmist says, “*so that our
 leaves thrive and grow and do
 not wither.*”¹²

Amen.

¹² Psalm 1 was the lectionary psalm for the day, and that
 verse was our sung response to the Proverbs reading.