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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Proper 20/B
Proverbs 31:10-31
James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

A capable wife who can find?

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

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

A wife, a servant and a child. These are the people that scripture raises up
for us today as holy models to be emulated.

And while we've come to expect things like this from Jesus, and we can sort
of get the joke—these are people who are not usually at the top of the heap as far a
power goes—the social status of these people in ancient times was so much more
marginalized than we realize, that the power of what we are really being called to
through their example – CHRISTIAN SERVANTHOOD –is mostly lost to us.

To really understand what Christian servanthood is and how we are to embody it we must first, therefore, examine the wife, the servant, and the child, in their historical context.

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Proverbs is the oldest of the Israelite works that are considered “wisdom literature.” Unlike the Torah and the Prophets, which view God primarily in terms of covenant and national history, for the wisdom tradition God is primarily Creator. God used Wisdom to create the world and placed Wisdom within creation, where people could observe its harmonies and live in right relation to it.¹

Last week we read the beginning of Proverbs in which the remarkable figure of Woman Wisdom is encountered addressing men from all the busiest parts of the city—teaching them how to live a good life and warning that to disregard her is to court death.

And this week we end Proverbs with the capable wife. The words usually translated “a capable wife” more literally are translated “a woman of worth.”²

This woman of worth is the living embodiment of Woman Wisdom’s teachings and attributes. And boy does she set a high standard! Her every action is about creating the good life for those around her. And they called her ‘happy.’

¹ Sharon Ringe and Carol Newsom, *Women’s Bible Commentary*.

² Sharon Ringe and Carol Newsom, *Women’s Bible Commentary*.

Everything she does, she does for her husband and household—to increase his stature and their wealth, his happiness and their security. She is the consummate giver, serving everyone else’s needs before her own. And in spite of the high praise she is given, she is valued not for her gifts and talents, but for what she can provide for others through her service.

This was the status and role of a wife in ancient Israel, and in the wider culture of the time as well. One of subservience and devotion.

Is this what servanthood looks like to you?

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In today’s passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus challenges his disciples who have been arguing amongst themselves about who is the greatest. We, and they, know something important is coming when Jesus sits down, like a traditional Jewish teacher.

Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.

In the first century servants had no social status or power. They were often, though not always, slaves. The work they were called upon to do was considered demeaning to those above that station.

In telling his disciples they must be servants not just to each other, but to all, Jesus asked them to humble themselves and let go not only of their bickering over who was the best disciple, but of the rules and expectations of the world in which they lived.

This kind of servanthood meant putting your neck on the line and breaking strong-held social norms, and risking shame in a culture in which the pivotal social value was honor.³

That is to say, taking on the mantle of servanthood meant taking risks. And what's more, it meant fully engaging with the world, in spite of those risks.

Is this what servanthood looks like to you?

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Jesus continued with his teaching:

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

To further illustrate his call to be a servant, Jesus made his point by embracing a small child.

³ Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*.

It is easy for us to sentimentalize this action, imagining groups of small children regularly playing at the feet of Jesus and his reaching out and cuddling a wee one in an appeal to the hearts of his followers. But that's not what is going on here.

Jesus and his followers both knew that children had even less status than servants, and they were even more vulnerable.

In our culture children and childhood are given priority and valued. This was not the case in Jesus' day. Childhood in antiquity was a time of terror. Children were the weakest, most vulnerable members of society. Infant mortality rates sometimes reached 30 percent. Another 30 percent of live births were dead by the age of six, and 60 percent were gone by age sixteen. Children had little to no status within the community and family, and minors were considered on par with a slave. Children had literally nothing to offer.⁴

By instructing the disciples that they must welcome children Jesus was telling them that not only must they be servants, but they had to be servants to those who had no way of ever reciprocating their actions. They had to give without the expectation of receiving anything in return.

Is this what servanthood looks like to you?

⁴ Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*.

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The stories of the wife, the servant and the child, rooted in their contexts, each offer us a glimpse of servanthood, but none of them in and of themselves are complete or show us the fullness of Christian servanthood. For that we need to examine how they are reach related to the formation of community.

When asked what the most difficult instrument was, Leonard Bernstein was quoted as saying, “the second fiddle. Plenty of people want to play first violin, but to get someone to play second violin, that's a problem. Yet, without them there is no harmony.”

That is at the heart of Christian servanthood.

Because Christian servanthood is concerned not only with being a servant, but with *how being a servant creates and affects community*.

Authentic community, one in which there is harmony, is created when we each use our gifts and talents in such a way that both others, and we ourselves, become the best we can be, and therefore the community becomes the best it can be.

The capable wife is very good at serving in such a way as to bring out the best in others. But the capable wife only truly becomes the woman of worth when she is valued not just for the benefit she can provide to others through her service, but for the gifts and talents she offers others and her ability to serve herself as well.

Because Christian servanthood is not about being subservient, not about being the ever-giving giver, not about being the doormat that others walk on and take advantage of – servanthood can only be Christian when we also uphold the necessary truth that being a servant requires boundaries that protect both ourselves and others.

Jesus told the disciples to be servants of all. The Greek word used for servant in this passage, *diakonos*, can variably mean servant or minister, and is the root for the word deacon. We know that in the early church the office of deacon included serving those in the community in need through the distribution of alms, and our own understanding of the role of a deacon today is one of servant ministry.

For servants to really be the *diakonos* of Christian servanthood, then, they must engage both individuals and the larger community.

It is *diakonos* when we who have the ways and the means take up the status reversing call of Jesus and serve those around us who are unable to help themselves, without expecting something in return. It is *diakonos* when we risk engaging the world around us and speak out against the *status quo* of the earthly order by proclaiming God's order—the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

We are called to expand God's love in the world, and when we do we are not only agents of transformation but we are ourselves transformed. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

Christian servanthood is seen in the welcoming of not just the child that Jesus embraced before the disciples, but the understanding that we are called to offer welcome to all those who are most vulnerable.

And not only welcome, but embrace. And through embracing, serving. And in so doing, create a more authentic community, one in which there is harmony because every member is playing a part.

Episcopal priest and writer Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “They wanted to know who was greatest, so he showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God's agent. The last, the least of all...if we want to welcome God into our lives then there is no one whom we may safely ignore.”

For it is a holy truth that we advance God's mission of justice, compassion and reconciliation when we become Christian servants by offering our gifts and talents in ways that sustain both our communities and ourselves. When we take on the mantle of *diakonos*. And when we live every day knowing there is no one whom we may safely ignore.

We are each called to be the woman of worth, the *diakonos*, the child, and the ones who offer welcome. And it is up to each of us to live into this call to Christian servanthood.

So what does your servanthood look like?

~ AMEN ~