

Reading from the Hebrew Scriptures Proverbs 31:1-9

Sermon *Speak Out!*

The Rev. Tom Hagood

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Oh, the wisdom of mothers through the ages. When asked what their mother's taught them, this is how various sons and daughters responded ...

- My mother taught me TO APPRECIATE A JOB WELL DONE: "If you're going to kill each other, do it outside—I just finished cleaning!"
- My mother taught me RELIGION: "You better pray that will come out of the carpet."
- My mother taught me about TIME TRAVEL: "If you don't straighten up, I'm going to knock you into the middle of next week!"
- My mother taught me LOGIC: "Because I said so, that's why."
- My mother taught me FORESIGHT: "Make sure you wear clean underwear, in case you're in an accident"
- My mother taught me IRONY: "Keep crying and I'll give you something to cry about."
- My mother taught me about CONTORTIONISM: "Will you "look" at the dirt on the back of your neck!"
- My mother taught me about HYPOCRISY: "If I've told you once, I've told you a million times—Don't Exaggerate!!!"
- My mother taught me THE CIRCLE OF LIFE: "I brought you into this world, and I can take you out."
- My mother taught me about BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION: "Stop acting like your father!"
- My mother taught me about ENVY: "There are millions of less fortunate children in this world who don't have wonderful parents like you do!"
- My Mother taught me how to BECOME AN ADULT: "If you don't eat your vegetables, you'll never grow up."
- My Mother taught me about my ROOTS: "Do you think you were born in a barn?"
- My Mother taught me about WISDOM OF AGE: "When you get to be my age, you will understand."
- And then there is the all time favorite...
- My Mother taught me about JUSTICE: "One day you'll have kids ...and I hope they turn out just like you!"

(<http://www.phillysonline.com/Mother.htm>)

Even long after their children have grown up ... mothers continue to give advice to their children ... I'm sure most of you have your own stories of your mother's wisdom through the years. But in our reading this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures, Proverbs 31:1-19, a mother gives some very special advice ... some powerful advice to her son who just happens to be a king.

And believe me, the words of this wise woman need to be heard again in our own time ... and repeated often. Open your hearts and feel the passion and love of a mother for her son ... as she reminds him of his responsibilities to be a compassionate and loving king ... to care for all of his

people ... especially those with the least. Listen for God's word to you.

31:1 The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him:

31:2 No, my son! No, son of my womb! No, son of my vows!

31:3 Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.

31:4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink;

31:5 or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed, and will pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

31:6 Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress;

31:7 let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

31:8 Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.

31:9 Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Mama seems a bit upset with her son ... King Lemuel. As a matter of fact, she's quite emphatic with her words. I'm not sure what he's done ... but I suspect he came home late to the palace one night and she caught him with alcohol on his breath and lipstick on his collar.

He's probably a young king ... maybe even in the first year of his reign. I imagine that his father must have died and he has assumed the throne at a young age. But ... now intoxicated with power ... he's stumbling a bit.

And his mother ... a good and righteous woman ... stands firm before him. It's time to straighten things out. "No, my son! No, son of my womb! No, son of my vows!" she cries.

Whatever he's done ... she's not going to stand for it. I don't know if the same thing was true of his father ... but the son is following a dangerous path that seems to be leading to some bad trouble ... particularly for his kingdom and its people.

That dangerous path has been followed by many a king ... including many rulers and leaders of today. Some of these rulers have held powerful political offices ... mayors ... governors ... congressional representatives ... senators ... presidents ... even pastors ... and many have fallen into the same trap that King Lemuel seems to have fallen into.

Just over the recent span of history ... we can point out a certain governor from South Carolina ... a congressman from Louisiana ... even Republican and Democratic presidents who have fallen into temptation that led them to forget their responsibilities and duties to those they were supposed to serve.

I began to wonder what each of their mothers would have told them if they had gotten wind of their problems before they became public news ... would they have been able to straighten them out? Who knows? But one thing is for certain, King Lemuel's mother has found out and she's going to set her son back on the right path.

And what is that right path? It is her deep concern for those who are dying ... those who live in poverty ... for those who are suffering in agony ... and if her son is wrapped up in drinking and partying and carousing all the time ... then who will look after those who are forgotten ... who are marginalized ... who are on the outside ... who will stand with them against the injustices of hatred and prejudice and discrimination? Who will be there to speak out for them?

That's when she makes it quite clear who will do it ... it will be her son, King Lemuel. She commands him to speak out ... to speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. To speak out, to judge righteously, and to defend the rights of the poor and needy. We don't know who King Lemuel is ... we don't know anything about his mother.

But the book of Proverbs is a wisdom book ... a book that is chock full of all kinds of helpful advice about how to live your life by following God's will and not the will of the world. In its essence ... it's a book of rules to live by.

But in chapter 31, we have an important shift to a story about King Lemuel and his mother ... a story that goes to the heart of what God is reminding the rulers and the people what they are required to do. It is a story that demands social justice and social righteousness ... a story that tells you and me to speak out ... to speak out for those who cannot.

But who are we called to speak out for? And who has time to speak out? Unfortunately, many Americans ... and many of them are American Christians ... are greatly illiterate on the issues of social justice and righteousness in not just our own country but in the world.

After all ... we have our own list of never-ending problems to take care of ... paying off our own debts from buying too many things beyond our means ... envying our neighbors who have more square footage in their homes than we do ... putting aside more savings for that newer model car that will ease the burden of a mid-life crisis ... complaining that the price of food and gas is eating too much into our budgets ... and let's don't forget that the Christmas holiday season ... which in some stores started right after Labor Day, is about to overwhelm us.

And yet ... somewhere ... through the all the noise and clutter of our world ... if you listen hard enough ... those faintly heard words of the Lord are still being spoken ... "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Some of us will reply to them by tossing a few coins their way ... as we try to soothe our conscience with a pitiful offering. But I pray that won't be all that we do ... I pray that somehow the Spirit of God will light a fire in your soul that will move you to do something much much more ... something far beyond what even you thought imaginable.

The issues of the forgotten ... the poor ... the victims of prejudice ... the lonely ... of our elderly ... of our children ... of those caught in the cycles of poverty ... of those with despair ... of those faced with the horrible consequences of sexual and emotional abuse ... of those oppressed because of racial and sexual discrimination ... those issues are there ... they are real ... and God is calling out to us to speak out for them.

We are called to speak out for them not with just silent words in our hearts ... not with simple gestures of support ... but with the same power and passion that God calls us to do from I John ... “... let us love, not just in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (I John 3:18)

I am not going to stand here and tell you what God is calling you to do. That is between you and your Lord ... but I am here to tell you that God is calling you to *speak out* for injustice in this world ... to speak out with righteous indignation against anyone who oppresses or abuses or forgets the least of those in this world ... because it was to those whom Jesus Christ ministered and loved and healed and remembered.

Find the voice inside of you that God wants you to share ... a voice that will move you to do your part in bringing something of God's Kingdom into a world that so sorely needs it ... whether it is here in our own country or across the sea ... just as Mother Teresa reminds us ... “You can find Calcutta anywhere in the world. You only need two eyes to see. Everywhere in the world there are people that are not loved, people that are not wanted nor desired, people that no one will help, people that are pushed away or forgotten. And this is the greatest poverty.”

Take the time to learn about an issue that speaks to your heart ... learn all you can about it ... read the stories about how this issue affects the lives of God's children ... visit the peacemaking website of the Presbyterian Church ... find someone who is involved and listen to how they are making a difference ... take the time to sit down with someone who is directly affected by the issue ... be it someone who is homeless ... or hungry ... or who is a victim of child abuse ... or of racial hatred ... or of sexual discrimination ... or someone who can't afford health insurance ... or someone sitting in prison for life or on death row ... or a soldier who has returned from the battlefield with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder ... and then take the next step ... listen to God's call on your life and *Speak Out* ... become actively involved ... and make a difference ... even if just a little one.

Believe me ... whatever you decide to do will make a difference ... just like that graffiti on the Berlin Wall ... “Many small people who in many small places do many small things can change the face of the world.”

And then ... as someone from UNICEF wrote ... “The day will come when the progress of nations will be judged not by their military or economic strength, nor by the splendor of their

capital cities and public buildings, but by the well-being of their peoples: by their levels of health, nutrition and education; by their opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labors; by their ability to participate in the decisions that affect their lives; by the respect that is shown for their civil and political liberties; by the provision that is made for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged; and by the protection that is afforded to the growing minds and bodies of their children. (The Progress of Nations, UNICEF)

Like a mother reminding her children ... hear the command of our Lord ... "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Let us pray:

Honor those whose loving spirit nurses hope, restores and heals,
Towel and basin used in service like the Christ who comes and kneels;
Tax and tithe are for a purpose, shared to shield the poor and weak;
Past the symptoms of our sickness, let the voice of justice speak.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.