

Let Her Works Praise Her

Sermon by ICWJ Organizer Sarah Smoot

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Through working in the Workers' Rights Center I've learned that the woman described in this scripture is a rarity, not because there are few women doing skilled and productive work, but because it is so rare for someone to take the time, like the author of this proverb, to stop and celebrate women's work. At the Workers' Rights Center I meet women who are underappreciated, underpaid, and experience unequal and discriminatory treatment in their workplaces. Several months ago I worked with Laura on confronting her experience of discrimination and sexual harassment in her office. One of her male coworkers had been making verbal and physical advances on her during work and continued to do so despite Laura saying that his behavior was unwelcome. Her workplace was unsafe. Laura could have filed a complaint of discrimination, but this would have launched her into a long process, in which she would have to go over painful details many times with complete strangers, and would not likely see a real punishment to deter her employer from allowing this behavior to happen to her or other women.

Esme and Danielle worked as janitors and had a male supervisor who constantly made jokes that were rude and demeaning to them as women. Eventually he began making physical advances on the women workers and implying that their sexual compliance would result in their getting a promotion. The women were distraught but feared losing their jobs and only started filing their complaints of discrimination after they were fired. The best case scenario of a discrimination complaint is typically that a worker can be legally required to get their job back, in the same workplace where they were badly treated, or maybe they will get a lateral transfer to another workplace away from the manager or coworker who harassed them. Laura was able to negotiate that lateral transfer directly with her supervisors, but the side effect of that solution is that she will be less likely to get a promotion or it may take longer for her to be promoted. When workers go through a transfer they start over at square one with new management who don't yet know their potential and will wait to see if they are worthy of a raise or promotion.

Laura and Esme and Danielle, and the experiences of many other women, show us that even though women have long been in the workplace, they are often treated as commodities rather than producers. The scripture that we've heard today, however, celebrates the woman of strength for her skilled labor, and it celebrates the part of her body that is most intricately related to her work – her hands. “She works with willing hands;” she plants; she weaves; she reaches out to the poor. The woman of strength exemplifies two of the ideal standards that we hold for work today. She is able to sustain herself and create a surplus that sustains others, and her work weaves her into sacred community with others: community with her family, with others who are in need, and with others who do business (“She supplies the merchant with sashes”). Her labor, which begins in the home, on her own land, extends its fruit outward into society. Others will eat the fruit of her vineyard. Others will wear the cloth she weaves. And she gives lovingly to those who would not themselves be able to afford

what she produces, who would be naked and vulnerable.

She is not only fruitful in her economic labor, but also in religious labor. The household, the place where the woman's work sustains her family, was also the center of learning about God and practicing prayer. The teaching of kindness, or the Torah as it is described in the Hebrew, is on her tongue. The woman's work and her faith are intertwined. She teaches Torah in her home, the work of a religious professional, a priest. She lives out the Torah in her work; she reaches out to care for the poor, which is the continual call of God throughout Torah and all of the Bible. This woman's work is sacred and holy.

So considering this woman's incredible skill, commitment, and productivity, why is the strong exhortation necessary at the end of the poem: "Give her a share in the fruit of her hands. Let her works praise her"? And why still today is there such discrepancy between men's and women's value and position in the work force? The regal nature of the purple fabric this woman makes implies that her coverings will be worn by the prestigious people who gather in the city gates – the center of activity, where it is said, "Let her works praise her." Yet it is possible that the woman herself was never seen in the city gates, only the evidence of her skilled work – the fruit of her labor. This still happens today. Think of how often a bag of McDonald's is taken into a high powered office building for lunch. The product of a worker's hands is making it into the city gates, but we will never see that worker there, and we rarely consider them while we enjoy the fruit of their hands. In restaurants and other service industries workers are not meant to be noticed. We're not meant to know that someone came in to clean the floors at night. If the work is done well, it will look seamless, easy, as if no work were necessary. If a waiter or waitress is noticed, it's usually because a customer is unhappy with their work, and when service goes well it's simply expected. In the restaurant industry, more women than men work in Fast Food, where they have lower wages, no opportunity for tips, and a workplace that is more dangerous and less likely to take care in providing workers' compensation for injuries. And because of the cheap price of the food and ease to access it by simply driving up to a window, society has developed an understanding that this work is not skilled labor, and the workers who do it are expendable; when one leaves there will be another applying for work right behind them.

This is why the poet speaks out for the woman of strength. When consumers forget that their beloved product comes from a worker who ought to be even more beloved, someone must say, "Give her a share in the fruit of her hands. Let her works praise her." There are several changes on the verge of sweeping our nation that would bring hard-working women like the one described here out of poverty: The Fight for \$15, can I get an "amen" if you've heard of the Fight for \$15? Many workers, particularly in fast food, have joined in this movement to say that their work and their lives are worth more than their current wages. There is also a change being considered by the Department of Labor, to expand the salary level at which workers be required to receive overtime wages. Under the current law, millions of workers work 20 or 30 hours over 40 every week and are still paid at the regular hourly rate. We've been raising the minimum wage, and inflation has increased, but the level at which workers are required to get overtime hasn't changed since 1975. That means more and more workers are working hours that ought to be considered overtime at their regular pay rate. The Fight for \$15 and the expansion of overtime are changes that would be a start to giving more equal recognition and

compensation to working women, a start to “Letting her works praise her.” Women are disproportionately represented in poverty-wage jobs and non-decision-making positions, so these proposed changes will benefit women and contribute to their equity in the work force. Changing legislation that impacts low wage workers will allow more women to reap their fair share of benefits and compensation from the labor of their hands. This Thursday there will be a proposal in our State Capitol for a bill that would bring paid leave to Wisconsin workers. On the issue of paid medical leave, the US is way behind other nations around the world that are similarly situated economically. Currently there is no guaranteed paid leave for workers who become ill or have family members in need. Workers who work in a large company for at least a year might be able to get *unpaid* leave and be allowed to return to their job. Since women are more likely to take leave from work than men, for pregnancy or to care for family members who are in need, our current system of offering only unpaid leave results in many women having overall less compensation in some of the same jobs that men do, and most of them have no less need for the compensation, as more and more single mothers are in the workforce.

For these single mothers, and women with non-traditional families, and for myself and other married women, I’ve chosen not to focus on the marital aspects of this scripture, which have gotten plenty of air time. Most English translations of the scripture render the opening line of the poem as “a capable wife [...],” rather than as “a woman of strength,” which is misleading for several reasons. There is no distinction in Hebrew between the words “wife” and “woman,” so there is no reason for the first line of the poem imply that the praise that follows is only for women who have a husband. The translation of “capable” also opens the poem in a mundane sounding way that robs the main character of the strength and skill that the author praises her for. The language that describes the woman’s provision of food for her family is hunting language, and the descriptions of her strength and of the sashes she produces use military words, otherwise associated with men and battle throughout the Bible. So this is no demure housewife; she is using her skill against great odds to provide for her family, to clothe the poor, and to make business deals.

One characteristic of the woman of strength emphasized in this poem that we modern women might disagree with is her clothing. There are several lines describing what the woman wears. But finally the author exclaims, “Strength and dignity are her clothing.” This is language that is used to describe the Lord. In the Psalms it is said, “The Lord is clothed in strength... The Lord is wrapped in honor and dignity.” The author reminds us that the woman of strength, like all people, is created in God’s image, and when her hands work, they work in the image of God’s hands.

When we consider this woman of strength and the praise that is given her, we recognize that the woman of strength is all over our scriptures and all around our lives, as you know through your beloved sister Lois. The problem of recognizing these women of strength is that they are often in the shadows, and not in the city gates. Take for example the story of Lydia that we read from Acts today. She only appears for a few verses, and yet we can imagine the kind of Godly woman who she was, if we spend a little more time with her. Like the woman of strength, Lydia is a dealer in valuable fabric—purple cloth. Like the woman of strength, she refers to the household as her own. In the ancient world property would have belonged to the Father or Husband of the household. It was progressive for the time to even

refer to a home as “theirs,” let alone as “hers” and for Lydia to say to a group of male teachers, “Come to my house.” These women are understood, not to be “independent,” which is frankly not a Christian aspiration, but they are praised as having prowess, skill, and significance, not only in their own households, but also in the society in which they participate.

There are many more women of strength all around us, and we need to bring them out of the shadows that have been cast by overlooking or misreading and misusing some of the scriptures. We are quick to teach the Great Commission, where Jesus speaks to the male disciples, while we forget that the Woman at the Well was one of the first evangelists. We learn that Moses received the tablets on Sinai while we forget that Myriam led one of the first worship services when Israel passed safely across the sea.

Similarly, women are often found in the shadows in our world of work. We are quick to encourage our sons to be doctors and lawyers and CEOs, and we still believe that when a woman enters these roles it is a special case. We applaud her uniqueness; we watch to see if she can do the job as well as a man, if she will quit or be fired because of the pull of her family and home life. Our society continues to funnel women into lower wage and less prestigious jobs, and the gap between “low-skilled” and executive level jobs inflates with every fiscal year. When we visit establishments where predominantly women employees are compensated with poverty level wages, we don’t expect to encounter the proverbial woman of strength there. But these are the places where we ought to expect her most. The tasks that the woman of strength sets her hands to are ordinary, but she is praised for accomplishing them in an extraordinary way – with care, skill, and ample productivity.

In our society we’ve lost sight of the value of everyday jobs, and the jobs that have less and less social value are more and more frequently filled by women. The single mother working at McDonalds and struggling each day to make ends meet for her household is a woman of strength. It is not she who is failing in the economic system; it is the system that is failing her. Our system fails her when she works every day and still must rely on food stamps and subsidized housing. Our system fails her when she must choose between staying at home with her sick child and going into work to make enough money to have food on the table that night. Our system fails her when she continues to be compensated with poverty level wages while the CEO of her company has a more and more extravagant salary every year. It is time that we let her works praise her and point others to recognize her valor. It is time that we restructure the system of our economics to ensure she receives a fair share of what her own hands produce. The Fight for \$15, the expansion of overtime, paid Family Leave: These changes would be a start to “Giving her a share in the fruit of her hands,” to “letting her works praise her in the city gates.” Amen