

The other day, my wife, Patricia, remarked on my claiming credit for cleaning our coffee-maker, saying, "Making coffee is 'House Hubby work'; it says so in the Bible, it says, 'He brews.'"

Forget her humor, but if you have never heard of "House Hubby work," let me explain.

Patricia is my second wife. Most of the folks from Florence are aware that I am a re-married widower. Carol, my senior-year-in-high-school girl friend to whom I had been wonderfully and romantically married for three weeks shy of thirty-six years -- not to deny that, as I tell couples with whom I am doing pre-marital counseling, even the best of marriages, and I have had two, have not just bad days, but some difficult years; -- Carol died sixteen years and twenty days ago. As a bit of a sidebar, while I most certainly did not and undoubtedly could not have conducted her funeral service, I did write it, including specifying music she requested, as I sat with pad and pen on the bed during her final days. And one of the passages that I included in the service was that beautiful passage from Proverbs that Kurt read moments ago.

Although Carol had twice told me that I would remarry, I was sure that I would not. Definitely not, and so definitely not intending to marry again but being lonely going to the opera alone, I met Patricia over the Internet and began to date her, and, well, God works in wonderful ways, we fell in love and married. Contrary to what some believe, widowed husbands do not remarry for companionship or for someone to take care of them, at least not those widowed at the age I was, but because they want someone to love, and with *just a touch of wisdom*, which is all I can claim, I did not seek to find a replacement for Carol nor for her multitude of roles as a wife, including her superb role as cook and chef.

We married, despite the fact that the never-before-married and not-a-kid Patricia was used to a different lifestyle than Carol and I had led, and . . .

Well, she *didn't* cook. In her words, "Not that I am not able, but I haven't." And so, since I clearly had not married her for her cooking, and as much for convenience as for the fact that at home we were eating fairly healthy suppers, *voila!* The George Foreman Grill, a device on which I cooked hundreds of chicken breasts and sausages.

We have since been using more of a toaster-broiler countertop oven, but during a sermon on a completely different topic, I once held up our original George Foreman Grill, and some people thought it was a toilet seat; if it were, at least the lid would be down.

Patricia and I would work together fixing our grilled chicken breasts and salad, but I started joking about doing "House Hubby Work," for which I would and still do always say, "House hubby work is never done." If I add water to the coffee maker or when I take out the trash, my mantra to Patricia is, ***House Hubby Work Is Never Done!***

It is a joke, but it reflects our understanding that times do change, and with that change has come a blurring of what were thought to be traditional roles, not only of husbands and wives but of men and women. When I was an elder leading a pastoral search committee thirty-five years ago for the Ogden Dunes, Indiana, church in which I first became a Presbyterian, not one of the applicants was a woman, though I had tried to persuade the first woman minister I knew, a Methodist assistant pastor at my previous church outside of Pittsburgh, to apply. Today, Presbyterian seminaries are dominated by women students, and plenty of pastorates — including those of both Community and First Presbyterian — are or have been served by women.

At a first reading of today's Proverbs passage, it is easy to miss take — two words now replace by one — to miss take it as an ode to old-fashioned ideas of a woman's, specifically of a wife's, roles in life. But revisiting this passage, really for the first time in those sixteen years, I believe a closer reading removes any apparent *sexism* and finds that it mischievously, almost deviously, calls us all to qualities that should belong as much to a husband — including house hubbies — as to a wife, to a male as to a female, single, married, widowed or divorced, and that these qualities tie in nicely with what both the writer of James and Jesus in our Gospel reading seek: *Honorably doing good for others*.

I would like to take a look at this passage in a bit of detail to show that it is not about — and believe me, I mean this in no demeaning manner — housewives; it is coded; it is about what we all should be: *virtuous*.

¹¹ The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. ¹²
She will do him good and not evil all the days of his life . . .

Being able to "trust in" anyone means that the person doing the trusting finds the other *trustworthy* -- not just reliable, but honest. Should not all of us seek to be worthy of trust?

and worketh willingly with her hands.

No task to which she — or we — are called is beneath us. This is reflected in Luther's and Calvin's attitude towards work, that it is our calling from God, and thus honorable. It was the basis of Max Weber's early twentieth century book, *The Protestant Ethic*. There is no gender bias to be found here!

²⁰ She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.

Oh boy; she almost sounds like the writer of James, but I'll get back to him in a minute, and it is certainly of a part with Jesus' teaching, if not so much in Mark, then certainly in Matthew and Luke.

²⁵ Strength and honour *are* her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. ²⁶ She openeth her mouth with **wisdom**; and in her tongue *is the law of kindness*. [emphasis added]

I don't believe I can add a bit to that, And although I am skipping a worthwhile verse, to get to:

³⁰ Favour *is* deceitful, and beauty *is* vain: *but* a woman *that* feareth the LORD, she shall be praised. ³¹ Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.

Now I ask you, are there any items here that are not *House Hubby Work*; and while I am somewhat joking, my point is simple: The qualities that make for virtue, what God asks of us, know no gender or role restrictions; they are the qualities which we all should seek to possess and display. Returning to Horace Greeley,

Fame is a vapor; riches take wings; only character lasts.

And almost hidden in our Proverbs passage is a really key word in my next to the last, my penultimate, quotation, *Wisdom*.

But it is a particular kind of *Wisdom* to which the writer or writers or editor of the Book of Proverbs refer, and we can get a glimpse of what they mean through what James has offered us:

3:13 Who *is* wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct *that* his works *are done* in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.

I believe the writer of our proverb is saying that *Wisdom* of the sort with which this virtuous woman — or “wife” in many translations — is blessed is not something we attain on our own, it is *a gift from God*. (Many feminist theologians argued that *Wisdom*, a feminine noun, *sophia*, in Greek, is a fourth “person” of God; I do not agree, but a *gift*, most certainly.) Why a gift from God? Earlier in the Book of Proverbs, and also in Psalms, we read,

The beginning of wisdom is fear of the LORD, And knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. [*Proverbs 9:10 Tanakh JPS*]

And what is “fear of the LORD” but awe and respect and acceptance of God’s will as that to which we humans should aspire to follow. I think the message of the “virtuous woman” Proverb is fairly

September 20, 2015

Page 4 of 4

clear: it is not that our daily tasks or our occupations or our careers or our taking care of our House Hubby Work is not important, it is that being adept at our daily tasks is not enough; kindness toward others, our hands out to the poor and needy, are part of what the Wisdom that comes from standing in awe and respect and acceptance of God require of us.

We can argue as to *how* we should “stretcheth out [our] hand[s] to the poor; yea, [and] reacheth forth [our] hands to the needy,” but we should never question but that we are called to do so.

But for what it is worth, humans do not live by bread alone, and as Christians our task is not just to take daily bread, but to take the bread of life to others, to take Jesus Christ into the world, and the best tool for that task is . . . the Church, the capital “C” Church of all believers. Alas, the Church is a human institution seeking to do God’s work, but as a human institution it has often fallen short. You and I collectively are called to help build up the Church so that others may come to know the God we know through Jesus Christ.

May God help us to use that Wisdom that comes from God to do so successfully, whether we are House Hubbies or Maiden Aunts or, what all of us are, often disobedient children of God, of the loving God who sent us Jesus both to teach us virtue and to tell us that though we often fail to live up to that virute, God loves us still.

And in Jesus’ name. Amen