

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 8, 2011  
Sermon Title: A Good Woman  
Scripture: Proverbs 31  
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## **Proverbs 31**

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

*No, my son! No, son of my womb! No, son of my vows! Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; or else they will drink and forget what has been decreed, and will pervert the rights of all the afflicted. Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more. 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.*

## **Ode to a Capable Wife**

*A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away. She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls. She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson. She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to*

*come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her: 'Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.' Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.*

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With the death of Osama bin Laden, my mind unexpectedly took a turn toward my mother, who passed away many years ago. I'm sure part of that was triggered by Mother's Day coming up and by my father's being here for the weekend. But mostly it was just wondering how my mother would have responded. To Osama bin Laden. To the Navy SEALs. To young folks celebrating in front of the White House and down by the Twin Towers.

Last Sunday I mentioned that my mother had mastered the "look of disappointment." She didn't have to say a word or mete out punishment. Just that look of disappointment could turn the most macho 1950s leather-jacket-wearing young hoodlum – me – to Jell-O. She also made a sound with her mouth, a bit more pronounced and emphatic than "tsk, tsk, tsk."

I imagine my mother meeting Osama bin Laden, her eyes boring deep into his soul, so disappointed, underscored by that sound, "tsk, tsk, tsk," leaving him devastated, humiliated, forlorn at his life so totally wasted by evil.

I imagine my mother seeing the Navy SEALs amid the congratulations and adulation and just knowing instinctively they needed a hug. I imagine my mother looking at the revelers, the happy revelers celebrating, and probably shaking her head just a little, slowly, with just a little smile: not approval, not condemnation, just a motherly smile that says, "You're young, you will learn, it's O.K."

I think what my mind was doing was personifying the age-old battle between Good and Evil. Normally, we capitalize both of these words – G for good, E for evil. We theologize it – God versus Satan. We nationalize it – America versus Al Qaeda. But mostly we experience it personally, when one person's goodness runs up against someone else's badness.

I suppose that's what led to our Scripture lesson for today. As pastors, we officiate at the funerals of wonderful people. When it's the funeral of a wonderful woman, I often read Proverbs 31, which begins with a rhetorical question, "A good woman who can find?" With the funeral of a wonderful

man, I often read Psalm 1, which is called "The Psalm of a Good Man." I sort of combined them into one responsive reading, celebrating goodness in general. The kind of goodness we run into every day: good neighbors, good citizens, good friends. And good mothers and how they got that way. Turn in your bulletin and you will find our responsive Scripture:

A Celebration of Goodness  
*Based on Psalm 1, "The Psalm of a Good Man,"*  
*and*  
*Proverbs 31, "A Virtuous Woman"*

Leader: A good woman, a good man, goodness itself in human form – where can they be found?

**People: They are far more precious than jewels. Their loved ones, friends, and family rise up and call them Blessed!**

Leader: Blessed are they who delight in the Lord, who do not seek the cynic or the wicked, who choose to know God very well.

**People: They do good and not harm all the days of their lives, they open their hands to the poor, they reach out their hands to the needy. They are like sturdy trees planted by streams of water, their leaves do not wither, they produce fruit in season.**

Leader: Strength and dignity are their clothing, they open their mouths with wisdom; the teaching of kindness is on their tongue.

**Together: They do not eat the bread of idleness, they prosper and are blessed. Loving God, for all such goodness in human form, and on this day for all mothers and mothering, we give thanks and rejoice!**

**Amen.**

What makes for goodness? We see it every day – and its opposite. Some harried shopper with two kids in tow knocks over a bunch of items in the aisle at Stop & Shop. One person stops, bends down, helps pick things up.

Another pushes past, mumbling under his breath. Both are probably much alike, both probably well educated, live in nice houses. One is good, the other, well, less so. You're in a meeting. There is disagreement. One voice raises, biting, caustic, critical. Another speaks out, gently, reconciling, hopeful. You're watching a game, a kids' game, maybe youth soccer or high school lacrosse, each kid trying hard. One kid does something wrong, an error, a miss, a failure of some sort. Soon after, one teammate goes over, stands next to her, a hand on the shoulder, a word or two, then a smile on both their faces. Life goes on, thank goodness.

Goodness. Not greatness, not exceptionalism, not extraordinariness, nothing heroic. Just goodness. Simple goodness. Where does it come from?

Our Scripture lessons give the impression that goodness is something you work at, you practice. In reading Proverbs Chapter 31 about a good woman, I was struck by the verbs: "she *does good, she seeks, brings, rises, provides, considers, girds, puts, opens, reaches, delivers.*" In fact, in one telling verse, it says, "She does not eat of the bread of idleness."

Goodness is work. Goodness is active. Goodness does good. Take my humble little illustration of the woman with two little kids who knocks over stuff at Stop & Shop. We've already agreed, I hope, that the person who pushes on by, mumbling under his breath, isn't helping. That person may or may not be "badness," perhaps only boorish, but that is definitely not goodness! And can we agree that standing there waiting, perhaps smiling somewhat condescendingly, doesn't quite reach the level of goodness? Nor would turning around and going to another aisle. Goodness steps forward, bends down, picks up, helps out, reassures. It's no big deal, really. Just goodness.

Psalm 1 takes it a mite deeper. Basically, the "Good Man" of Psalm 1 emulates the old folk song, "Accentuate the Positive":

*Accentuate the positive  
Eliminate the negative  
And latch on to the affirmative  
Don't mess with Mister In-Between*

The Bible says a good person does not walk with the wicked, does not stand with sinners, does not sit with mockers. Goodness doesn't come from those who are up to no good. Let's not even take it to the level of Osama bin Laden. We live a more common, everyday life. The badness we run into is mostly ... what? Rudeness. Selfishness. Meanness. Lying. Backstabbing. Bullying. Gossiping. Bad-mouthing. Undercutting. "Bad actors," we used to

call them. Bad apples. Bad manners. All enough to ruin a good day. You hang around that stuff for too long, and it will have a negative effect sooner or later.

A lot of people, good people, make the mistake of thinking that as long as they don't participate, as long as they don't actually say anything bad, or do anything bad, then they are not involved. Wrong. Life doesn't work that way. Not at work. Not at play. Not at home. Not a church. Your presence in the midst of badness, low-grade badness or high-grade badness, your presence will be taken as acquiescence, support, agreement, endorsement, even participation. It's true in the law. It's true at the dinner table. It's true around the office. It's true in school. When badness is going on, and you stand there like a stick in the mud, the mud you are sticking in is badness. You are mixed in it whether you like it or not. It sticks to you. If you're just watching badness happen, you're part of it. Fair or not.

In Psalm 1 the "Good Man" makes a conscious decision not to hang with the nastiness, the meanness, the hurtfulness, the badness. Instead, the Good Man of Psalm 1, the Virtuous Woman of Proverbs 31 chose another path. In Psalm 1 the person delights in God's words. In Proverbs 31 the person delights in God's works. In Psalm 1 it says, "His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1:2) The "law" is just a broad term for the Bible. A good person "delights" in that! You might wonder how you can delight in the Bible. We might ponder it, obey it, submit to it. But delight in it?

A good friend of mine, a great Baptist preacher, was preaching once about the Bible and about how some people see the Bible as oppressive, demanding, negative, fun-killing. And my friend said yes, being a Christian is restrictive, following the Bible is restrictive, being Christlike is restrictive, "as wings are to a bird." And he sat down. The church folks sat in stunned silence as his words sunk in. *As restrictive ... as wings are to a bird.* Wings let you fly and soar and see things more clearly and get places more quickly. That's why a bird delights in its wings. That's why a good person "delights in the law of the Lord." God's words don't end the fun. They start the goodness. And goodness is fun.

Every year as pastors we lose some great church people, and in recent months we've lost two dear, dear ladies, two great good women. Two Hall of Fame mothers: Marjorie Doty and Amy Lyster. We all knew them in different ways and miss them in different ways, but for me, one of my favorite places to know them was at Bible study. They loved Bible study. And they smiled through every verse we studied. They "delighted" in God's words and

"meditated day and night" and never lost that delight. And did I mention they were really good folks?

I think what the Bible is saying is that goodness springs from something. No wonder Psalm 1 says this Good Man is like "a tree planted by streams of water which yields fruit and leaves and prosperity." Note: the fruit and the leaves and the prosperity are the result of streams of water. When we see goodness, check out the streams that feed it. If you want goodness, look for streams, look for something that will feed it. And one of those streams is the Scripture, all those stories and people and lessons and ideas passed down from generation to generation. They teach, they inspire, they show. Goodness.

My son asked me yesterday what I was preaching on. I said, "Goodness," and he quickly said, "Goodness comes from hanging around other goodness." You see, we also get goodness from others. Someone sets an example for us and we are inspired, we want to emulate that.

I was with a friend yesterday at Dogwood, and we were praising this friend. And the friend, not knowing my sermon theme is "Goodness," my friend said, "Whatever goodness I have done or been, I got from my mother and father." That's almost a perfect ending for this sermon, but I get paid to preach a certain length, and I need to get in two more minutes.

So let's go back to the "Virtuous Woman" of Proverbs 31. Her goodness is a goodness of good work. Read the chapter when you get home. She's industrious, she's creative, she's energetic; she's a merchant, an investor, an entrepreneur, an importer. Seriously, she's a dynamic business person! And successful. That part of herself is balanced by compassion. She keeps good work and good works in harmony. Her goodness is rooted in how she works and what she does with her profits. Goodness is in her decision-making, goodness informs how she gets her money and what she does with her money. The image that I take away from both Scriptures is that in good people, goodness permeates their lives. It's not an add-on, it's not extracurricular, it's not a copy. It's essential. It's core. And we need more goodness.

Let me close with a little story. Every May we collect a lot of goodies here at the church for our soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. By the way, notice that the word "goodies" has the same root as goodness. It all comes from good, doesn't it? Good people who want to do some goodness providing goodies for our soldiers. Every year you give us mountains of goodies. And you've also given us money, and some of that money we've used to help two

chaplains on military bases, Fort Devens up in Massachusetts and another in New Hampshire, both stopping-off points for young soldiers going off to war.

The chaplain's wife is a friend, and this winter we were talking about what it's like at Sunday services. She gets to know a lot of the soldiers. They treat her like a mom. She told me about the previous week. She knew some of the boys were headed off to Afghanistan. It was their last Sunday together, their last Sunday at church, their last Sunday in America. One young soldier seemed particularly shaken. She wanted to reassure him, so she said to him, "Remember, if there is anything I can do for you, you just let me know." "You can hug me," he said. *You can hug me.* Just like a mother.

We began today's sermon reflecting on my imaginary wonderings of how my mother would have reacted to the events of this week. We ended with the story of one woman bringing a mother's touch to young soldiers heading off to war. In between, the Good Man of Psalm 1 and the Virtuous Woman of Proverbs 31 taught us how to be good. lives rooted in God's word and God's works. "Be" verbs. Do good.

All in all, happy Mother's Day, for Goodness' sake.