

ODE TO HARRIET

If you're looking to Scripture to provide you with the characterization of the ideal woman, the model wife, you need to look no further than this string of most illuminating proverbs. Why, it's just the sort of thing that merits our focus on the occasion of "Mother's Day."

This "good wife" (31.10), the perfect mother, this "worthy woman" has the complete trust of her husband. And why not, since, so described, her sun rises and sets on what pleases him and what benefits him? (And guess who is putting together the Book of Proverbs and later adopting it as Holy Writ?)

She weaves and sews, she does the marketing, she cooks, she directs the household, she manages the real estate, she carries on the family's daily commerce, all while she plants and tends to the vineyards and gardens. In her spare time, she is strong, diligent, and conscientious; charitable, enterprising, and confident; humble, wise, and kind.

In short, the job description for his good, perfect, and worthy woman seems quite clear and straightforward, to say nothing of all-encompassing: She is to be everything to her husband and family; she is to be virtually nothing to herself.

"Far more precious than jewels," indeed (31.10). Yes, this woman, this wife, this mother, is quite the catch.

Frankly, for all its good intents, this portion of the Book of Proverbs is a profile of what every little girl, every aspiring bride, and every young Mom had best elude and flee at her earliest opportunity.

This portrait is curiously reminiscent of a very popular TV show from decades ago, from the 1950's and 60's, as near as I can recall. If you have any years on you, then you have probably seen an episode or two of "Ozzie and Harriet."

Ah, yes, those Nelsons! The ideal white-bread family, father Ozzie and mother Harriet are completed by young hunk David and cute little Ricky.

Oh, there are some hijinks which go on in and around the Nelson family--there wouldn't have been a 14-year series without some of that--but nothing that couldn't be neatly sorted out and repaired within the allotted time slot.

As I remember, Ozzie is a bit of a mumbling, stumbling dolt, but--have no fear!--for Harriet is here! It is Harriet who usually saves the day! You know Harriet--always seen in dresses and pearls (never in jeans or sneakers!), always tending to the household's myriad tasks (never at the health club indulging herself!), always deferring to Ozzie whose better she plainly is (never contradicting him in front of the boys, which, you know, could skew their "normal" development).

Looking back on that popular TV series now, we can see not only how dated it was in general, but how unfair it was in particular to poor Harriet--to portray her genuine strength and ability as second-fiddle to the likes of a stammering, confused Ozzie; to identify her fundamental value as a person, as a woman, as a mother in such simplistic, two-dimensional terms.

In some ways, Harriet Nelson is the mid-20th Century's version of the good wife, the perfect mother, and the worthy woman as delineated in the 2nd Century B.C.E.'s Book of Proverbs. We didn't come very far in 2200 years, did we? Regardless of how rosy things were presented in the Nelson's looking-good family, behind the scenes, off screen, when Ozzie and the boys weren't watching, Harriet is probably exhausted, quietly resentful, and maybe even a bit depressed. And, I think, understandably so.

On the annual occasion of Mother's Day, then, this morning's message is an ode to Harriet, whose day, thank heavens, is long past.

In announcing the timely demise of Harriet, there is, to be sure, some mourning to be recognized, for, compared to now, things did seem clearer and simpler back then. The way forward, however, often requires the forfeiting of the truths and norms of yesterday and the embracing of the continuing, uncertain unfolding of fresh, more enlightened truths and norms of today, evoked by the God who is still speaking, as the UCC suggests.

It is a great and challenging time, I should think, a frightening and exciting time, to be a woman, a wife, a mother during these days "A.H."--that is to say, "After Harriet."

On this Mother's Day, then, remembering and honoring those who, within and beyond all the cultural stereotypes, have contributed enormously to our betterment, let us be emphatically clear with our mothers, our women, and our girls: Oversimplified image that she is, Harriet doesn't work here anymore!

In fact, Harriet is dead! Long live you!