

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 22, 2024

Proper 20, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Proverbs 31:10-31](#)

[Psalms 1](#)

[James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a](#)

[Mark 9:30-37](#)

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When I lived in the South for a few years, I learned that it's possible to have this conversation. "Want a Coke?" "Sure, what kind have you got?" "Seven Up or Dr. Pepper." Wait a minute, those aren't Coke! But for some people in the South, "Coke" is a generic term for any kind of soda. Of course it's also the word for an actual Coca-Cola, so it can get confusing. "What kind of Coke do you want?" "Oh, you know, a regular Coke," you might say, or "a Coca-Cola," or maybe you might say "I'll take a *Coke* Coke."

We use some other words like that too. A tiger, a lynx, or a bobcat are all kinds of cats, but if I tell you I have a cat at home you know I'm probably talking about a house cat. The word for the whole category is also the word for a particular kind—and it's the kind that comes to mind first, the most representative example of that kind of category, like a house cat for the whole category of cats, or a Coca-Cola for the whole Southern category of Cokes.

It wasn't very long ago that mainstream English in books and newspapers used the word *man* like that. Within the lifetime of many of us in this room, school textbooks used the word "man" to refer to the whole human species. The version of the Creed in the 1928 Prayer Book said that Jesus came down from heaven "for us men and for our salvation." Those references were meant to include people other than adult males, like women, and children. But at the same time, if your friend said "I see a man at the door," you would know they were probably talking about an adult male human being, not a woman or a child. The same word could be used for the whole category of human beings, or for one kind of them. And to be honest, I think that usage reflected a worldview in which adult male humans were seen as the best example, or the most representative example, of human beings. Which is a worldview that was with us for a long time, and certainly its legacy is still with us today. We might imagine humanity—or "Man"—as a kind of pyramid with adult males at the peak and in the center. "What kind of man do you mean?" "A *man* man!" And then farther from the center and lower down the slope are others, including women, children, and others who might not fit neatly into society's gender categories.

Our scriptures come to us against the backdrop of a worldview like that. Our first reading today from Proverbs highlights a praiseworthy woman. She's portrayed as wise and even powerful in her own right. She does real estate transactions and manages a household. There's a lot of beauty and joy in this passage. For many centuries pious Jewish men have recited it to their beloved wives on Friday night at Shabbat dinner. And at the same time I don't think it does this passage an injustice to point out that it's written very much from the point of view of men.

The woman in this passage is defined as a wife and her praiseworthiness comes from her role as a support to her husband and a nurturer to her children. There's a conventionally gendered quality to this passage and of course in the place and time in which it was written it's difficult to imagine it any differently.

Meanwhile in our gospel reading Jesus' disciples are arguing about who is greatest: who is at the top of the pyramid. And Jesus does something perhaps surprising: he shows them a child, someone who is vulnerable, someone who has no rights in that place and time, someone who is at the bottom of the pyramid, and he stands the child in the middle of them and says, "If you want to be great, you must be humble. If you want to be first, you must be last. If you want to welcome me, welcome a little child like this one."

It's as if to say that in Jesus there is no pyramid, no center, no one more or less human than any other. Which is good news for children, and women, and anyone else other than free adult men with power. And in fact it's good news for them too, because it puts them back into right relationship with others and God and themselves. But of course it's one thing to hear Jesus say it and another thing to get there.

We live in a world today that's different from the biblical world in many ways. Most of our textbooks and newspaper style guides no longer use "man" as a synonym for humanity or "he" as a generic pronoun. In just over a hundred years in this country we have gone from women not being able to vote, to now having the second woman as a major-party nominee for President. Women earn the majority of college degrees in this country today.

We have begun also as a society to talk publicly about the ways that sex, sexuality, and gender are not a simple binary but a differentiated rainbow of variation; that there are intersex people, transgender and nonbinary people, gay and lesbian and bisexual people, and that people of whatever gender and orientation can behave in ways that may or may not match the gender roles expected of them without the sky falling or society collapsing.

Yet we don't live in some kind of gender utopia today either. Women of course are still underrepresented in many ways, from the halls of congress to the C-suites of corporations. But beyond that even as we have seen women and people of gender minorities advancing into positions of more prestige and influence in society, we still often see a devaluing of the kinds of work and roles that have been considered feminine: caretaking, homemaking, teaching, nurturing. I think arguably we are also seeing at this moment in our society a kind of crisis of masculinity and manhood also, with depression and loneliness and addiction and deaths of despair as symptoms, and with some young men responding to these social changes by being radicalized into violent or misogynistic caricatures of manhood in lieu of something healthier to aspire to. Meanwhile in much of the world the pyramid is still very much in place. Today in Afghanistan women can not only no longer attend school, they can no longer go out without a chaperone or allow their voices to be heard in public. And right here in much of this country women have had the right removed from them to make their own decisions about abortion.

The pyramid today looks different, yet it's still with us. And the question is, what will we do with it? Will we cling to our position as high as we can get, push others down the sides to get ourselves closer to the top, argue as Jesus' disciples did over which among us is the greatest? Or can we find our status in another way, not through manhood or adulthood or power or prestige but by embracing the path of being children—children of God, the God in whom there is no longer any insider or outsider, slave and free, male and female, the God who delights in us in all our variety, who says to each of us at our baptism, “This is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased?”