

A Mother's Wisdom  
Proverbs 31:1-9

How can we honor our mothers on this special day? Well, why not let a mother have her say? One of the few places in Scripture that records a mother's words is today's passage. Now, we don't know exactly who King Lemuel was. We know he is not listed among the kings of Israel or Judah, but we don't know where he reigned. We don't even know his mother's name. And yet this woman's wisdom has been preserved for more than 3000 years, recognized as an oracle, a prophecy from God. So surely there's something here from which we can learn.

Of course, none of us are in exactly the sort of situation in which Lemuel found himself. He was a king, and in the Ancient Near East, that meant he had absolute power over whatever area he and his armies managed to control. Kings in those days were personally called to make the laws, as well as to enforce the laws. A king also had to apply the laws as a judge.

So it's no wonder that Lemuel's mother warned him about the dangers of drinking too much. As verse 5 points out, a king never knew when one of his afflicted subjects would ask him to render a judgment. He had to be sober so that he could apply the law correctly to any difficult case that might arise.

Well, aren't we glad we don't have that kind of total responsibility? Aren't we glad that our ancestors, in their wisdom, decided to apportion governmental authority to separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches? And isn't it nice to have judges and other public servants who can make all those difficult decisions? So, unlike Lemuel, it would seem that we can just unwind at the end of the day and kick back with a brew or two until it's time for us to go to work again.

But wait – who does our government say is supposed to supervise the work of all those public officials? Who is supposed to make sure that the presidents and governors and legislators and judges and supervisors and aldermen don't abuse the power that is entrusted to them? Come to think of it, who are the ones who invest all of these officials with their power by electing them to the offices which they hold? According to our state and federal constitutions, we do. The sovereignty, the final resting place of all American political power lies with the voters, with us.

Oh, and King Lemuel may have been able to render judgment by himself on any sort of judicial case, but that's not the way we do things, is it? We have judges, but we also have juries, and everyone who is eligible to vote is also eligible to serve on a jury, with the responsibility to decide the facts of any case that might be placed before us. And we'd better have our wits about us when we are called to take someone's freedom or even his life into our hands.

So, how should we modern Americans apply the words of Lemuel's mother to our own lives? Of course, we should be sober whenever we enter the polling place or the jury box. But we must also take the time to study the important issues discussed in our local, state, and federal campaigns. We need to make the effort to meet the candidates, or at least to listen to their speeches and study what they think about the problems we all face.

And so, while we may not have the responsibility of bearing all that concentrated legislative, executive, and judicial power in one person like Lemuel did, we have perhaps the more time-consuming problem of keeping up with all the different officials in all those different branches that we have the power to elect. If we American citizens carry out our political responsibilities as conscientiously as Lemuel's mother wanted him to do, would we have any more time to get drunk than he did?

Of course, King Lemuel had another big responsibility that none of us will face. For although Lemuel's mother doesn't mention it, kings in those days had to be ready to do battle at a moment's notice, to defend their subjects from foreign invasion. The Japanese didn't phone ahead and tell President Roosevelt that they were going to destroy the fleet in Pearl Harbor. Al Qaeda didn't announce their intentions to destroy the World Trade Center in advance. Just so, a king never knows when he will have to lead his army into battle. He must remain sober, ready for any challenge that comes his way.

Of course such a warning would apply to our modern generals and admirals. It would also apply to all the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who must be vigilant in combat zones. But the events of September 11, 2001 should remind us that America's enemies can be anywhere, actively seeking to destroy us and our loved ones.

And so while paranoia is never appropriate, a reasonable amount of alertness certainly is. In November of 2001, President Bush called all Americans to "add your eyes and ears to our efforts to find and stop those who want to do us harm," and ten years later, President Obama would doubtless agree. The citizens of a free republic are never really off duty, for our common safety is our common responsibility. We always need to be alert enough to protect each other's lives and property.

But Lemuel's mother made it plain that he wasn't just supposed to react to the judicial and military problems that would inevitably present themselves. He also had to take the initiative in making his kingdom a better place for all his subjects. In verses 8 and 9, she calls on him to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. She calls him to defend the rights of the poor and the powerless, to use his power to help those who are truly needy.

Of course our modern political officials often make it their business to propose solutions for the chronic social ills of poverty and injustice. And of course it is our job as voters to assess their proposals with sober judgment. Especially in these times of extreme budgetary stress, we need to make sure that our governments don't spend more than the citizens can afford to pay in taxes.

But don't we, as American Christians, also have the responsibility to get involved in solving some of these problems ourselves? That's why our presbytery supports our partners in ministry in Northeast Brazil, as they seek to bring water to a dry land, along with the living water of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's why we support the work of institutions like Belhaven and Chamberlain-Hunt *and* CEF, as they seek to train the next generation to make a difference in the world around them.

But just as Lemuel's mother called him to be directly involved in helping the oppressed and the poor, shouldn't we take our involvement to that next level as well? I was so proud to hear about the folks volunteering to secure the priceless artifacts in the Grand Gulf Museum from the coming flood. Other opportunities for service to our neighbors will doubtless present themselves as the waters continue to rise throughout this month. But if we aren't alert and sober, if we aren't actively seeking chances to help others, those chances may pass us by.

So if it isn't any more appropriate for free citizens than for ancient kings to lay around in a stupor, why would anyone indulge in strong drink? Perhaps King Lemuel's mother had been listening to the blues or to the country music of the day, for verses 6 and 7 sound like a catalog of everyone's favorite drinkin' songs: here's someone who is ready to perish. Here's someone who has a heavy heart, whose life is bitter. Here's someone who is beset with poverty. Here's someone who's just low-down miserable. Let folks like that go and get drunk, Lemuel's mother says to him, but don't you do it.

And in most of those drinkin' songs and in most of those blues songs, the reason behind the misery is that the singer has been done wrong by his woman, or by her man. Hank Williams had a feelin' called the blues because his baby had said goodbye. At a quarter to three, Frank Sinatra had one drink for his baby who had walked away, and one more for the road. Taylor Swift regretted saying goodbye to her boyfriend, but she couldn't go back to December, she couldn't turn around and make it all right. It's no accident that there are just as many cheatin' songs as there are drinkin' songs, right?

And if you think you've got romantic issues, think about poor King Lemuel. It is likely that, like Solomon, Lemuel had a harem of many wives and concubines. That was, after all, one of the main ways in which kings carried on foreign policy in those days – by marrying the daughters or sisters of neighboring kings. It's no wonder, then, that Lemuel's mother warns him in verse 3 about the dangers of giving his strength to women in the plural.

Now, don't get me wrong. We've all got problems, and some of us are dealing with situations and relationships that just seem impossible to us. All those drinkin' songs and cheatin' songs were written by real people living real life, and they wouldn't be on the radio unless lots of people could sympathize with them. I would venture to guess that even King Lemuel, whoever he was, had some tough times too. Nobody sails through life without encountering anything that makes us sad. Everybody's got a right to sing the blues sometimes.

And it's not like everyone can just live in a relational vacuum, without ever getting involved in the heartbreak that accompanies romance. If we did, there wouldn't be a next generation on which we could bestow our wisdom, like Lemuel's mother gave to him. And there wouldn't be anyone to celebrate mother's day.

So, what is Lemuel's mother trying to tell him, and us? That no matter how low we may be, no matter how great our heartbreak may be, it will do us no good to try to drown our sorrows in strong drink. That's not the way kings and princes handle their problems, and it shouldn't be the way we American Christians handle ours either.

For can any of us who have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus claim to be worthless? Can any of us who are trusting in the Lord consider ourselves helpless? Can any of us who know we have been forgiven because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross dare to believe that life is hopeless? Can any of us who have been blessed with the presence of God's Holy Spirit really consider ourselves to be poor?

And why should we tell our sorrows to Joe at the bar like Frank Sinatra did when we can bring our greatest heartbreaks and concerns to the throne of God Almighty? Why should we look to liquor to forget our problems when we have a God Who can solve whatever those problems are?

Now, we don't know if King Lemuel listened to his mother or not. The questions she asks him in verse 2 may indicate that she was trying to bring him up short, to bring him to his senses by asking him what he was doing. We don't know if he wasted his youth seeking pleasure before realizing the truth of his mother's words.

But the good news is that it's never too late to do the right thing. It's never too late to listen to your mother. With each new day God gives us, we have the opportunity to give that day back to Him, to bow before the One Who has created us, to devote our lives to His glory and to the good of others. God calls all of us, just like King Lemuel's mother called him, to a life of responsibility and integrity, a life of love and service. What better way is there to honor our mothers, what better way is there to honor God than to heed that call?