

Wisdom Raises Her Voice  
April 30, 2006  
First Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis  
Proverbs 8:1-11, 22-31  
Mark 7:24-30

It is rather mind boggling to me that just 60 years ago, I, or any woman, could not have stood in this pulpit and preached a sermon as I am about to do before you. Today, we are celebrating the gifts of women, and in particular we are celebrating the one hundred year anniversary of women being ordained as deacons and the fifty-year anniversary of women being ordained to the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church.

It is significant to consider what we take for granted today has not always been the norm in sacred institutions. The Women's Ordination Timeline<sup>i</sup> – a shorted version of this document appears as a bulletin insert today – notes that in the early 1800's, the Presbyterian Church had no official stance on women speaking in public because it was thought to be an obvious rule that they would not! The General Assembly's first statement about women speaking and praying in public came in 1832, when after a hearty debate, a narrow vote approved that a "pastoral letter" be sent with the following language:

*Meetings of pious women by themselves, for conversation and prayer, whenever they can confidently be held, we entirely approve. But let not the inspired prohibitions of the great apostle to the Gentiles, as found in his epistles to the Corinthians and to Timothy, be violated. To teach and exhort, or to lead in prayer, in public and promiscuous assemblies, is clearly forbidden to women in the Holy Oracles."*<sup>iii</sup>

It was over a decade later at the Seneca Falls Convention, that Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a Presbyterian who later left the denomination because of its position on women, would address and affirm the issue of women speaking publicly in church leadership, as well as many other areas of society.

The debate would rage within the Presbyterian Church throughout the 1800s, in places like Lafayette Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn and Wickliffe Presbyterian Church in Newark, women were invited to speak and these actions often brought charges that were sustained by the larger governing bodies.

One notable response came from the Presbytery of Newark, who in their charges against the minister who had invited two women from the Women's Christian Temperance Union Conference to speak, the presbytery declared: "we think that the action of Brother See in inviting women to preach in his pulpit at the regular public services on the Sabbath Day was irregular and unwise."<sup>iii</sup> Something irregular and unwise was certainly happening.

As early as 1889, Louisa Woosley was ordained to ministry, but within a year her ordination was ruled invalid by the Kentucky Synod. It would be over sixty-five years later in 1956 before Margaret Towner was ordained as a minister of the Word and Sacrament, and that women were effectively able to be ordained to this office.<sup>iv</sup> Those sixty-five plus years were filled with debate, silence, refusal to engage the debate, rejection, and in the true Presbyterian way, countless committees to study the issue. From

these debates came the acceptance of women being able to be ordained to office of deacon in 1906 and to the office of elder in 1930.

Do not be fooled though in thinking that any of these milestone markers of women's ordination silenced the critics or made women's ordination to any of these offices simple or ordinary. In fact, even today, it may seem ordinary for women to be ordained to church offices, but the reality remains that the journeys of our sisters before us were not so long ago that the struggles are completely resolved. After all, 1956 might have marked women's ordination as Ministers of Word and Sacrament, but it was 1974 before the first African American woman was ordained, and 1979 before the first Hispanic woman was ordained,<sup>v</sup> and while several lesbians have been ordained in just the past few years, the Presbyterian Church is not yet what could be identified as a welcoming denomination to those women seeking ordination.

This congregation is blessed with a unique spirit that embraces and nourishes the gifts of women in leadership in distinct and creative ways. This gift is not merely a gift of the present, but a gift that reflects a rich history of women's leadership through these very decades when the debate about women's role in the church was raging. This history is valuable because it makes the current way leadership is shared between all a comfortable place.

We must always understand though that no matter how wonderful the congregation, congregations are part of an institutional system, and those systems, by their very natures are severely flawed. The institutional church carries in its structures that have wounded people in many unforgivable ways. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons still must be careful when entering any church. They look for signs of welcome and assess how far that welcome extends. Can they hold hands? Can they baptize their children? People of color know that they may enter a church and not see many faces like theirs in the midst of the congregation, and they must assess how far the welcome extends to them. Women in the ministry shift from the joy and accomplishment of seminary graduation to the reality that their male classmates will likely receive a call more quickly than them and often get paid more money. Beyond the walls of Presbyterianism, women in Roman Catholicism still struggle for ordination privileges, and are silenced in myriad ways, including not being able to celebrate the sacraments or to preach.

These are some of the realities that our wounded institutions carry in them. They are not insurmountable, unless of course we wish to pretend as if they don't exist. Then these wounds are quietly able to sit in the corner and fester, letting their sharp barbs scratch anyone who unsuspectingly thinks the corner is empty.

We are not without witnesses who can provide ideas and pathways of how we as a congregation can continue to nourish the gifts of women and struggle to heal the wounds of the larger institutions of which we are part.

The Easter season in which we find ourselves provides one such set of witnesses. It is not an accident that within the gospels it is the women who are the first witnesses to the resurrection. They experience all that we expect: fear, amazement and excitement. As the first messengers of this incomprehensible news, they are in a position of great responsibility and of great risk. The late Jane Kenyon, one of the great American poets of the twentieth century, wrote her interpretation of the risk in which these women were engaged in her poem titled, "Depression."

*...a mote. A little world. Dusty. Dusty.  
The universe is dust. Who can bear it?  
Christ comes. The women feed him, bathe his feet  
with tears, bring spices, find the empty tomb,  
burst out to tell the men, are not believed...<sup>vi</sup>*

By retelling the stories of these women, and believing their voice that the tomb is empty, feeling their fear, feeling their amazement, we proclaim the mystery of our faith and we authenticate their presence and value their experience. These are stories we should repeat frequently, and make sure our daughters and sons know these women are to be believed, that believing in their witness of the empty tomb gives us entry to the greatest mystery of our faith.

We are witnessed to as well by the Syro-Phoenician woman whose story we heard read from the Gospel of Mark. This woman brings several distinct characteristics to the conversation. First, she is, in the place where she found Jesus, truly an outsider. Her foreignness is identified by both her nationality and her religious beliefs. She is described by various commentators as unconventional, bold, clever, and morally correct.

Second, her confrontation of Jesus begins in a very non-confrontational way. She seeks him out and bows down at his feet, and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Throughout the Gospels, women come to him passionately searching for his help for themselves, for a loved one. His responses are not always without inquiries, but rarely do we hear him so harsh as he seems here. Even if we allow for softness of tone, the words are clearly a postponement, if not an outright rejection of her request when he says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."<sup>vii</sup>

You can almost hear the breath inhaled from all who were present. The confrontation is sudden and the stakes are clearly high. Jesus response is confusing; the women's status as an outsider has often been highlighted as the major part of his rejection of her request. But a closer look at Mark's context suggests that Jesus is not opposed to healing foreigners, as he does so with no hesitation just chapters before when he exorcises many demons from the man who had to be bound to keep the legion of demons from tearing him apart.<sup>viii</sup>

The Women's Bible Commentary asks a question that must be asked, does Jesus refusal of this woman's request have anything to do with her gender?<sup>ix</sup> It is impossible to know, and difficult to argue, but what we do know is that she chooses to confront his rejection of her request. At that time, her decision to respond would have surely been seen with the same distrust that the Presbytery of Newark suggested about women speaking in the pulpit in 1877, her confrontation of him is "irregular and unwise." This woman though has reached that point that we all come to at times in our lives, where frustration and disappointment have left her with nothing to lose.

Her response is anything but "irregular and unwise," in fact she thinks so quickly in that moment that she is able to take his analogy and flip it back on him, forcing him to acknowledge the legitimacy of her petition. We are witnessed to then by the strength of Jesus' ability to hear the counterpoints of his own arguments and change his positioning. This transformation is an equally critical witness to women's voices being heard as the woman's own experience, for in Jesus' response in this passage, we see the hope that can

come from transformation. Would that the institutional church could recognize and transform itself as quickly!

In a recent book “Celebrating Our Call: Ordination Stories of Presbyterian Women,” Letty Russell, Professor Emerita of Theology at Yale Divinity School, talks about her struggle with a denomination that views her as an outsider within.<sup>x</sup> Ordained in the Presbyterian Church in 1958, she speaks eloquently in her ordination story about the tension of being both outside and within the institutional power structures. She speaks frankly about her realization, after working in East Harlem Parish for three years, how she “recognized the need for ordination in order to work in the power structure of the church.” She speaks of a “revolution of small changes,” as being one of the gifts of existing both within and outside the institutional church.

Ms. Russell expresses a theology in the telling of her story that is worth hearing in her words. She puts it this way: *“Paul’s call in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 is for Christians to be ‘in, but not of, the world,’ but this call is frequently ignored in congregations...many churches of our days live of, but not in, the world. They are ‘of the world’ because their lives, structures, class divisions, sexual orientation, and prejudices all reflect the culture of which they are a part. They are ‘not in the world,’ however, because they refuse the task of witnessing to God’s intention for a new creation by practicing works of justice and peace in the world. In order to be a church inside out, we need to open our lives to God by practicing a holistic spirituality of connection to God, to our own bodies and ourselves, and to our neighbors in need, be they next door or on the other side of the world.”*<sup>xi</sup>

Being an “inside out church” is not an easy task. The lines we straddle with one foot in the institution and one foot kicking at the door of the hierarchy demands a delicate balancing act. Perhaps it is the last witness we call today that helps us the most with how to find that balance. “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?”<sup>xii</sup> Christina read this passage from Proverbs for us this morning, where we heard Lady Wisdom speaking in one of the most powerful feminine voices in the Bible. She asserts her truthfulness and reminds us of her long standing relationship with God. Her voice will echo in the prologue of the Gospel of John, “in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God,” but it is here in Proverbs that her description gives us sense of the intricate balance that molded creation. She is beside God, as limits are set, as the first bits of soil are laid, when the circle is drawn over the face of the deep.

If we are to be transformative, if we are to be in the world, a church inside out, we must be able to rejoice in what is possible, we must believe that there is potential for something new, and that we can be part of what makes that new thing come into being. Wisdom is raising her voice to us, she is reminding us that witnesses we heard from today are part of the work we share with God in creating a new thing. In witnessing the resurrection, in confronting authority that is unjust, in understanding how to be IN the world and not just OF the world, in responding to the call of wisdom, we participate in that “revolution of small changes.”

For it is in these small changes that we heal the wounds and transform the systems of oppression layered in the church as institution. We must learn how to be even more passionate listeners; we must speak, even if we fear not being believed. We must confront injustice, even when it may seem “irregular and unwise.” We must practice works of

justice and peace, and we must feel confident that Wisdom raises her voice to show the balance that is needed.

Paul gave us plenty of words that have been used to suppress women's voices, but perhaps it is best to turn to his words as our charge this morning. In Philippians 4:8-9, he encourages the church in Philippi with these words:

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen, and the God of peace will be with you.*

I encourage you to hold these words for yourselves – keep on being a place where women are encouraged to be deacons, elders, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Recognize the places where the institutional systems still silence and ask women and men to respond to those places differently. Believe that a new creation is possible. Keep on being a place where wisdom raises her voice.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.pcusa.org/women/ordination/ordination-timeline.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/women/ordination/ordination-timeline.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Kenyon, Jane, "Depression" in The Boat of Quiet Hours (Graywolf Press, 1986).

<sup>vii</sup> Mark 7:27 (NRSV)

<sup>viii</sup> Tolbert, Mary Ann, "Mark" in The Women's Bible Commentary ed. By Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1992), p. 268-269.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Russell, Letty M., "Outsiders Within: Women in Ministry," in Celebrating Our Call: Ordination Stories of Presbyterian Women ed. By Patricia Lloyd-Sidle (Geneva Press: Louisville, KY, 2006), p. 133-144.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, p. 139.

<sup>xii</sup> Proverbs 8:1 (NRSV)