

WOMEN CAUGHT IN THE ACTS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Proverbs 31: 10-29, Acts 16: 9-15

The words of Proverbs 31:10-29, sound quaint in this time when we have become more aware of the role and gifts and leadership of women. In industrialized countries, where the daily basics of baking bread and cooking meals is not an essential to human survival, women have so many other roles besides that of mother, homemaker, tender of the hearth fires, and knitter of woolly mittens and sweaters. So hearing the words of the proverb praising the domestic abilities of a capable wife is to hear a description that sounds out of step with the many additional roles a woman fulfills today.

The poem is ostensibly the advice of the Queen Mother to her son, Lemuel. And her words are those of a woman who desires for her son, a happy marriage.

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 rises when it is still night and provides food for her household and
tasks for her servant girls. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands
hold the spindle.

It is, of course, the praise of a woman who is the joy and delight of her husband and who finds satisfaction in fulfilling a domestic role. She is a woman whose honor is a measure of that honor which she confers on her husband, born of the ancient code of honor and shame.

If we took a poll, I wonder how many mothers here today might wish what the Queen wishes for her son in this proverb. For many women to be such a “capable” wife no longer has the appeal it once had in ancient Israel. As the junior senator of this state once said, “I’m not the kind of person to just stay home and bake cookies.”

Women today struggle with a much more complex set of roles. Well educated, breadwinners, single moms, women in the workplace raising children, sharing in a marriage, it’s not a Proverbs kind of life anymore for a capable woman. Women juggle many roles, and life is more complex now than it was in the ancient villages of our religious forebears.

As odd as that description in Proverbs might sound to us today, I nonetheless remember doing a memorial service about ten years ago, for an elderly woman who was clearly the product of an earlier era.

She had married her husband of some sixty years duration back when he and she were in her early twenties. She had devoted herself to having babies, providing an attractive home, supporting her husband’s career by entertaining clients and business associates at home, and looking after her children when they came home from school each day. As the children now in their fifties, planning their mother’s memorial service reminisced about her, the things they remembered were very traditional. She had devoted herself to being the best wife and mother she could be. Her children remembered

Christmas at their house, how carefully she strung popcorn on a string with a needle and created homemade decorations for the tree.

They recalled her delicious fudge, her Toll House cookies, her gift for sewing and mending a hole in a sweater. They remembered the wonderful way she cooked lamb and the homemade valentine cards she made for her grandchildren with paper doilies and red construction paper. They remembered with fondness their mother who was in so many respects that capable wife described in Proverbs. At her funeral that quaint description of a capable wife seemed most apt, and reading it at that service came like a benediction to a woman who gladly loved leading a very domestic life.

Growing up in the 30's and 40's was a very different thing than growing up in the 2000's, and the images of mothering that Madison Avenue puts in front of us now no longer feature women in aprons slipping biscuits into the oven, but a woman calling her husband from her office downtown and urging him to go out and pick up some KFC.

We all know, or at least we think we know, how sexist the Bible is and how out of touch with women's diverse roles and many gifts and capacities for leadership it misrepresents. We think we know that, and there is much to prove that case.

But there is also much to indicate that in the early church, the role and gifts of women were recognized in ways that have only recently been drawn to the church's attention. It has taken the fresh eyes of women Biblical scholars and women in ministry and women taking note of passages long ignored by male scholars that have made us all stop, look, and listen to what the work and ministry of women described in the scriptures was.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of the early church after the resurrection, is one of those repositories that catalogue the ministry and work of women in the first communities of faith. In such a patriarchal society as Jewish society in the first century, it is a wonder that there is any notice of the presence of women at all in the written history of the church. But surprisingly, women are caught in the Acts of the Apostles ministering to the needs of the saints, patronizing (or should I say *matronizing*) the apostles, supporting their work and making possible their sustenance and shelter.

In the book of Acts, Luke mentions among others Sapphira, Queen Candace, Rhoda, Tabitha, Priscilla, and Lydia, and gives us historical footnotes and feminine reference points to enrich an otherwise male apostolic story.

A couple of weeks ago I preached on the story of Tabitha, that gazelle of human energy who supplied the needs of the saints in Joppa. Today the story is that of Lydia, a woman of Philippi, a Philippian philanthropist, if you will, who provided support to Paul and the fledgling ministry he was carrying out in that city.

Lydia was a seller of fine purple cloth, a luxury item for the wealthy. She was a businesswoman in command of her own household, and her wealth and prominence was such that no man's name is associated with her. So we do not know if she is married, widowed, or even dating! We know that she is so important and so independent that reference to a man is not required in this case to confer upon her the honor of male association that would normally be required of others.

Like Cornelius, who commanded his household in Caesarea and who welcomed Peter there; Lydia and her household in Philippi welcomed Paul and received his message with thankfulness. Lydia believes the good news that Paul shares, and she and her household are baptized as a result. Because of her hospitality, Paul was able to conduct his work and witness in Philippi. And Lydia emerges as a person of great character, a Gentile who embraced the faith and played a role in its dissemination in Philippi.

In all honesty, the New Testament's record on women and reporting their role in the early church is mixed. Mary and Mary Magdalene are portrayed as the first to see the empty tomb on Easter morning, but in Mark's gospel the women are portrayed as running away from the tomb and saying nothing to anyone because they were afraid. In Luke's gospel they run and tell the Twelve what they have seen but they are dismissed as tellers of an idle tale. On the positive side of the ledger, however, in the book of Acts, as the disciples await the gift of the Spirit, the women are mentioned as present in Jerusalem in that upper room devoting themselves to prayer and preparing for the next things.

Luke tells the story of Rhoda in Acts 12, who is a maid in the mother of John Mark's household. When Peter escapes from prison and is looking for a place to hide, Rhoda answers the door and is so excited to see Peter she turns and runs to tell everyone in the house, leaving Peter, vulnerable to arrest and standing in the street. Like the women at the tomb who were dismissed for their good news of Jesus' resurrection, the men inside of John Mark's house dismiss Rhoda as having lost her mind. But it all gets sorted out in the end and the comedy and danger of leaving Peter out on the street is resolved when he is ushered inside.

Priscilla is mentioned by Luke in Acts, chapter 18. Priscilla is the wife of Aquilla, a missionary team to Corinth and Ephesus who had been expelled from Rome. Priscilla and Aquilla are always mentioned together in the scriptures. They are true partners in their work and marriage. And their importance can be seen in that Paul took both of them on a sea journey to Ephesus with him. In Paul's letters, in particular his letter to the Romans, Paul mentions Priscilla by name, and underscores his high regard for her.

Each of these women are mentioned, remembered and valued in the life of the early church. They are caught in the Acts of the Apostles, they are disciples in the early churches, they are among the first believers, they are patrons of the church who share their wealth and make possible the ministries of Peter and Paul. They traveled with Jesus along with the Twelve, and they came to faith and are mentioned for that faith throughout the gospels.

Now you may wonder why I am going over this litany of the role and importance of women in the scriptures today, aside from the fact that it's Mother's Day, which even though popular opinion would have it otherwise, is not a religious holiday!

Well, there are three reasons that I am going over ground that you might think is already pretty well covered. And one of the reasons I am mentioning the importance of women is because there are some dissatisfied Presbyterians ready to leave the denomination because they are so unhappy over ordination issues that they want to become a part of another Presbyterian denomination (not our own). They are so against

the ordination of gays that they are willing to settle for a denomination that does not believe in the ordination of women either. What a sad state of affairs.

We are a church and a denomination that do believe in the ordination of women. And while there are many things about the Presbyterian Church USA that set my teeth on edge from time to time, one thing that I could not countenance would be the idea of being a part of a denomination that did not believe in the gifts, and call, and ordination, and recognition of women in ministry as elders, deacons, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

In a somewhat similar vein, for all of the respect I have for my Catholic brothers and sisters in the faith, and for the Catholic Church, I believe that that church is profoundly wrong in believing that God only calls men into the priesthood, especially when using the explanation that Jesus only chose men as his apostles. If anything, the weight of the scriptures recording Jesus' shattering of the roles and relationships of men and women was always in the direction of removing barriers, not raising them in ways which seemed to him either arbitrary or unrighteous. Once again, I am grateful that we have what I believe is a more biblically faithful position, one that welcomes the gifts of pastoral leadership in women.

Finally, I raise this issue because next Sunday Sarah Segal McCaslin will begin her ministry among us as the called Associate Pastor of First Church. Barbara and I could not possibly be happier to have such a gifted and capable colleague in ministry. She comes to us with an academic degree and significant experience in social work as well as theology. She will take an extended semester of Clinical Pastoral Education in this first year she is with us, but as those of you who have gotten to know her already realize, she is an enormous blessing as a pastor, and she will bring wonderful gifts for ministry at First Church. She is going to be involved heavily in pastoral care and visiting in the hospitals and calling on homebound members, preaching on a regular basis, teaching, working with these kids that we are baptizing today, and their parents, and working to develop our ministries with the seventy percent of this congregation that is in their forties, thirties, and twenties.

Sarah will stand on the shoulders of all the women in ministry who have gone before her here and in the early church and in the Presbyterian Church over a good many years. She will build on the ministries of Barbara Davis and Edee Fenimore. She will stand on the shoulders of Priscilla and Rhoda and Tabitha and Lydia. She bears the name of the great matriarch of our faith Sarah, Sari, Abraham's wife, who gave birth to a great nation of blessing as many as the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore.

And fifty one years later, she will stand on the shoulders of Margaret Towner, the first woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church, ordained in Cayuga Syracuse Presbytery in 1956. The first such woman called to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, a graduate like Sarah (and Barbara and me) of Union Seminary here in New York City.

Margaret Towner was asked last November in an interview that I attended what it was like to be a woman at Union in the mid 1950's. Margaret said she was not the only woman at Union at that time. There were a handful of UCC and Methodist and American Baptist women there already, some of them able to be ordained, some of them getting the education they would need for the day when ordination actually became possible.

“The faculty were rather cool to my being there,” she said. “They tolerated us.”

There were a number of faculty members who were terribly encouraging and supportive of me. When I became confused, I went in to my professor, Dr. John Bennett, who was my adviser. I said, “You know, Dr. Bennett, maybe I don’t belong here. I’m really confused by the way some of my classmates, mostly the male classmates – the questions they were asking and some of the ways they were debating.” He simply said to me, “Margaret, maybe it’s not you that’s confused.”

In her first call as an associate pastor on a church staff she worked in Christian Education. And Margaret Towner said she did not ever preach. She consciously chose not to do so because she felt she needed to win the confidence of her colleagues in ministry who felt threatened that women would start filling the pulpits of men. As if pulpits could be claimed in that way. Her women colleagues criticized her severely for her choice of what she called “the gentle way.”

But in her second call, serving in another church, she began preaching as she was entitled to do as a Minister of Word and Sacrament, and so she became and still is an inspiration to several generations of women in ministry who have followed her.

So on this Sunday before Sarah Segal McCaslin begins her Ministry of Word and Sacrament among us, I challenge us all to embrace her with the love, support, prayers, encouragement, and confidence that I think is the hallmark of this church.

She comes from good stock! From the likes of Margaret Towner and Edee Fenimore and Barbara Davis and Sarah, the matriarch of us all, and Mary who placed herself at God’s service, and Priscilla and Rhoda, and Tabbitha and even Lydia, all of them... without whose work and life and example and ministry and love and service, the church, this church, the whole Christian church would be the less.

For them. For Sarah. For all the women of the church who are God’s servants and saints, thanks be to God.

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