

“Women! Live in Church”
Central Presbyterian Church
February 19, 2006
Scripture: Exodus 15:19-21 and Mark 14:3-9

A Sermon in Two Voices by
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Voice One: Rev. David Colby

This weekend we hosted Theatre Unbound’s performances of *Women! Live on Stage!* The play was a brief overview of the history of women in theatre. Theatre Unbound publicized the featured roles:

A Chinese warrior turns prostitute! Commedia divas on stilts! A kabuki dancer in drag! These are just a few of the true stories of female theatre artists set loose in this spectacular spectacle.

Like the theatre, the church has a mixed history of including women as actors and directors, producers and performers. A colleague of mine started a church in Philadelphia that features a “center for subversive theology,” with a worship service this month is titled, “Harlots, Honeyes, Saints, and Sisters: Silenced Women Speak.”¹ My preaching mentor Jon Walton tells about his preaching mentor who was preaching on the story of Rahab in the book of Joshua in a church in South Carolina. The preacher had just called her a harlot (not a bad translation of the Hebrew word *zanah*) when a very proper woman stood up in the congregation, right in the middle of the sermon and said, “Young man, you need to have your mouth washed out with soap.”²

As we embark upon a wild survey of women in the Bible, it helps to approach it fearlessly and without the blinders of Victorian soap-washing attitudes or rigid gender stereotypes. Named and unnamed women are featured prominently throughout the Bible. Sprinkled throughout the Bible, from the earliest scriptural fragments to the leaders of the New Testament churches, comes the witness of strong women. So, without further ado: Women! Live in the Bible (an extremely brief history).

- Our anthem and Hebrew Scripture reading features Miriam’s triumphant song. Scholars believe it may be one of the very oldest fragments of our written scriptures.
- And how about that Rahab, (you know, the one you don’t call a harlot in South Carolina!). She sheltered Jewish spies who came to spy on the city of Jericho, defied the orders of the city’s king, misdirected the king’s men, and helped the spies escape. Rahab, harlot that she was, is included in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, and is cited as a heroine of the faith.³

- I loved hearing Bobby McFerrin's tribute to his mother with this version of Psalm 23. Some of the most familiar words in the Bible – “the Lord is my shepherd” using feminine imagery for God. Shepherds often were women. Shepherds, according to Luke's gospel, were the first to hear news of Jesus' birth. The Lord is my shepherd, she restores my soul.
- The gospel of Mark is really a lesson in discipleship – how we are to follow Jesus. And quite often in this gospel, the twelve named disciples are rather comedic in their failures to follow. In one case, Jesus even rebukes Peter, saying “get behind me Satan.” In some ways these named male disciples serve as foils to other, unnamed disciples who do get it. Jesus had taught that he would suffer, and, in an act so touching and loving, an unnamed woman, a follower, a disciple, anoints Jesus' body.
- The apostle Paul – we should admit up front that Paul has a mixed record on the role of women in leadership – Paul directly names and thanks specific women who had leadership roles in the early churches.
- And, of course, it was a small group of women who remained at the foot of the cross while the others drifted away out of sorrow or fear.
- When Jesus appears after the resurrection, is it a surprise to any of you by now that he appears “first to the women”?

Like in Theatre Unbound's revue, it turns out that far from being unimportant marginal figures in the Bible, women are of central importance. Central Elder Margo Nicoll recently said to me as we began thinking about today's service, “if it weren't for us, there wouldn't be a church.” Margo is right.

But not all forms of Christianity have welcomed the full participation and leadership of women, I am sad to say. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is far from perfect, but I am proud as we celebrate this year the 100th anniversary of the ordination of women as deacons and the 50th Anniversary of the ordination of Women as Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

In hindsight, it is hard to remember a time in the Presbyterian Church when women were not ordained. But the staggered dates of the first ordinations give a clue that it was a political and theological victory that did not come without a fight. Women ordained as deacons in 1906. The first female elder, 1925, and the first female minister, not until 1956. Some churches still do not have women as elders, or as ushers, and “are not yet ready” for a female minister.

Fred Craddock summarizes both sides of many a pastoral search committee interview.

The committee said to the young minister being interviewed, “You've preached a real good sermon; that's as good a sermon as we've had in this church in a long time. And you've answered the questions. Your theology and your biblical knowledge are really

good, and your references are good, but we just don't feel like you're the one for our church just now." And SHE says, "Oh."⁴

It is important to celebrate the anniversaries of women serving as deacons, elders, and ministers. And it is important to note that we still have a ways to go to live into our beliefs that God calls women and men to all ministries of the church.

Betty Friedan died this month. Some called her the most influential feminist of the 20th century. Her book, The Feminine Mystique was a bestseller. She helped found the National Organization for Women. But now we are in the midst of what those who study our culture are calling a backlash against feminism. I don't know if the backlash assumes that we have achieved equality or is based on a belief that no particular group deserves special rights. But a backlash there is, even though women continue to face disproportional poverty, unfair economic treatment, and abuse. Statistics begin to tell the story that we need to do more, rather than less, to celebrate the full gifts and dignity and safety for women.

- In the United States, women were about 40% more likely to be poor than men in 2003, almost one of every eight women were poor, compared to about one of every eleven men.⁵
- A full-time working woman currently receives only 73 cents to every dollar received by a man. And if women received the same as men who work the same number of hours, have the same education, union status, are the same age, and live in the same region of the country, then these women's annual family income would rise by \$4,000 and poverty rates would be cut in half.⁶
- One in six women will experience rape, and half of the women who report rape are under the age of 18.⁷

We have a long way to go! In the midst of these painful realities, and the backlash against women in our culture, it is all the more important for the church to listen for the voices of women in the Bible and to proclaim our central belief that God calls women and men to all ministries of the church.

Voice Two: Dr. Paula Cooley

David began with the triumphant dance of Miriam, sister to Aaron and Moses, and has brought us to this point with the sobering news of how far we as women and men have to go, even as we celebrate how far we as women have come, in this our movement to extend full participation to women within the Church, indeed to women everywhere in all realms of life. And the news is truly sobering. In a recent issue of *The Nation* Katha Pollitt notes in her eulogy to Betty Friedan that Friedan, working with other women, initially sought three goals in the early 70's: 24-hour day care; abortion on demand; and equal opportunity in education and in employment. Now, some 36 years later, not one of those goals has been realized. Indeed, the issue of abortion under any circumstances acutely divides women who understand themselves as Christian. Clearly when we speak of celebrating women in the Church we must take care to

acknowledge that not only are we not all alike, we are and have been throughout history deeply divided on any number of fronts, even as we have shared the same biblical narratives, the same confessions, the same creeds. It is to this diversity and how best to honor it that I briefly turn. Let us revisit the scripture for today.

Miriam's song celebrates God's triumph on behalf of the Israelites over a death-dealing leader and his army. It is a celebration of life gained against all odds; at the same time it honors a victory dependent on dealing out death in great numbers. Miriam, the prophet, dances with all the Israelite women to the percussion of tambourines. Virtually knee-deep in the bodies of the Egyptian army, they are ecstatic with joy. From Moses' birth to the Red Sea it is a bloody tale, a predictably death-dealing, yet surprisingly life-saving story, this story of redemption. Women stand everywhere at the center of it, from Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who lie to save the new-born Israelite sons, to Moses' mother and sister, to Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants, back to Miriam herself. The women, hardly pacifist, hardly docile, dance wildly, before turning with their men and children to face together an unmapped wilderness stretching out before them. There is still a long way to go.

We shift the scene now to centuries later to Bethany at the house of Simon the leper. Jesus is with his associates when an unnamed woman enters, breaks open a beautiful carved jar, almost translucent in its whiteness, and proceeds to anoint Jesus with its very costly contents. The text narrates that "some," nameless and gender unspecified, object. Whoever they are, they object on good social justice grounds that the cost of the oil would have better been given to the poor. (Many of us might no doubt agree.) They scold the woman accordingly. Jesus chastises them. "Let her alone..." he says. He adds that the poor will remain with them, but that he will shortly go to his death. Her act is at once a ritual anointing that acknowledges who Jesus is and a preparation of his body for burial. He concludes in words that foreshadow and echo the sacrament of communion, "Truly I tell you wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." As with Miriam's act of celebration, so with the ritual act of a woman whose name we never learn, the price of redemption is high. New life presupposes death. Women are right in the middle of the action.

What does it mean to place these two narratives side by side? They initially look so different from one another—one a story of the redemption of a people of epic proportions, as God confronts an army and God's very breath sends it down into defeat, the other narrative focused so intensely and sparsely on single figures, flesh on flesh, in the home of an outcast, an untouchable. Miriam, so clearly named, holds a publicly recognized position of prophet; the other woman remains to this day unnamed, albeit her act is a ritual act. Yet both women perform the acts required of them, acts that celebrate the death-dealing, life-giving power of redemption, acts that challenge any notion of power that claims a fixed center that would render them invisible, that would place them on the margins. The Church itself has been such a center; women and men alike have institutionalized center and margin, intentionally and unintentionally. The intentional exclusion of women is obvious. Not so obviously we marginalize ourselves by reading ourselves out of the texts, by reading the texts without imaginatively seeking to understand what the world might have looked like through the eyes of the diverse women whose stories they ever so elliptically tell. When we say the word "woman" we so often project a sort of monolithic vision of wombs rather than the messy, differentiated, richly diverse, wildly at

odds people we actually are. We fail to listen. We then fail to question. Named and unnamed alike, we become domesticated or, worse still, disappear altogether.

The good news is that we who claim fellowship by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the resurrected body of Christ that is the Church, this rag-tag communion of saints known and unknown, we who claim a share in life everlasting, world without end—we don't all look alike, don't all act in concert, don't all get along. When we put these two stories together, they challenge all our earthly notions of power, of fixed centers that determined fixed margins, of who women are or should be, of what can and will redeem us—men and women apart and together. The tradition that claims me, far more than I rest easy in claiming it, is a tradition various enough, wide enough, and deep enough to include both Rosa Parks and Phyllis Schaffley, both Karla Faye Tucker, the axe-wielding, convert to white evangelical Christianity, and Wanda Jean Allen, the lesbian African American evangelical who murdered her lover on the steps of her local police precinct in Oklahoma City—both women who converted before their executions on death row. The good news is that redemption emerges out of the midst of the struggles to which we are captive, both within and without the Church. The good news is that the center has not been held in place, does not hold, and will not be held in place by the margins it seeks to define, for we women simply resist staying in one place, no matter how scolded by “some” (Mark 14:5). For we are too busy dancing and anointing.

So where then is the center? What's central, for example, about Central Presbyterian Church?

Permit me one personal story. Phil, my partner, and I have lived in Saint Paul for almost seven years. In all that time we have never managed to find our way easily around the commercial center of this city, no matter that we regularly enjoy concerts and plays, city-planned events, the Farmer's market, shopping at Marshall Field's, and so much more that the city offers. We quite simply, in spite of our best intentions, have never come and left by the same route. Indeed, we most often have ended up lost and sometimes quarreling over how to get home—especially at night. The truth is, it all fell into place about the second time we found our way here to this church. Once we found our way here, the rest of the downtown area sort of fell into place. We can figure out wherever we are and how to get where we want to be by imagining where we are in relation to Central Pres. It's amazing. Central Pres. is not at a fixed center in relation to the margins of the city for us; rather it is a location we imaginatively conjure up that works to locate everything else. There is a moral here.

Women are not fixed. We are not relegated to the margins, though imagining us so keeps us at best invisible and at worst poor and suffering needlessly. If we shift our notions of power from a model of a fixed center and margin to that of a horizon that calls us beyond ourselves, then what centers us is that which allows us three-dimensional space and a future. The horizon is necessary to our motion, always moving with us and before us, present yet just out of reach. Wherever we are going, and right now the future of the entire planet is seriously up for grabs, the horizon locates us as we struggle together to give new birth to a groaning creation that awaits the redemption of our very bodies (Romans 8:22, ff.). The good news is that the real power lies with that which allows us to move as we dance and to anoint one another in the midst of a life-and-

death drama for a future we cannot know but can dimly glimpse with hope. We do what we can (Mark 14:8) God be praised! It is enough.

¹ See their website at www.broadstreetministry.org/worship.html

² Dr. Jon Walton, “No Sanctuary in the Sanctuary,” sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church in New York, January 29, 2006. www.fpcnyc.org.

³ The story of Rahab is found in Joshua 2, NT citations are Matthew 1:5, James 2:25, Hebrews 11:31.

⁴ Fred Craddock, Craddock Stories, edited by Mike Graves and Richard Ward (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001) 26.

⁵ Statistics from www.legalmomentum.org/womeninpoverty.pdf

⁶ Statistics from the National Organization of Women www.now.org/issues/economic/factsheet.html

⁷ Statistics from the National Organization of Women website www.10forchange.org/issues/violence_brief.html