

Finding Voice

sermon digest

May 13, 2012

Luke 7:36-8:3

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The year was 1837 and monumental change was afoot. After years of gathering in living rooms and church basements across the country, 180 women came together in New York to form the Anti-Slavery Convention of America. It was the first national political women's meeting in American history. Black and white women met together, breaking the taboo against women speaking publicly and politically. Speaking of their work as "the cause of God," this courageous band of women united in an effort to effect a more just society, a society more in keeping with the democratic and religious ideals they held dear. It was the beginning of American women organizing on behalf of the abolition of slavery. It was also the beginning of women organizing publicly on behalf of women's rights. A year later they gathered again in Philadelphia where they were met with a severe backlash. A mob of 10,000 raging men gathered outside the building where they were meeting, shouting angrily and throwing stones through the windows. Unable to continue their meeting, the women joined arms and filed into the streets. While they escaped with their lives, the mob continued to riot, breaking windows and doors and finally setting fire to the building.

The ugliness of the 1838 incident had the effect of striking fire. The women's diaries and the accounts of their proceedings in subsequent gatherings reflect a growing sense of determination. "Sympathy for the Slave," the women's organizing motto, blended into a growing awareness of their own sense of social responsibility and dis-ease with the social restraints imposed upon them. A public resolution voted in those years read,

The time has come for woman to move into that sphere which Providence has assigned her, and no longer remain satisfied with the circumscribed limits with which corrupt custom and a perverse application of Scripture have encircled her [Quoted in Helen La Kelly Hunt's *Faith and Feminism*, 9].

Chafing against custom and the "perverse application of Scripture," women started on the road that would take them to Seneca Falls, New York, and the first Women's Rights Convention in 1848 and efforts to achieve the right to vote. The 19th Amendment, formally introduced in Congress in 1878, was finally approved 42 years later.

More than simply a social cause, women's efforts on behalf of the slave and rights for women were for many also a religious cause, deeply informed and motivated by their understanding of God and their sense of mission emanating from that understanding. Although they were supported by some men, they were met with anger often expressed in bitter derision by others. The story is told of a man challenging Sojourner Truth at a rally in Silver Lake, Indiana. Charging that no woman could be as outspoken as she, he challenged her to prove her sex to which she, to the shame of her tormentor, defiantly tore open her blouse, exposing her breasts. In another instance, when a white man self-confidently assured her that her speeches would accomplish nothing, being no more important than a flea bite, she retorted, "Maybe not, but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching" [Hunt, 62-63].

Our voices are the gift of the long line of faithful women who have gone before us. As I read about the incident with Sojourner Truth, I could not help but recall the derision directed toward the founding of an alternative organization during the denominational conflict in which some of us were engaged 20 years ago. A powerful pastor in the denomination known over the years for his contemptuous, nasty comments on a host of occasions assured the media that those of us who were leaving were of no more significance than a few fleas on the back of an elephant. Maybe so, but thank God for a positive, hopeful alternative to the slugfest that had preceded it.

Also, as I read about the emergence of women's rights in the 19th century, I cannot help but think about the circuitous path women traveled within that denomination—a path I was to later learn was not unlike that of women in other denominations. Founded in 1888 the Woman's Missionary Union of the Southern Baptist Convention was held at arms length by the convention and after some deliberation, allowed to establish itself as an auxiliary organization, dedicated to praying and raising funds for missions. After some debate, the organization was allowed to submit a report to the annual gathering of the convention; but since the convention gathered in churches, the reports could only be read by a male official of the denomination to avoid the embarrassing situation of a woman speaking publicly. With time, the director of the organization was eventually allowed to make the report herself, but only after the body adjourned to a Sunday School classroom, lest she speak from the pulpit. With some glee we observed

efforts a century later to strong arm a highly successful and influential organization to abandon its auxiliary status and “come under” the control of the denomination.

As Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller would later document in their investigation of the writings of American religious women, women found their voices in their auxiliary organizations. Championing the causes of world mission, raising their voices on behalf of pressing needs in the world that surrounded them, women found that they had voices and that their voices mattered. In the 1970's as women sought to be faithful to the sense of calling they had first come to know through the educational efforts of those women's organizations, I was impressed to learn that the experience of my own denomination was not unlike that of others. The Woman's Missionary Union hosted the first Women in Ministry Dinner at the 1982 Southern Baptist Convention and pledged its support as Southern Baptist Women in Ministry was organized. Although the “Southern” would be dropped, Baptist Women in Ministry continues as a vital, free standing organization today. If you remember those early days or if you care deeply about the issue of women in ministry, I encourage you to go to the Baptist Women in Ministry website where you will see along with the history and current efforts of the organization, a picture of a lovely young woman wearing a colorful T-shirt emblazoned with the words “This is what a preacher looks like” and surrounded by her small children.

Pardon my venture down memory lane; but those memories are, I believe, vital not just to our personal histories, but to the mission of Christ's church. In conversation with another woman in ministry a short time ago, she commented, “I am in the middle of a vocational crisis.” On reflection, I commented in all seriousness, “I feel like I have been in a vocational crisis most of my adult life.” It matters, I firmly believe, that the gifts and energies of women and the sense of calling that propels us are not frittered away as somehow unimportant, as little more than an adolescent, unrealistic dream. Having found our voices in the context of responding to the extraordinary needs that surround us, our voices cannot be easily silenced. Having found our voices in the company of the faithful line of women who have preceded us, we cannot in good conscience now lose them.

Our voices are bestowed upon us by the Jesus who welcomed and called women. If we are emboldened by the long line of faithful women who went before us, we are fundamentally affirmed in our calling by our encounter with the God who was in Christ. The affirmation and welcome Jesus extended to women is noteworthy throughout the four Gospels, and this despite the fact that the church had already started to pull in the welcome mat and re-establish boundaries on where women might venture. The Gospels were put together at a moment in which the church was moving, as we see in reading other parts of the New Testament, to restrict the role of women. This very fact seems to be a good indication that the stories and teachings about Jesus and his relationship with women go back to an earlier time in the church. We are on good grounds in assuming that the stories reflect a truth about Jesus that contrasted not only with his own time but to some extent with the church that would serve him. The best gauge we have then of who we, Christ's church should be, is found in the example of Jesus.

Luke in particular steps forward to depict a welcoming Jesus. Focused on demonstrating how the gospel of Christ moves from its early beginnings in Judaism across all ethnic and cultural barriers, Luke is specifically intent on demonstrating Jesus' welcome to those who were disadvantaged in society—the poor, the Samaritans and, yes, women. Luke relates numerous instances of Jesus' encounter with women and specifically includes parables depicting women in a positive light. His is the only Gospel to include the note about women apparently journeying with Jesus and the disciples as Jesus taught and healed. Luke has the extended story about Martha and Mary in which Jesus gives women, in the words of Frank Stagg, “the right to opt for the study and not be compelled to be in the kitchen” [*Woman in the World of Jesus*, 53]. With the other Gospels, Luke depicts women as among the last at the cross, accompanying Jesus to his burial and the first at the resurrection.

Although all four Gospels carry the story of a woman anointing Jesus, they differ widely in terms of the identity of both the woman and the host of the dinner. They also differ on whether the anointing happened early in Jesus' ministry (Luke) or later, whether the woman anointed Jesus' feet (Luke and John) or his head, whether the anointing happened in Galilee (Luke) or Bethany, and whether the host (Luke) or the disciples or “some” or simply Judas objected to the woman's actions. One thing all four Gospels agree on, however, is that despite the fact that the woman was clearly acting contrary to the

social conventions of the day, Jesus defended and praised the woman.

In short, staccato like pronouncements Jesus poses antitheses in Luke not unlike the antitheses included in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Addressing Simon the Pharisee, the host of the meal, Jesus charges, "*You gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but . . . she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment* (44-46). "You did not, but *she* did. You did not, but *she* did. . . ." If we rush here to point our finger at Simon the Pharisee and pontificate on the rigidity of the religion of others, we have missed the point. Rather, we should look within ourselves at those conventions, those assumptions and presumptions that close us off from the doxology of gratitude and love embodied in the woman's actions. We, too, should be on guard lest our presumptions of favor, our certainty that we know the walls God's love will not leap, the new thing that God will not dare to do, hinder us from recognizing God's calling when it comes.

The question, you see, is about faithful service, brimming to the rim and spilling over with gratitude and love. Apart from that, our service is meaningless. Filled with that, motivated and daily renewed by the overpowering and empowering experience of the God of gracious love and acceptance we encounter in Jesus Christ, we find our voices and our very lives. Thanks be to God!