



“These Women”

Texts: Genesis 18:9-15, Exodus 1:8-22,
Exodus 15:20-21, Ruth 1:16-18,
Luke 1:39-45, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 24:1-11, Acts 16:13-15

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

There is nothing original about the title of this morning’s sermon. It is the same title as an episode of “The West Wing” from the first season, episode five, for those who need some Netflix this afternoon. The entire title of that episode was “The Crackpots and These Women,” but we will leave the sermon about “The Crackpots” for another day.

The dilemma for the preacher on Mother’s Day is how to approach the day. For too many, the day is not a Hallmark moment. The relationship between mother and child was not good. The ability to have a child was compromised. The right person with which to have a family never materialized. Added to all of that are the multitude of messages, shared over generations, that subtly and not so subtly suggest that a woman’s truest worth is found in her ability to bear and raise a child, and you can begin to see why this day presents no small number of pastoral challenges.

So, we’re heading in a different direction this morning.

That different direction began thirty-six years ago for me, when I entered seminary and met the Reverend Dr. Johanna W. Van-Wyk Bos. Before I arrived at seminary, I had been raised in a fairly conservative - sometimes even fundamentalist - evangelical church. I didn’t know anything else. When I got to seminary, here was this brilliant, loud, over-the-top, justice-oozing feminist, with a thick Dutch accent, and a compelling way of engaging the world and the scriptures that I had never heard before. Tug by tug, pull by pull, Johanna pulled the blinders of patriarchy from around my eyes and I began to see everything in a different way. I saw the overwhelming presence of male dominance and privilege, how I benefitted from it, and how easy it would be through my life to rely on it and preserve it.

I could go on and on about this woman, but there's more to the sermon. Suffice it to say, I am who I am today because of Johanna Bos. Blame her! She came to Pennsylvania to preach at my ordination almost thirty-three years ago. That was a sermon! But she also introduced me to the work of Dr. Letty Russell, when I did an independent study in feminist theology with her. In one of her books, Dr. Russell wrote:

Whatever else the true preaching of the word would need to include, it at least would have to be a word that speaks from the perspective of those who have been crushed and marginalized in our society. It would need to be a word of solidarity, healing and love in situations of brokenness and despair and a disturbing and troubling word of justice to those who wish to protect their privilege by exclusion.

So, today we speak a word in solidarity from the perspective of those who have been marginalized and even forgotten and we challenge those who protect their privilege by exclusion. We speak a word of those who have been silenced in the church. We speak a word today for *these women*.

The women I speak of today were all known to me and there are many more I could name. They were participants in the work of quilting together the fabric of my faith. They all quietly - and sometimes not so quietly - demonstrated and spoke the truth of the gospel and made it possible for me to believe that I could live it as they did.

It begins, of course, with my mother, Ora Lillian Fredley Fleming Hardt and with her mother, Ora Ethel Stirling Dobson Fredley. These two were a pair. Both musical, both committed to their church, both devotees of Billy Graham, both full of more than their fair share of the devil. Extraordinary senses of humor, astounding senses of hospitality, Mom and Grammy lived the faith in a way that would be impossible for any right-thinking person to miss their commitment to Jesus Christ. Little wonder I have been a Presbyterian since birth. It's a pre-existing condition, considering *these women* from whom I descend.

Elizabeth Wightman was a short, plump, no-nonsense Episcopalian who came to work for the Presbyterians when there was no real place for her to serve in her own church. This was in the mid-1960s. We always called her "Miss Wightman" and, though later in life she invited me to call her "Betty," it just never seemed appropriate. She was our choir director and organist at the Parkwood United Presbyterian Church in Allison Park, Pennsylvania. She was the one who taught me to sing the Lord's song and to memorize as many of them as tickled her fancy. One hymn a month - all verses - committed to memory and quizzed. I think I sang with her for six years. That's seventy-two hymns in Wightman time. But she taught me to love the music of the church and for that I could never hope to repay her. *This woman* is one of the reasons we sing many of the hymns we sing and why I passed more tests that I care to tell you, because I knew the songs of our faith and what we believe we sing.

Dr. J. Bardarah McCandless was my professor of Christian Education at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. Bardie was a jewel. A superb educator, a woman of deep faith, a mezzo-soprano whose rich voice could move you to tears, Bardie taught me the power of compassion at a time in my life when it could not have been a more important lesson. ***This woman***, though never married and without children of her own, has been influencing the lives of thousands of children through her students.

Then there are ***those women***, most of whom are now gone along with the church we shared - the women I refer to as "The Veterans of the Turkey Wars" at the Oakland Presbyterian Church in Springfield, Ohio. Lillian, Audrey, Pat, Sybil, Thelma, and so many more - the Presbyterian Women - who would cook for two days every year to prepare a Turkey Supper for 300 people - and make about \$1,500 for their work in the process.

One of them was Florence Kessler. Each woman had a particular responsibility and Florence was the person who chopped the celery for the dressing. Her husband Clayton was not feeling well the morning the celery was to be delivered, so Florence called me and asked if I would mind stopping by their house to pick up the celery and deliver it to the church and the commandant in charge of dressing. I went to their home and Florence invited me into her very humble kitchen. There were two bread wrappers full of perfectly cubed, very finely diced, celery. "Florence," I said. "This is amazing. These are perfectly cut. This must have taken you forever to do." "Well," Florence said to me, "it is for the church." Did you hear that? Nothing short of perfection because it was for the church. I wish I could bottle that and share it around. ***This woman*** made a statement of her faith through cutting celery and I don't think I will ever forget her for that.

Make the turn toward home with me.

More than a few years back, we began the process of restoring the stained glass windows in the Sanctuary. An unanticipated gift from someone hardly anyone knew got the ball rolling and all of the windows were subscribed in short order. Except one.

You can't see it, but behind the Fisk Organ, up there on the second level, is a magnificent window. The only people who get the chance to see it are the members of the choir. It's large and colorful and extraordinary. But it is, for all intent and purpose, invisible.

Who would pay to restore an invisible stained glass window? The Presbyterian Women. They took on the project, brought forth the funds, and the window is completely restored. The rain doesn't seep in any more. The glass is beautiful once more.

Through rummage sales and personal offerings ***these women*** stepped up to complete a somewhat thankless project.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of:

Blanche Jung	Mary French Reilly
Philuria French Shanklin	Eliza Drew Barnes
Laura Castleberry Dunkerson	Martha Orr Bayard
Emily Orr Clifford	Jean Cavell
Mary Dannettell	Candy Thompson
Naomi Lockridge	Charlotte Richardt
Helen Stoutenborough	Sue Woodson
Edna Vinson	Patricia Snyder

and so many more whose lives and faith and generosity make our continued life as a congregation possible. *These women* and more are some of the reasons we are here today.

And there are so many more women, with us still - sitting within these walls this morning - whose gifts, commitment, faith-in-action, and witness continues to speak to us and calls us to new ventures in ministry and mission. To name them all would risk leaving someone out. But look around.

[These are]those who have been crushed and marginalized in our society...with whom we declare a word of solidarity, dealing and love in situations of brokenness and despair and pledge ourselves to offer a disturbing and troubling word of justice to those who wish to protect their privilege by excluding others.

These women are those who taught the children, cleaned the silver, prepared the meals, paid the bills when the church's money ran short, sat on church boards and committees, and do all that work that no one else is willing to do, but make the work of the church run smoothly.

These women are the living witnesses and embodied examples of the gospel of justice, inclusion, and grace.

Like all *those women* whose stories we heard again this morning, *these women* - with us here and surrounding us in that great cloud of witnesses beyond - are the reason we are here today. They are our faith mothers. They nurtured us, taught us, displayed their witness for us, and challenged us then - and challenge us still - to be God's faithful and authentic people.

For all *these women*, we give thanks to God.
For now and evermore. Amen.



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