

“Anointed”

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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Isaiah 43:18-19

¹⁸Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Mark 14:3-9

³While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. ⁴But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? ⁵For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. ⁶But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. ⁷For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. ⁸She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. ⁹Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

In my nearly 45 years, I have never been part of a denomination which did not ordain women to all offices of the church. As many of you know, I grew up in a sister denomination, known as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. That denomination ordained the first woman in Presbyterianism, Louisa Woosley, in 1889. I’m proud of that history. I grew up in a local congregation which, though it did not have a woman as pastor while I was growing up there, often invited women to preach. The chaplain of the local college was a woman, and I remember her preaching at my home church, as well as at activities of the college. As a young child, it never occurred to me that some would think this impermissible. It did not occur to me that this was not the case in some other Christian denominations. I’m reminded of an anecdote told by Rev.

Marianne Niesen about a five-year-old girl who had *only* known Rev. Niesen as her pastor. She asked, “can boys be pastors, too?” While I *did* know that “boys” could be pastors, I never doubted that people of whatever gender could.

At some point, I must have learned that the church across the street from ours – a Southern Baptist congregation – did not ordain women, but I do not recall it. Honestly, to this day, I have trouble understanding that point of view. I see the scriptural arguments for it, but I understand those passages in the larger context of the whole of the Bible – and God’s continuing revelation to us. In my view of the church, women are absolutely essential, and not relegated to secondary roles. As Jürgen Moltmann stated, “Without women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection” – referring to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as the first to see the risen Jesus. They were the first to see him and the first to go and proclaim the good news. Christian tradition calls Mary “apostle to the apostles.” Priscilla and her husband Aquila were leaders in the early church. Euodia and Syntyche were mentioned by Paul as co-workers in the gospel. Deborah was a judge over Israel, Mary, the mother of Jesus, spoke prophetic words, Martha and Mary were good friends and students of Jesus, and Lydia was a wealthy businesswoman who hosted Paul and Silas. Throughout the Bible, God used faithful women to spread the good news.

The seminary I attended understood this, as well. It had a faculty & staff which – at that time – was 49% female and a student body which was 42% female. Thus, I was constantly exposed to the ideas, expertise, faith, and knowledge of female classmates, faculty, and other scholars. I remember one classmate – who happened to be male – had on his backpack a button which read “This is what a feminist looks like.” Though that word has been dragged through the mud, I remember well that the first definition of feminism in the dictionary is “the theory of the

political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.” This is the stated belief of the denomination in which I was raised and in the denomination in which I now serve. However, in the church (as in most any organization), our practice doesn’t always align with our stated beliefs.

Last week, Pastor Matt and I, along with three others from our congregation, attended the NEXT Church National Gathering in Cincinnati. While there, I had the opportunity to watch a documentary produced by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. The documentary is about the man-made water disaster in Flint, Michigan. I hope that we’ll be able to screen the documentary here, so be on the lookout for information about that. While at the conference, the director of the film, David Barnhart, spoke to us about making the documentary. One of the things he said is that people around the nation would say to him things like, “but that’s all taken care of now, right?” The answer is that it is *not* all taken care of, almost six years after it began. Pipes are still being replaced. People are still living with undrinkable water. People will be dealing with health issues for the rest of their lives. No, it is not all taken care of.

I wonder if some among us – people like me, having never been part of a church which does not ordain women – might think that women’s equality is “all taken care of now.” And, sadly, the answer is that it is not all taken care of. That is the truth, even though our God, in the beginning, created us equal – notice the first account of creation in Genesis 1 mentions only equality, saying “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This is where we began, with equality which has been spoiled by human sinfulness.

Though the denomination in which I was raised has ordained women since 1889, many of my female colleagues found it difficult to find a church which would call them as pastor. In this denomination, a recent survey showed that women were about 25% of the pastors of churches,

though 55% of the associate pastors.¹ We still have a way to go in the church towards actual equality. In the culture around us, we have even further to go. In business, Fortune announced last year this headline: “The Fortune 500 Has More Female CEOs Than Ever Before.” The problem is that this record number of female CEOs of those 500 businesses is 33, or only 6.6%.² And for women who are not CEOs, the gender wage gap persists, with women overall making around 81% of what men make.³

No, it is not all taken care of now. Our society is impoverished by its lack of equality. And, while this sermon is about women in the church, that applies to the equality of all of God’s children, across age, race, religion, ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and whatever other lines we use to separate ourselves from each other.

So, let us work for equality in the church and in our society, learning from women. In today’s Gospel lesson, a woman gives exuberant praise to Jesus, anointing his head. Anointing one’s head was something a prophet did in recognition of a king. In 2 Kings, we read this: “So Jehu got up and went inside; the young man poured the oil on his head, saying to him, ‘Thus says the Lord the God of Israel: I anoint you king over the people of the Lord, over Israel.’” Similarly, David and Saul were anointed as kings by Samuel. This woman acted as a prophet in recognizing the kingship of Jesus. Jesus also appreciates that she has anointed him for burial, as he will soon be crucified. She has performed what Jesus calls, in some translations, a “beautiful thing.” And the men gathered there don’t get it. They see waste, not worship. Jesus calls them out, saying “wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” And it *is* told in remembrance of her, with this story recounted in various

¹ <https://church-trends.pcusa.org/minister/leadership/gender/pcusa/0/>

² <https://fortune.com/2019/05/16/fortune-500-female-ceos/>

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<https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2019/women-had-higher-median-earnings-than-men-in-relatively-few-occupations-in-2018.htm>

forms in all four gospels. Our example is given – recognize Jesus for who he is, and worship him. Follow the lead of this unnamed woman, who Jesus praised.

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Today is International Women’s Day throughout our world. The official site for this day states, “We can actively choose to challenge stereotypes, fight bias, broaden perceptions, improve situations, and celebrate women's achievements. Collectively, each one of us can help create a gender equal world.”⁴ That is the job of each of us, to work for a world which does not diminish the full humanity of women, in the church and outside of its walls.

In the PC(USA), today is “Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday.” On the website for this day, it states, “today, we honor women of faith, those who may have felt their faith falter at times and those who held fast to faith. We give thanks for their persistence—their witness, their words, their actions. We know we stand on their shoulders.”⁵ Indeed, we are grateful for the women of this congregation and of the world. We celebrate their God-given gifts and give thanks for them, even as we work toward a more equal world for all of our sakes.

Some among us did not grow up in the way that I did. You did not grow up in a church which stated that women and men were created equal and should have equal access to roles in the church. Some of you may even have trouble hearing and believing that today. For some of us, this is God doing a new thing, making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, as Isaiah wrote about. If so, whatever your gender may be, follow that path in the wilderness, travel those rivers in the desert, expand your perspective. Ursula LeGuin wrote, “[Women] are volcanoes. When we women offer our experience as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new

⁴ <https://www.internationalwomensday.com/Theme>

⁵ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/racial-equity-womens-intercultural-ministries/allwomen/>

mountains. That's what I want - to hear you erupting. You young Mount St. Helenses who don't know the power in you - I want to hear you.”⁶ To the women in this church, make new maps, make new mountains, be proud of who God made you, and lead as we together follow the new things that God is doing. Amen

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9064832-i-know-that-many-men-and-even-women-are-afraid>