

The hymn we just sang (In the Garden) has been a comfort over many years in Christian churches, although it was not sung much in the Congregational church of my youth. In fact, you cannot find it in our older Pilgrim Hymnal (c.1960). I think church leaders considered it a bit schmaltzy, a bit too individualistic, too privatized; The United Church of Christ, since its founding in 1957 has always considered how salvation is not just personal, but very much about social justice, how Jesus came to change not only individual hearts, but social systems that harm.

When I was in seminary in the mid-80's, I led worship in nursing homes and I learned how popular "In the Garden" was among the elderly. I sensed the schmaltzy "me and Jesus" mood of the song, and did feel a little prejudice against it! (Why not sing about loving your neighbor, about making peace in the world!) I also did not realize that the song was right out of the Bible, the story of Mary Magdalene and the risen Jesus (John Ch 20 that we often read on Easter!) I realize now that besides the story being a personal encounter between the Risen Lord and Mary Magdalene, it's interesting to note that the risen Jesus *first appeared to a woman* when he arose from the tomb. If Mary was such a close and trusted disciple, why did Jesus appointed Peter as the one to build his church? In that day, like now, many churches will only think of growing a church with male leadership!

Then, and now, there has been a cultural problem of the subordination of women. There's good reason that a prominent (and necessary!) mission statement at the YWCA is "Empowering Women." A professor of theology, Stephanie Smith, recently described the situation of women this way: *With women, it is not so much a sin of pride, but the underdevelopment or negation of the Self, and an inadequate sense of personal agency. Thus "salvation" for women may not be as much about receiving mercy (passive), but becoming more an "active agent" in one's life.* Professor Smith notes that approximately one out of four American

women experience some sort of domestic abuse, and about one out of five girls are victims of sexual violence. Faith and Salvation for many women may be less about self-sacrifice and receiving grace (passive), and more about actively and courageously standing up for oneself, developing an active “personal agency” to reach one’s full potential.

I’m not going to try to review all of church history and world history to point out all the unfair treatment of women, though I’ll bet if I opened discussion up to all here, we would be here a long time! But just to mention a few examples that come to mind: The Roman Catholic Church *still* will not entertain the idea of women priests! Eastern Orthodox churches are in the same boat. In Protestant conservative evangelical churches, what we see in practice, is the belief that you will grow your church only with a strong male leader. (After all, in Bible days Paul spoke about women staying in their lane, learning from their husbands back at home) ... and surely we don’t want to question these sayings of Paul!)

In churches that I’ve known in *my* lifetime, I agree it could easily be said that women are the backbone and lifeline of the church! Women still get most of the work done for Sunday School, building community around meals, and women are also the mainstays of “circles” like prayer circles, our former “service club” and even mission of our thrift shop... food and clothing and loving, compassionate welcome into our spaces. Arguably Jesus was mostly about love and compassion, and quite frankly women usually do this better than men! Who are the elementary school teachers? Who are the Sunday school teachers? Who are most of the nurses? So the church does well to honor and follow women ministers, women pastors, women priests, women preachers. (I think it is a great thing that the United Church of Christ has such a high percentage of woman ministers!) *The gifts of love as empathy and compassion are often more evident in women.*

Our crazy warlike world needs more emphasis on love and *peacemaking*. We need more women world leaders. The necessity of nursing and nurture in child-rearing years has a great chance of opening the heart of any person. I think women over all are less likely to govern through violence or dictatorship. The Stalins, the Hitlers, the tyrants of the world are usually men, who rule by fear, threats, and violence.

Let's remember that the Jewish Bible speaks of Wisdom as Feminine! ("Wisdom cries out in the streets, listen to her!") Our Gospel reading this morning stands out to me as one of the most memorable encounters of Jesus with a wise woman. Jesus is challenged by the woman, and he changes his mind due to her sharp and wise words. She was a "Syrophoenician" woman, meaning that her people were from Syria and Phoenicia. So she had double vulnerability... being a woman and being a foreigner. At that time, the non-Jews were often called "dogs," and strangely enough(!), Jesus told her that he needed to feed his own people first, not the dogs. It is hard to reconcile this saying with our overall picture of Jesus. It seems hard-hearted. (Maybe he was really tired that day, and just meant, "I don't have time to go around healing everybody!") I came into the world as a Jew, and that's who I need to minister with first!) Wise and witty as she was, she used the same imagery to reply: "Hey, even the dogs under the table get some crumbs!" So Jesus consents and miraculously heals her daughter from a distance.

The Syrophoenician Woman is the story of a strong woman, a woman who challenged the great healer, with Jesus listening to her and honoring her request. Another famous story is Jesus' encounter with the "*woman at the well*"... again, a double vulnerability: A *woman* out in the public square, the public well, at midday, and also a foreigner, a Samaritan. And again, Jesus crosses cultural norms to engage her in conversation. She was obviously very vulnerable, having had 5 husbands and currently living with a man who was not her husband. Jesus must

have understood that she had no other economic possibilities at that time but to latch on to men who could support her. Jesus offers her his own Spirit, his “living water” and she becomes an “evangelist” for him, telling everyone in her town about him. He did not shame or blame her for her living situation, but renewed her with his Spirit, his “living water!”

One other memorable story of Jesus’ encounters with women is called “*the Woman caught in adultery*.” I’ll bet Jesus had the same thoughts many of us have... What about the guy? Couldn’t the authorities be doing a manhunt for the man that was also adulterous? Are you stoning just the woman? Rather than punishing her, Jesus exposed the *sin in the society*, and his saying is famous across the world: “He who is without sin cast the first stone!” The adulterous relationship may be sinful, but it surely did not merit a death penalty! He said to the woman, “go on your way, just don’t do it again.” He restored her personal agency, her power, to recreate her own life, feeling the mercy and understanding from this great healer. Jesus undoubtedly understood her situation in society, more the victim of men, not the instigator and transgressor. The woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery could have started the “Me Too” movement.

In conclusion, despite the vast majority of Bible stories having patriarchal bias, Jesus clearly valued and honored women, and worked against anything that put them down. Our church and our world would be much better off if we listened to women leaders more, valuing the typically “feminine” qualities of *love, nurture, empathy and compassion*. Male leaders in our world, rather than rule by intimidation, domination, and war, should develop more love, nurture, empathy and compassion for others; they are the qualities of Jesus himself, and the ideals for all humankind to follow. Amen.