

Margaret Parker Memorial Lecture Series
Peace and Justice through the Empowerment of Women
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I think I would have enjoyed Margaret Parker a great deal. I'm just sorry I never got the opportunity to meet her. She was an incarnate example of what's possible when you've got vision and passion and persistence. She had a pretty significant effect on the lives of many in the South Bay, through her work with women in the Church, advocating for women's ordination and in providing a support structure for women in the workforce. She transformed the lives of many others through starting the first free medical clinic in the area, and the 1736 House, and the boundless energy she gave to advocating for rights for the marginalized, a living wage, better housing for the poor and aged, and limiting the potential for nuclear war.

A six-year-old Margaret helped to raise a bear cub her father brought home one summer, and she put the same pluck and courage to work for the rest of her life. She gave human evidence of the image of God that Hosea describes as a mother bear protecting her cubs. The Great Depression took away Margaret's opportunity to finish college but seems to have given her a drive to see that other women were not similarly deprived. There were funds enough for her younger brother to go, but not for her. Families make the decisions they think best, but those decisions are ultimately shaped by the norms of the culture in which they live.

I've just finished reading the proofs for a book by Amy Goodpaster Strebe, *Flying for Her Country*, that gives an account of the women pilots of the Second World War. A couple of thousand women in this country were recruited to ferry aircraft in the early 1940s, trained and put to work in ways that let men be sent to the front. Those women were exposed to most of the same dangers as their male colleagues who served in combat – they were shot at, their engines failed, they dealt with poorly maintained airplanes, and they did it at a pace that would have felled a lumberjack. In 1944, the all-male civilian pilots' union and their campaign to avoid being sent to the front as foot soldiers produced a social reaction in this country that forced the women's units to be disbanded. Those highly skilled and dedicated women pilots were sent back to the kitchen when men decided they wanted their jobs. It happened quite suddenly, and in a way that meant that airplanes sat idle for months until men could be trained to replace those women, and it probably prolonged the war. It also meant that the burgeoning aviation industry after the war lost most of that feminine skill and passion. It has not yet recovered. In 1929, 6% of the licensed pilots in this country were women. 70 years later, it's still only 6%. In the military and at the airlines, fewer than 5% of the pilots today are women. The same thing happened to almost all of the women who were employed in non-traditional fields during the war – Rosie the Riveter and her female coworkers lost their jobs when the men came home.

The relative absence of women in the aviation industry may not seem obviously related to issues of peace and justice, but the causative attitudes persist. There have certainly been economic losses involved in barring young women from aviation, not just in the 1940s but in the decades since. There have been even greater impacts in diminished opportunity in a wide variety of endeavors. When the gifts of a certain class of humanity are devalued or ignored, the whole community suffers. Women are still vastly underrepresented in scientific and technical fields. They are not always encouraged to take the basic mathematics and science they will need to begin to explore those fields. It's a vicious cycle often beginning with elementary school teachers who don't much like math and science themselves. The absence of role models adds to the difficulty. We will not heal this world or build a society of peace and justice until all young people have equal opportunity, and equal dignity in offering their gifts for service.

So why talk about this in church? Gender discrimination, and stereotypical gender roles in our society still get a fair bit of propping up from the sacred sector. Some among us still appeal to biblical warrant to define women's roles as helpers rather than leaders, as objects rather than subjects. This election just past saw quite a few subtle and not so subtle attempts to use women as symbols rather than acknowledge their individual gifts and liabilities. In the United States part of the Episcopal Church, we may think discrimination is mostly a thing of the past, but the reality is that women are still less often called to be rectors of large congregations and less often elected as bishops, in spite of the fact that we train and ordain men and women as priests in roughly equal numbers. That pales in comparison, however, with the attitudes in some other parts of the Anglican Communion. The wife of an African bishop told me a horrifying story this summer at Lambeth. She said it is quite normal in her country for an AIDS widow to be compelled to marry the brother of her dead husband, even if he is already married. If she refuses, his family will come and take her children and any household goods she may have, and put her out on the street. She has essentially no rights to an independent life as a widow. If she accedes to the cultural expectation to marry the brother of her late husband, it is exceedingly likely that she will get AIDS from him even if she has managed to avoid being infected by her late husband. Interestingly, the Anglican Church will not support such a woman either in seeking to remain single and raise her children, or in entering a polygamous marriage with the brother. She's damned if she does and damned if she doesn't.

We talk about this in church because we profess a faith that says none of us is ultimately saved until we all are. Until all of humanity is set free for abundant life, none of us will be able to enjoy a world of peace and justice, at home in the presence of God. And we need the God-given gifts of each and every human being to be put to work in service to that dream of God's. We continually profess a belief in the dignity of every human being. That cannot mean that some are more dignified than others. Our theology of the Body of Christ affirms that each part is of essential and ultimate worth and value – that we cannot do without some parts of the body because we think they are less important.

This Church is passionately involved in work toward that dream of God – that prophetic dream of the abundant banquet, of people living in peace with justice, of an end to war, and the full flourishing of all humanity. Jesus claimed that as his mission when he entered the synagogue in Nazareth and read from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). All Christians share that mission.

The vision of a healed world that is held up in the Millennium Development Goals begins to move toward that end. Particularly in the United States, The Episcopal Church has urged our government to meet its financial commitment to international development, and we continue to work to educate our parishioners and motivate their participation in caring for the poorest around the world. We give abundant thanks that the Scandinavian countries, Belgium, and Luxembourg have met or exceeded their promises to fund this work. The US still falls woefully short of its commitment – we give about one-fourth of what was promised in 2000 – and this Church continues to lobby Congress to increase our giving for international aid and debt relief.

The MDGs are intimately related to what Margaret Parker spent her life working toward. Empowering women is foundational to resolving poverty. When girls have access to education at all levels, when women are equally employed and compensated for their labor, when women and their children have adequate health care, all members of their communities begin to flourish. When people are delivered from poverty, the most vulnerable can truly begin to develop their God-given gifts for the good of all. Ultimately, that is the road to making peace around the world.

When the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered this summer at the Lambeth Conference, we spent part of our time talking about how we can be better partners and advocates for the full flourishing of all humanity, particularly in the ways represented by the MDGs. We talked about

leadership and our role in the transformation of society, and the need we have to partner with any and all who share that great dream of God for shalom. We had those conversations despite the deeply entrenched sexism and patriarchy in most parts of our Communion.

In the days just before the Lambeth Conference began, a layman from England said to me that the biggest difficulty in the Church of England's struggle to embrace women's ministry as bishops is that, in his experience, most men cannot imagine taking orders from a woman. I think he is both right and wrong, for the ordained ministry is not about giving orders so much as it is modeling Jesus' kind of servant leadership. When we begin to shift the understanding of ordained leadership, indeed all leadership, toward that model of servanthood and friendship, then we do begin to transform the world toward that great vision of God's, where no one is devalued or ignored or excluded because of that person's created gifts of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, or physical ability. That kind of world is founded on a theology that upholds the image of God in all God's creatures. That kind of world moves toward a society of friends, all of whom are equally called to heal the world.

Leadership is key to achieving this dream, and leadership is the key quality for which Canon Margaret Parker is remembered. We can be confronted by injustice and discrimination, but if we don't do anything about it, nothing changes. Albert Einstein said, "the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing but expect different results." Erma Bombeck would certainly have agreed, and she would have been talking about domestic chores and training children, both girls and boys, to be both self-sufficient and in constructive relationship with each other. Leadership is about promoting change, and it's a role that you and I promised to take on when we were baptized. Leadership toward a different future is part of our daily ministry, in all spheres of life. Think about those promises we reaffirm so often: will you pray, learn, resist evil, be and do good news, love your neighbor, respect others' dignity, and work for justice and peace? The fact that there is still work to do means we haven't yet arrived at the fullness of the Reign of God. If something about the world is going to change, it is going to need our focused and intentional leadership to effect that change. We've got a vision of where we're meant to be going, but it's up to us to motivate ourselves and others to start moving. Leaders – you – are those agents of change.

Those leaders come in both genders, in all ages and races and stations of life. The most insistent leaders can be crying children: notice how quickly they get attention in a crowded and quiet room. Sometimes the most effective leaders sit down on the job – like Rosa Parks or several thousand Nigerian women. About 25 years ago, in the Niger Delta, where multinational oil companies have appropriated traditional lands and polluted the land and waters, the women's council demanded payment for the damage, as well as a clean water well and consistent electrical power. They blocked the oil companies' employees from the production facilities. The management offered to send someone to negotiate, but the women refused anything less than their original demands. When no response was forthcoming, they sat down and took off their shirts. Their demands were met, immediately. They didn't shame themselves, but they did shame anybody else who happened to be in the vicinity.

A year or so ago, I was privileged to see some of the fruits of transformation in a poor community in Honduras, and what can happen when a woman begins to be empowered. Episcopal Relief and Development and the diocesan development agency, AANGLIDESH, partner with communities to address the MDGs. The development is steered by villagers' desires and with their leadership. In one community, the leaders decided to work on better housing and basic sanitation measures. The development agency provided expertise and some funds to buy metal roofs, but the villagers supplied most of the building materials and the labor.

We visited one village, several miles up a deeply rutted dirt track that is largely inaccessible during the rainy season. AANGLIDESH has been working in this village for a year, and we were invited to see some of the progress: new adobe houses with metal roofs and concrete floors, new and sustainable latrines, concrete wash stations that allow basic hygiene and direct gray water

into catchments, doorways with gates to keep the animals out of the house. The joy that this work has brought could be seen in the decorations painted on the walls of the new houses.

A young woman invited us to her home to hear a choir of small children. In the last year she has taught them simple and insightful gospel songs. Not only has this young mother of six begun and led an effective Sunday school, she has herself learned and taught her neighbors about the importance of a more varied diet, including a number of different of vegetables and fruits they are growing nearby, and in the process she has become a gifted public speaker in this little community. Any of you would have recognized the address she offered when we sat outside her home as a pretty fine homily. This woman has a third grade education, and she understands the gospel message about the love of God for each of us. The people from the diocese who have been working in this village for the last year told us that when they first went there she was so shy and withdrawn that she would not come out of her home. She has been given basic human dignity, she has discovered that she, too, is God's beloved, and she is sharing that good news with everyone around her, both in word and practical deed. She has become a source of transformation for her community, and I have no doubt that the work begun there will migrate to surrounding villages pretty rapidly.

The third MDG is specifically about empowering women and working toward gender equality. This woman and her story are a remarkable example of how small changes can have a major impact on the health and welfare of an entire community.

I was in Haiti a couple of weeks ago, and saw two remarkable examples of how women's leadership is beginning to have significant impact there. There is one priest in the Diocese of Haiti who is a woman, Fernande Pierre-Louis. She serves as principal of an elementary school at the cathedral in Port-au-Prince. Her school is one of three on the cathedral grounds – the others being a music school and a trade school, where a number of her students will eventually study. The several hundred students who study in that place see a woman in leadership, both as a leader in the church and a leader in the school, and they see her as a full and equal partner with male colleagues. The children who grow up in that environment will not look at the world in the same way as their parents did, who may never have seen women as leaders in public life.

We also visited a hospital in another large city, a diocesan institution that provides significant medical care for and research on filariasis – a tropical disease that causes chronic suffering. That hospital has an associated nursing school, started by Hilda Alcindor. She is a native of Haiti, but lived and worked in the US as a nurse for more than 30 years. She returned to Haiti a few years ago and started the nursing school in 2005. It's connected to the university, fully accredited, and will graduate its first class of bachelor's level nurses in January. Hilda has recruited students, built buildings, shaped the curriculum, and instituted a remarkable discipline and high standard in that school. We heard from others that her 120 women and 20 men students both look up to her and stand in awe of her powerful leadership. She told us that her students will practice solo, much like nurse practitioners here, and will need to be able to do their own lab work as well as much of the other work of running a clinic. The nurses who graduate from that school will change the communities in which they work in many ways – not just in improved health but in providing incarnate examples of competent and powerful leadership, much of it female.

This work of developing leaders is not just needed in developing countries. Women are actually better represented in governmental leadership in many other countries than they are here. Women hold over 48% of the parliamentary seats in Rwanda, highest in the world. In this country, women hold 17% of the seats in Congress. The global average is 18%. Around the world, more women are elected to office when a country has quotas and provides active support for recruiting and training women to run for office. Women serve at even lower rates as heads of state. As of January, only 8 of the 192 nations represented at the UN were headed by women – one of them a hereditary monarch.

The third MDG is about gender equality, and in addition to participation in political decision making, the measures of progress have to do with equal access to primary education, and access to jobs. Job opportunities are improving, as more women find paid employment in non-agricultural positions. Women fill nearly 40% of such jobs around the world. Yet the reality is still that globally, women do two-thirds of the work, produce half of the food, receive only 10% of the income, and own only 1% of the property. Girls are making progress in going to school, and staying in school, particularly in the wealthier and more urban sectors, but the poorest and more rural communities need active supportive mechanisms to get and keep girls in school. Feeding them at midday, eliminating the fees that are often charged, and providing adequate and separate sanitation facilities are all effective ways to encourage attendance and promote retention. Official policies that seek to delay marriage are another.

Education, employment, and political representation are essential tools toward improving the lot of women, children, and their communities, both male and female. Consider how social dynamics change when educated women raise children, both girls and boys, with more equal expectations for how they will serve the larger community.

Empowering women begins with respecting their full human dignity, and believing that they show us an image of God no less than or better than do men. We have made some progress, though we still have a long way to go. When I changed schools in 8th grade, I was told that I couldn't take woodshop or metal shop. Girls had to take sewing and cooking. Boys were permitted in those classes, but girls were not permitted in the shop. I don't know of any coed schools in this country where that is the case today. At the trade school we visited recently in Haiti, I asked about the presence of young women, because I didn't see any in the auto shop, the architectural drawing class, or the electronics repair shop. The teachers told me that they get one or two a year, but it is clearly not encouraged – yet. Those young nurses we saw in school, both the women and the men, and the school principal who is a woman and a priest, will begin to change social expectations about proper employment and leadership for people of both genders. It doesn't happen overnight.

When I was a young graduate student, and first served as chief scientist on a research vessel, the captain wouldn't speak to me. He was grossly offended that a woman was on *his* ship, and he certainly didn't think she should be giving him directions. Thirty years later we have made progress there as well, though we still have a long way to go. I'll warrant that there's an archbishop or two around who feels exactly the same way.

Margaret Parker had a remarkable and transformative ministry here, and her work continues to bless , many lives. Consider what she might have done if she'd had the advantage of a full university education. And then consider how many lives right here in Los Angeles are limited by lack of access to the resources needed for abundant life. When women and girls, equally as men and boys, have access to those blessings, here and around the world, we will indeed live in a transformed society. May your kingdom come, O Lord, and speedily.