Labor of Love

Every Member in Ministry: You Were Made for More

Exodus 1:8-10, 13-21

Mothers Day, May 12, 2019

By

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I grew up in a home with strong women. My grandmother was “Rosie the Riveter” who worked at Douglas Aircraft during World War II in Long Beach riveting the cockpits of airplanes for the war effort. This Mother’s Day, I thought I might share a story of my own mother, Barbara Vinson O’Grady, who turned 90 years old last summer, and has been on our prayer list for several years because of her Alzheimers Disease diagnosis. She grew up in Alhambra in the 1930s. Both her parents worked ten-hour days, six days a week during the war, so my Mom with her sister had to raise their younger brother and take care of the household chores even before she was a teenager. As World War II came to an end, she enrolled in a program at UCLA to train nurses, leaving high school early to take advantage of the opportunity.

During the training she became ill with pneumonia and it took several weeks for her to recover. Barely back on her feet, she was instructed to report to LA County Hospital for the night shift. Since she was only a nurse in training, she assumed she would be shadowing a real nurse. Upon arrival she learned that she was the “real nurse” responsible for the entire floor and, with one aide, was expected to provide care for 14 fresh post-operation patients. It scared her to death. So she began by praying the Lord would get the two of them through the night with everyone still alive in the morning. There was no time for self-pity. And so get to work she did. They did make it through the night with every patient still alive the next morning.

Eventually, my mother went on to graduate school and to teach public health nursing in several university settings. She joined the Board of Governors that oversaw operations at the University of Minnesota Hospitals, and then became chair of that board. Next she was appointed to the Metropolitan Health Board that oversaw healthcare throughout the entire metro area, becoming chair of that board, all while directing Ramsey County’s public health nursing programs. I’m bragging just a little here about my mom. But my point is that she found her voice, and discovered her resolve to never let fear motivate her that night in LA County Hospital, at the tender age of nineteen. First you pray, and then you do the best you can with what you have.
Women have had a more difficult time discovering their own voices in many instances. Take ministry in the Church for example. Though the Presbyterian Church has been ordaining women since 1956, many young women grew up never actually seeing an ordained woman minister of Word and Sacrament.

Lillian Daniels is a pastor now in a Congregational Church, but during her graduate training in seminary, she found herself as a chaplain in a mental hospital giving her first sermon to five patients. One kept demanding that they pray to Princess Grace. Finally Lillian Daniels said, “You can pray for Princess Grace and other heads of state, but not to her, because that would be crazy . . . Not that I’m calling you guys crazy in a bad way or anything. I mean, yes, you are in the psych unit of course, but who am I to judge?”  

They just glared at her long enough that her voice trailed off in mumbling, so she just started reading her prepared sermon, complete with footnotes and block quotes without any emotion. “Plain and monotonous would fit the patient’s intellectual estimation, to the level of the cold, dispassionate academics whom everyone listened to.”

It didn’t go well. Despite her best efforts, as the weeks progressed the patients didn’t listen to her or take her seriously. She concluded it was for two reasons: she didn’t wear a clerical collar (because she wasn’t yet ordained) and they were mentally ill. Then she added a third: they were sexist. She writes, “Looking back, I see now that I was vaguely right but I had them all reversed. The patients’ primary barrier to listening to me was indeed their mental illness. But as to who was delusional, it was me on the subject of clerical collars. Once I got a chance to wear one after being ordained, I realized my chaplain supervisor had been right. My voice was not transformed by a costume any more than it was amplified by mimicking my professors. And as to their so-called sexism, I came to miss the patients’ refreshing candor once I was ordained into the polite world of church clergy politics, which mostly had the good manners to keep its sexism to itself.”  

Lillian Daniels has become a much sought-after preacher throughout the country. But she had to first find her own voice, and then learn to use it.

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2 Ibid. pg. ix
3 Ibid. pg. ix-x
Nancy Lammers Gross, a preaching professor at Princeton Seminary, writes, “I know women who have fire for the gospel pent up in their bones, but since they are not allowed to preach from the pulpits of their own churches, they have shrunk their voices to fit the size of their assigned roles.”

Fitting into their assigned roles was not the legacy of Shiphrah and Puah in these texts from Exodus. God uses what is weak and despised to shame the strong in this divine irony, and it transforms our understanding of strength entirely. The story of Exodus transitions from one of family to one of nation. The Genesis story is about the family of Abraham and Sarah and their children. But now the blessing of Genesis, that the Creator God will “. . . make of you a great nation . . . and all the families of the earth will be blessed”, is coming to fruition. But it is threatened by this major effort to subvert what God has done. “A sign of blessing for Israel is a sign of disaster for Pharaoh. The new king of Egypt counters God’s life-giving work with death-dealing efforts. A life-supporting situation becomes life-threatening.”

God’s extraordinary creative activity is set against “this life and death struggle in which the future of the creation is at stake.”

Ironically, at the core is the question whether God’s people will serve their creator, the Lord God, or serve Pharaoh, or some other lesser god that eventually enslaves them. Pharaoh is preoccupied with Israel and their extraordinary growth. Unless that growth is curtailed, they may become a fifth column in time of war and escape. These Israelites become a matter of national security.

A recent article in the New York Times, talks about a New York City museum dedicated to the story of Auschwitz. “Mass murder takes central planning. Killing as a communal business, made widely lucrative by the Third Reich, permeates the first traveling exhibition about the largest German death camp, Auschwitz, whose yawning gatehouse, with its converging rail tracks, has become emblematic of the Holocaust.”

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4 Ibid. pg. xix
5 Fretheim, Terrence E., Exodus – Interpretation Series (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1991) p. 27
6 Ibid. p. 28
7 https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/08/arts/design/auschwitz-exhibition-review-holocaust.html
“By the end of the war,” says the museum audio guide, ”90 percent of Jewish children in occupied Europe had been murdered.“ Well-timed, during a worldwide surge of anti-Semitism, the harrowing installation opened Wednesday — the anniversary of the Allied victory in Europe — over three floors of the Museum of Jewish Heritage at the Battery, in sight of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. It strives, successfully, for fresh relevance, starting with its haunting rubric: "Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.”

The story of Shiphrah and Puah is “not long ago” and “not far away” either. Under slavery, subjects become objects. Those who are just being identified as a people, are about to lose their identity by becoming slaves of another. The irony is thick. Pharaoh is the first to recognize the children of Israel as a people and it highlights the fulfillment of God's promises. His concern to act shrewdly will be shown as complete folly as his policies again and again are turned to Israel's advantage. Pharaoh says more than he knows. The more he oppresses them the more they grow. God's people must pass in and through adversity on the way to the fulfillment of promises. And Pharaoh's tactics actually have the effect of furthering the fulfillment of God's promises.

Two midwives outwit the king. The king stoops to converse with two lowly Hebrew women, who are named while Pharaoh remains nameless. It is an uneven match as they find their voices and engage in creative disobedience. The Egyptians fear of the Israelites leads to their failure while the women's fear of the Lord (trust in the Lord) leads to their success. It's non-compliance with the law on humanitarian grounds rooted in a creation theology, much like the civil disobedience of the Civil Rights Movement that was founded upon the Constitution and biblical claim that “All are created equal and given certain inalienable rights, among them the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” These women are not leaders in the community, they are not persons of influence who could impact governmental policies. Yet they are not powerless. In the process of carrying out their mundane tasks, they have a profound effect on the future. God is at work through them. These women risk their lives and completely defuse the situation with boldness and cleverness. God's work of creation is accomplished in and through them.

This Mother’s Day we hear the story of Shiphrah and Puah, two women who were at their best in the worst of times. Their courage and determination, their cleverness and creative disobedience won the day and created a way for Moses to survive the holocaust of that day. It was women

8 Ibid.
who saved the day then and still do today. It was women who first witnessed the resurrection and provided testimonials. And it was women who first showed up and were the last to leave Jesus.

Never think for a moment that what you do is insignificant, whatever it is, whether mundane routines or facing your fears in a hospital, or finding your voice in a pulpit, or challenging the powers that be. God can and will work through you to bring about his life-saving and life-giving purposes. Find your voice and use it as creatively and cleverly as you can. That’s why you have a voice! Use it. We are, all of us, in a position to help bring God’s new life into the world. It’s a labor of love. Like my mother’s advice, first pray and then do the best you can with whatever you have.

When we talk about “every member in ministry” here at SMCC, we mean to say that the ministry of Jesus Christ in and through this church depends much more on you than it does on the clergy. God uses what is seemingly insignificant to accomplish the impossible, God’s own life-giving purposes. God will use you, if you just place your trust in him. Amen