

“Honoring the Faithful: The Prophetic Sisterhood”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

February 26, 2012

From: *Prophetic Sisterhood* by Cynthia Grant Tucker

Walking behind this pioneer band and singing their song for them now, we hear in its text an ongoing narrative telling of shared destinies and discern that its subjects were not stray eccentrics or characters who moved through plots that were theirs alone. Indeed, these women themselves understood that theirs was a fluid community with a common experience that transcended time and place. [T]he record of these prophetic sisters serves to remind us that ... where women have cast their lives in the terms that they ... have set for them[selves], their stories of struggle will speak to us of inspiring human achievement and bravery.

As a legacy, then, this shared history has no conclusion but only takes pause, defying the kind of closure that the world has too long imposed on the female destiny and bidding us all to create a freer, authentic narrative for the future.

.....

“In grateful memory of the pioneer religious liberals of Iowa. They dared to follow where truth led the way.”

The church lobby was transformed into the holy deluge that is Sunday morning. The First Unitarian Church of Des Moines was rocking. I wandered around taking it all in grateful for the opportunity to stand on the outskirts. Our Leap of Faith team had been working diligently since Friday afternoon – discussing and reflecting and looking around the place. But somehow I’d missed this brass plaque, “In grateful memory of the pioneer religious liberals of Iowa. They dared to follow where truth led the way.”

It’s not that I ever lost connection with the Iowa Sisterhood. When in seminary I read about them I felt I would be tethered to their memory forever more. But somehow, even when I saw the portrait of Mary Safford hanging in the sanctuary, it didn’t hit me.

This is where it all began.

This is the “this” of which I speak.

It is the late 19th century. Then and now, the Unitarian Mecca is not in Iowa. It is further east. Much further east. And the clergymen that populate that Mecca are pretty comfortable there. But still there were those in New England as well as some who had already ventured west – and by west, I mean Iowa, who very much wanted to spread Unitarianism’s good news. These

rugged souls stood within the radical arm of Unitarianism as the denomination continued to struggle to define itself theologically. As the writer describes, these were Unitarians who had “shuck[ed] off the old Christological elements and patriarchal features of deity that most Eastern liberals still clung to.”

I suspect that their theology would sound familiar and inviting to you. I suspect most Souls here and now would have felt at home there and then.

But guess what? There wasn't exactly a pack of east coast clergy beating a path out west.

The few male clergy serving congregations in the western states had broader perspectives of women's potential than did their colleagues in Boston. This was because they'd spent time enough on the frontier to witness women doing all sorts of things thought to be a man's purview. In the mid to late 19th century in Iowa one could find female dentists ... lawyers ... doctors – unheard of in New England but on the frontier all bets were off. The work needed doing and there were plenty of women who were willing and able.

Why not serve as ministers as well?

These women had a champion in Reverend Jenkin Lloyd Jones a man who had the humility and vision to know a good minister when he saw one – no matter their gender.

And these women came to serve. Quite a few of them felt a call to ministry at a very early age. Mary Safford and her friend Elizabeth Gordon were two of these. The first ones, in fact. In no time and in feminist tradition, they raised up younger women encouraging discernment of call. Then Safford & Gordon helped those younger women to hone the skills needed to successfully lead congregations of liberal religionists.

Their ministry was different. It was different because they were women. It was different because they were women and they had a clear sense of purpose and a determined sense of how to make real their vision.

How was their ministry different from their male colleagues?

They believed that the purpose of church was to emulate family life ... that the liberal church above all else should be homelike. That the congregation was really a “church family.” They built churches that were without tall steeples but rather more like the family home: flexible, inviting. While some groused – most of whom lived elsewhere – most others felt at home within this architecture.

These churches were not only the spiritual and religious centers of these fledging communities. They also became the cultural and learning centers. Not surprisingly, many of these women had begun their adult lives as teachers – of course, one of the few professions available to women at the time. Their skills as teachers easily translated into the ministry and they lost no time setting up programs for adults as well as the Sunday School programs set up for children.

They were so successful that from 1880 to 1913 the Iowa sisterhood planted and grew 20 Unitarian churches in the district.

Take a guess at how many new churches have been planted and grown in our district in the past 30 years.

They became the “ministers-at-large” in their communities. So for example, these ministers were frequently called upon to perform funerals for unaffiliated community members. Here is a story about one such funeral.

With Marion Murdock, Florence Buck was serving a congregation in Wisconsin when in 1904 a church trustee approached Florence. He was hesitant when he asked if she would take on this funeral. He explained that the deceased has been, “honest and upright” but that he had died of “drink owing to an inherited tendency.” The family, apparently embarrassed, had planned on holding the service in funeral parlor. But Florence Buck would have none of it. She insisted that the man be given a proper funeral at the church.

She described the service to her Sisters in ministry. She said that the church was full of people of every sort including the members of the Bartenders Union. She described the scene: “I looked into the faces of these men and it was evident that some of them had been bracing up for the occasion and that the bracing up had not been effectual.”

Many of those in attendance were young and as she spoke to them about character, discipline, hope, and love Florence felt that the chance to reach these folks was, as she said, “An opportunity [she] would not have given up to preach before the President and Senate of the United States.”

Does this story sound familiar? The philosophical underpinnings of what it means to be a spiritual and religious body? Does the theology resonate with you? As you look around at our sanctuary, at our steeple-less church building, do you feel these women smiling upon us? Does their commitment to hospitality that extended to all corners of their community resonate?

I think so. Let’s connect the dots from 19th century Iowa to present day New Hampshire.

I was visiting with my friend and colleague, the Reverend Barbara McKusick Liscord in Milford, NH where she serves the UU congregation there. Just before Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Barbara decided she wanted to do something different to commemorate Dr. King’s legacy. Something that put forward the cause of peace.

So she had what she thought was a small idea.

Barbara is increasingly concerned – as we all should be – about the health of our environment and specifically about our food. She thinks food should be wholesome, fresh, and accessible. So she had this idea that her congregation would partner with individuals and families who do not have the resources or the wherewithal to plant and tend back yard gardens.

Barbara called the folks that run the local social service agency and asked for their help in identifying neighbors who they thought would be interested. They agreed to do so, largely because Barbara had a relationship with them.

She thought that the congregation could build the raised beds. She thought that each individual and family involved in the program would be partnered with a church member who knew something about gardening and could serve as a mentor. They're starting small but the enthusiasm thus far indicates that a powerful ministry has been launched for both the congregants and for the neighbors they sought to support.

We can trace this type of ministry – from Milford, NH to New London, CT and hundreds of our sister congregations all over the United States – right back to Iowa. To Mary Safford, Elizabeth Gordon, Marion Murdock, Florence Buck, Caroline Barrett, Ida Hultin, Eliza Tupper Wilkes, Mary Colson among others.

How did their story end? You can guess. Eventually the Prophetic Sisterhood was displaced by male clergy, by those at the American Unitarian Association who believed, in Grant Tucker's words, that its lost institutional vigor would be regained by building a "manlier" ministry. The women who had founded and led congregations thereby growing the faith scattered to all parts of the country and took up community ministries. Their stories were nearly eclipsed until several of their journals emerged a generation later and Cynthia Grant Tucker took the time and care to write a book about them.

How did their story really end? In author's words, "As a legacy, ... this shared history has no conclusion but only takes pause, defying the kind of closure that the world has too long imposed on the female destiny and bidding us all to create a freer, authentic narrative for the future."

Faithful Unitarians all. Today, we give thanks for their courage, determination, compassion, and love.

Amen.