

“Three Women, and Many Others”

Luke 7:36-8:3

17 June 2007

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor
Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.” Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “Speak.”

“A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Prayer.

Three women,
Mary, Joanna, and Susanna,
and many others,
provided for them
out of their resources.

“If you ever want
to get something done
in the parish
turn to the women”
a former mentor once advised.
Men,
don't feel like this is a slam.
It isn't.

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Just take a look around
and you'll notice
the population is much
more heavily weighted
towards women.
Personally, I believe
it is much more manly
to bring your family to church
than it is to coach Sunday sports,
go to the beach,
mow the lawn,
or cook on the grill.

If you want something done,
turn to the women
of the church.
No doubt,
this is painting with a very broad brush,
making some general assumptions
about individuals;
which is always a set up
for being labeled
culturally or gender insensitive.
But in general;
it is true,
though we all know
here at Zion
we are blessed with many exceptions
to the rule.

Consider how blessed we are
here at Zion
with the work of our United Methodist Women.
They make it possible for us to
give away nearly a third of everything
... of everything we receive
each year
to support local, regional, national,
and international missions.
From missionaries in Cameroon
and gloves for the cold in Rochester
to pizza for a work crew,
the United Methodist Women of this parish
are the best anywhere.
Just as
Mary, Joanna, and Susanna,

and many others,
provided for Jesus and his disciples
the Mary's, Joanna's, and Susanna's
of our parish today
are continuing the mission
supporting the ministries of Jesus Christ
in that same tradition
two thousand years later.

But I do have two concerns
about the current state and status of women
in the parish today.

The first is that the average age
of the United Methodist Women has been
increasing for decades
and there isn't much room to continue this
trend.

The second is that
we should not allow the service nature
of the United Methodist Women
to become a self-limiting model
for leadership in the church.

First, let's talk about age.

There are many ways to explain the
demographics

... more women working,
less willingness to take on commitment,
not trusting institutional processes,
and others

that collectively conspire
to prevent younger women from joining the
ranks

of formalized United Methodist Women circles.
Instead, a delightful cottage ministry approach
is beginning to take form.

In place of raising money for missions
individuals maturing in today's church
are much more likely to be willing to
roll up the sleeves
and get their hands dirty
by doing missions.

One approach is not any better than the other;
doing the mission or
raising money to support the mission.

What is important

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is the commitment *to* missions
 ... the labor of ministry
 in the name of Jesus Christ.
 Instead of being branded
 "United Methodist Women"
 perhaps we would be more responsible
 to call ourselves
 "Women in Ministry."
 What do you think?

The church needs to grant permission
 to women in specific
 and everyone in general
 to be engaged in missions and ministries,
 using the gifts God has given you,
 on behalf of Jesus Christ.
 It shouldn't matter
 if you are raising money to
 support a work camp trip
 of if you're the one going
 on the trip to fix plumbing
 and hang a shingle.
 It shouldn't matter
 if you are the one at the monthly meeting
 or if you are a member of the choir
 or women's book group.
 What should matter,
 the only thing that should matter,
 is the commitment to Jesus Christ
 and his Kingdom.
 So,
 ask yourself:
 where do I see the need?
 what skills do I have to contribute?
 is this what God is calling me to do?
 In a permission church
 our only reply is
 what can we do to support your efforts?

The second area of concern
 I'm raising this morning
 regards how women often
 feel limited
 or marginalized
 by old paradigms for parish ministries.
 Men were the ordained pastors

and women's rolls were to serve
 at least, in women's circles or organizations
 at most, as a deaconess ...
 what was recognized as a
 church related social worker.
 Thankfully, gender barriers for women
 in pastoral ministry are being
 blown apart and scattered to the four winds.
 In today's world
 two-thirds of seminary students are women.
 The percentage of ordained women
 continues to rise,
 as it has done over the past two hundred years.
 The cultural landscape at the time of Jesus
 where men received all the attention
 and women only get a measly little paragraph
 addendum at the end of the parable
 is being changed to be more inclusive,
 more respectful, and, thankfully,
 more equal than it ever has been before.
 This is a good thing.
 There should not be one female
 in our pews
 who feels limited by a call into ordained
 ministry
 simply because of her gender.
 God has blessed this parish
 with an excellent roll model
 my predecessor, pastor Anne.
 The fact that we continue to think of her
 as a roll model
 tells me that all of us,
 present company included,
 still have a long ways to go.

One day,
 I pray for the day,
 the Pope will come to the insight
 that he could have been born a girl.
 On that day,
 the landscape will change
 and the tremors emanating from
 the Roman Catholic Church
 will be felt in the Protestant House as well.
 The doors that once served
 as barricades to women

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will be opened wide
 and made passageways
 for competent, excellent women
 pastoral leaders in the church.
 That will be a grand and glorious day.

In the mean-time,
 if you feel called into parish ministry,
 come and talk with me.
 Do not let age or gender be a barrier.
 We United Methodist may
 not be as repressed as our Roman brothers and
 sisters,
 but we still aren't perfect, either.
 If we truly believe our marketing tag line:
 "Open Hearts, Open Doors, Open Minds"
 then age, gender, even orientation
 should not be a barrier.

One thing that is for certain,
 each of us are called.
 Some are called to the ordained life,
 others are called to put to use
 our skills
 to support the mission and ministry
 of the Church.
 For some,
 those skills may be to contribute money,
 raise money,
 or discern where money should go.
 For others,
 those skills given by God
 are to pound a hammer,
 carve a turkey,
 play a piano,
 or run a sewing machine.
 What ever your call may be
 make a commitment ...
 make a commitment to put it to use,
 all in the name of Jesus Christ,
 all for the glory of God.

What is your call?
 Where is your commitment?
 The word of the Lord. Amen.