

“For ALL the Saints”

Ruth 1.1–18 & 22

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 2 November 03

Sometimes in the church we get a wicked case of collective amnesia, forgetting the stories of women: the heroic or horrific tales of women in the Bible and the stories of women in Christian history. We even forget women in the language we use when we pray or we sing. So, I think we need to be intentional about recapturing the hidden histories of women and about re-imagining the female aspects of the divine.

The story of Ruth is central for us in displaying the qualities of God that are reflected in humanity: loving-kindness, loyalty, commitment, devotion, hanging in when the going gets tough. Interestingly, this is a passage that often is used in the marriage of a woman and a man, though the story itself is about the relationship of two women: a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. It may be easy for us to see that the story goes beyond gender, which is why it’s used in opposite-sex weddings, but then why don’t we ascribe other stories about women similarly to both genders? (We don’t do this with Mary and Martha or Delilah, do we?)

The stories of women in the biblical tradition are often powerfully wonderful ... *or awful*. The images of Ruth (loyal, devoted, loving) and Esther (savior of the Jews in Persia) and Mary (mother of God) are juxtaposed with Delilah, Jezebel, and Mary Magdalene. The various books that comprise the Bible are *mixed* in their portrayal of women, and the Bible comes across as having an ambivalent voice about women: their personhood and their role as persons of faith. (Paul says both that there is “no male or female”¹ in Christ, but also that “women should be silent in the churches”²) If that’s not a mixed message, I don’t know what is. Paul, like all the rest of us, is a very human bundle of contradictions.

The inescapable fact remains that the Bible is the product of two highly patriarchal societies: ancient Israel and the first-century Roman Empire. So, what are we to do with this product of the ancient Near East, a culture that was light years away from our own? We do what all people do when they read scripture: we *interpret*. I tend to ask three questions when I read scripture: What does the text **say**? What did it **mean** in the historical context in which it was written? And what how does it **speak** to us in our setting today? Or in shorthand: *says – meant – means*.

I had another phone call this week from another angry fundamentalist, who wanted to save my soul by changing my mind on a number of theological points. And this fellow insisted that he didn’t *interpret* scripture, but reads it as the very words of God, transmitted directly onto paper. I asked whether he observed the kosher laws in Leviticus, and he replied that he didn’t have to because Paul says that we are no longer bound by the law.³ Fair enough...but how then does he justify condemning gay and lesbian folks on the basis of Leviticus? It’s **his** interpretation. We all interpret!



So, what about women in the history of the church? Well, that’s certainly a mixed bag, too. But, I want to introduce you to some of our foremothers in the faith, from the early church, the middle ages, and the modern era, so that you can hear *their* voices.

¹ Gal 3.28

² I Cor 14.34

³ Rom 7.6

How many of you have heard of a mother of the early church named Thekla? There is a short text 2nd century text you can get online called “The Acts of Paul and Thekla,” which details some of the faithful heroics of an early Christian woman. Thekla was an aristocratic woman who decides to follow Paul, renouncing her family and her fiancé – that’s acting out in a patriarchal society. Thekla becomes a traveling missionary and lives out her life teaching the gospel. Here’s a brief extract: “Then Thekla arose and said to Paul, I am going to Iconium. Paul replied to her, Go and teach the word of the Lord. But Trifina [a rich widow] had sent large sums of money to Paul, and also clothing by the hands of Thekla for the relief of the poor.”⁴

Is this the image you have of women in the early church? Preaching and teaching and bankrolling the church? It was significant enough to cause Tertullian, a North African bishop of the second century to offer this caustic reply: “But if they claim writings which are wrongly inscribed with Paul’s name – I mean the example of Thecla – in support of women’s freedom to teach and baptize, let them know that a presbyter in Asia ... [created a pseudonymous letter from Paul and was forced to resign] his position. For how consonant would it seem with faith the he should give woman the power to teach and baptize, who consistently refused permission to woman even to teach?”⁵ (Tertullian didn’t know that many of the epistles attributed to Paul are thought to have been written by someone else, using the authority of Paul’s name.)

Jumping ahead nearly a thousand years, have you become acquainted with Hildegard of Bingen? Well, you’ve been singing her words for several months now: “O Holy Spirit, Root of Life.” In addition to being a gifted musician and composer, Hildegard produced major works of theology and visionary writings, and was consulted by and advised bishops, popes, and kings. She attributed her abilities to movement of the Holy Spirit, writing, “Praise to you, Spirit of Fire! To you who sound the timbrel and the lyre. Your music sets our minds ablaze! The strength of our souls awaits your coming. There the mounting will give the soul its savor and desire is its lantern. Insight invokes you in a cry, full of sweetness, while reason builds you temples as she labors at her golden crafts.”

Moving ahead to the 14th century, how many of you are familiar with the English mystic, Julian of Norwich? Julian was an anchoress, a lay person living a solitary life in the Church of St. Julian in Norwich, England. Not much is known about Julian, other than from her writings about her experiences of the divine. Here are her words from *The Revelations of Divine Love*: “But I did not see sin. I believe it has no substance or real existence. It can only be known by the pain it causes. This pain is something, as I see it, which lasts but a while. It purges us and makes us know ourselves, so that we ask for mercy. It is true that sin is the cause of all this pain, but all shall be well; and all shall be well; and all manner of thing shall be well.”

In our own tradition, one of the women who stands in the forefront is Anne Hutchinson, who was the central figure in an early challenge to Puritan authority in Boston. She held meetings in her home for Bible, study prayer, and discussion of recent sermons. (I guess they didn’t have sermon talk back at First Church in Boston in 1637.) The patriarchy was threatened by this woman, whose theology was “fundamentally at odds with Puritanism’s Reformed doctrines.” She was tried and then banished to Rhode Island because of her extreme views on grace and law. The charge was that she “maintained a meeting and an assembly in your house that hat been condemned by the

⁴ translation by Jeremiah Jones on www.pbs.org

⁵ Tertullian, on baptism, *A New Eusebius*, p. 172.

general assembly as a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex.”⁶

It took our Congregational forbears over 200 years to transform their views of women enough to ordain Antoinette Brown Blackwell in 1853. She was one of the first women to study theology at Oberlin (where Jim Taylor went to divinity school), though her presence there made waves. She was known for a feminist reading of Paul’s epistles, especially the passage from Galatians I referred to earlier. Though she was ordained as a Congregationalist, the Rev. Mrs. Blackwell also served in Unitarian churches.

So, the church’s history and our denomination’s history with regard to women is ambivalent at best. But, if you think of nothing else, remember the women who are our foremothers in the faith. And when we sing “Faith of our fathers, living still...” let’s remember, too, the faith of our mothers and the ways it has shaped us.

Language is important, because it reflects the inner ideas that we hold, and it makes ideas visible. One of the reasons I use the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (the one in our pews and in our lectern) is that when the text speaks “generically” of brother, man, mankind, and forefather, the translators use brother and sister, humankind, and forbear. (It still uses the singular masculine pronoun, he, for God where the text reflects that.)

Let me take a quick poll: how many of you are women? (%?) Traditionally, it has been the women who have done the most to keep the church afloat. It was the Ladies’ Missionary Aid societies that funded our missionary ventures in the 19th century, and women continue to have a predominant presence in the pews. And if you look around Plymouth, you find women in all kinds of leadership roles: on staff and on church council women are in the majority, including our moderator, Marge Norskog.



So, all of this begs the question: what about God: does God have a gender? What do you think?

A really fine German theologian of the Old Testament, Erhard Gerstenberger, writes that “We ascribe to God characteristics and behaviors similar to those with which we are familiar. Fundamentally, God is ‘totally other.’ But from our limited perspective God acts like a ‘good father.’ ... Wherever people make statements about God, their own situation gets mixed up with the divine image. Age, gender, occupation, social status, every one of the theologian’s life experiences colors his or her portrayal of God.”⁷

And that was absolutely true for the people who wrote the Bible. They were recording *their* experience of the divine presence...yet, it was their experience of God in the context of a patriarchal society. If we are striving toward a new vision, Paul’s vision of a world where ethnicity, gender, and social status become irrelevant to our faith, we need to re-imagine God.

We need the richness of biblical metaphors for God: mother eagle, rock, potter, shield, father, and all the others. And perhaps we need new metaphors for God, as well. One of my favorites comes from *Star Wars*: I often think of God as “the force.” In fact, when Obi Wan Kenobi says, “The force be with you,” I always want to reply, “and also with you.” No matter what image we use for God, she is bigger than any image.

The idea behind inclusive language for God is not that we strip away every reference to God the father, but that we include other metaphors as well. The ones we sang in that hymn by Brian Wren are rich: “Strong mother God, working night and day,

⁶ LTH, III, p. 49

⁷ Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch*, p. v.

planning all the wonders of creation...Young, growing God, eager, on the move, saying no to falsehood and unkindness.”⁸

So, my wish for you is that you will think of God in as many ways as your imagination will allow. God is bigger than any of our imaginings and closer than our very breath. And my wish for you is that when we talk about the 2,000-year history of the church, that you will remember **all** the saints, women and men.

Amen.

⁸ Brian Wren, “Bring Many Names,” NCH 11