

Old South Church in Boston

The fifth Sunday of Lent

April 7, 2019

Ally, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, based on John 12.1-8

It was a dinner party. It was a dinner party in Jesus' honor. The siblings—Mary, Martha and Lazarus—were putting it on for Jesus. It was their way of thanking him for having raised Lazarus from death. A dinner party was the least they could do. After all, what do you do for someone who has turned death into life, grief into celebration? What do you do for someone who reached far into the grave and brought your loved one back? The siblings settle on a dinner party.

Tablecloth, candles, delicacies. The lamb is on the grill. The baklava is prepared. The grateful siblings are turned out in their finest togs. The guests—and guest of honor—are chatting, laughing, sipping fancy aperitifs.

But, because the dinner party, as fine as it is, seems like a paltry thing in comparison to the magnitude of Jesus' gift to them, Mary aches to do more. Grilled lamb and her special baklava, even with tablecloth and candlelight, are not enough.

Maybe you've been there. Maybe you have been in a place of such high gratitude, such deep indebtedness, such wild relief, you'd *do* almost anything, *give* almost anything as a sign of how grateful you are.

Mary procures a vessel filled with a costly salve, an unguent made from pure nard (a flowering plant from the Himalayas of China; nard is good for almost everything: perfume, incense, sedative, herbal medicine). It is exotic, precious, and costly. Simply put, it is the finest thing Mary knows of. She hopes this will express the degree of her gratitude, her indebtedness.

Before dinner, vessel in hand, Mary approaches Jesus. She kneels. She anoints Jesus' feet with the exquisite substance. Released from the jar, the fragrance fills the home.

What?! yells Judas? What is she doing? The waste! The chatting ceases. The guests freeze. Judas's words cut. His loud, sharp scold cuts Mary to the bone. Mortified, Mary shrivels. Her face is flushed with embarrassment. She is humiliated in her own home.

All eyes are fixed on her. And those eyes – all except for her sisters – are all male. This is the first century. The Middle East. It's a man's world. Judas is an important man. He is Jesus' treasurer. Mary is seized by wrenching shame.

Then: *Leave. Her. Alone.* demands Jesus. Jesus stands and faces Judas. *Leave her alone!* Mary has an ally in the room; a friend, the guest of honor, no less. If Judas isolated and ridiculed her, Jesus' words pull her back in to the fold and envelop her. His words rescue her.

Two thousand years ago there lived a rabbi, a Middle Eastern male, who looked out for women, who was their ally and friend and confidant, their defender and champion, their intercessor and advocate.

In preparation for this morning I sat down and re-read all four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) with one question in mind: How does Jesus treat women? What was Jesus really like with women? What clues can we gain from this first century Middle Eastern man about how women fit into Christianity?

In *this* world in which female genital mutilation is practiced in Africa, Asia and the Middle East; in *this* world in which little girls in Afghanistan are attacked with acid for the crime of going to school; in *this* world in which Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, with their exclusively male priesthoods, are the dominant forms of Christianity around the globe; in *this* world where women are still paid less than men for the same work; in this *Me Too* world, a world of too much sexual harassment and assault; in *this* world: how and where do women fit into Christianity. How does Christianity regard women really?

After re-reading all four gospels with that single question before me, here is my conclusion: two thousand years ago there lived a rabbi, a Middle Eastern male, who looked out for women; who was their ally and friend and confidant, their defender and champion, their intercessor and advocate. What's more, he was their conversation partner in matters ethical and existential, in matters theological and practical.

If you fetch your archeological pickaxe and trowel, and if you dig down through layers of Christian patriarchy; if you dig down deeper than the year 300 of the Common Era; if you dig down deeper than the churchly Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople; if you dig down to the very time of Jesus, to the earliest stories of Jesus, you will unearth a revelation: two thousand years ago there lived a rabbi, a Middle Eastern male, who looked out for women; who was their conversation partner in matters ethical and existential, in matters theological and practical. Two thousand years ago there lived rabbi who challenged ancient conventions of patriarchy. Two thousand years ago there lived rabbi who was for women an ally and friend and confidant, defender and champion, intercessor and advocate.

It is little wonder that women were among the most stalwart of Jesus' followers. They served as disciples and evangelists, as teachers and preachers and deacons. Women were the first at the cradle and last at the cross. Women were the first to witness, the first to believe, and the first to tell the story of resurrection.

Is it any wonder our churches are filled with women who find in the life of the church a place and a home, a chance to lead, serve and shine?

One of our tasks this Lenten season – what we are calling a season of reckoning and repentance – is to give an accounting of our own church's complicity over three hundred and fifty years in systems that have and do perpetuate an unholy patriarchy. Here is my accounting of Old South Church on this score. On the positive side, women were among our founders in 1669 when a faction broke away from First Church in a dispute over baptism.

However, the names of our male founders are prominently listed in our history books, while the names of the women are not.

It was a woman, Madame Mary Norton, whose deed of land (well situated land) in 1669 made possible, and emboldened, the breakaway church. It is hard to imagine we would be here today, 350 years later, had it not been for Mary Norton.

We have among our members a list of women writers: Mother Goose (AKA Elizabeth Vergoose), Phillis Wheatley and more. These women raised their voices in ways available to them. Both literally, and literarily, these female writers changed the world.

In the early 1700's Old South member Samuel Sewall (a Harvard graduate and a prominent citizen) wrote and published an essay entitled *Talitha Cumi* in which he argued, biblically and legally, for women's rights.

On the other hand, I am still on the hunt for the earliest instance of a woman preaching from an Old South pulpit. Despite the forward leaning nature of this church across the centuries, I have not found evidence of a woman in the pulpit before the mid-1970s.

I also note that in the mid-19th century Old South preachers promoted "Muscular Christianity". Muscular Christianity is the actual name of a Victorian era philosophical and theological movement characterized by a belief in patriotism and the moral and physical beauty of athleticism, self-sacrifice, discipline and (wait for it) manliness. Sermons of that era, are studded with the words *manly* and *manliness*. It is hard to know how the women in the pews processed that in their own minds and hearts.

Today, throughout the life of our church, women are represented strongly in areas that were previously reserved for men: board of trustees, finance, clergy and other leadership positions. In addition, I am happy to report that men are prominently represented in areas previously reserved for women, for example, teaching Sunday School and cooking and preparing meals.

Today we are conscious of the social inequalities out there in the world and we do our level best to overcome them within the life of this church. We aim for the high ethic of equality to which Rabbi Jesus continues to call us.

A careful reading of the four Gospels (our primary source material for the study of Jesus) reveals that Jesus consistently and assertively acted the part of ally and up-stander (the opposite of by-stander) for those persons at the bottom of the social heap in the Middle East in the first century: women; the poor, the ill and the lame.

What does this mean for Old South Church in Boston on the eve of our 350th anniversary? May I suggest that as followers of this rabbi, we are called to mimic him in acting the part of allies and up-standers (the opposite of bystander). If you're not sure what this means, I've got some ideas.

If you are male, stand up for women! For Christ's sake, be an ally and up-stander.

If you are white, stand up for people of color! For Christ's sake, be an ally and up-stander.

If you are straight, stand up for LGBTQ folk! For Christ's sake, be an ally and up-stander.

If you are rich, stand up for the poor! For Christ's sake, be an ally and up-stander.

If you are well—if you have the great fortune of being hale and hearty—stand up for the ill and frail! For Christ's sake, be an ally and up-stander.

If you are human, stand up for God's voiceless, imperiled creation! For Christ's sake, be an ally and up-stander.

If anyone asks you: What gives you the right to mess with the status quo? Tell them about Rabbi Jesus. Tell them that two thousand years ago there lived a rabbi, a Middle Eastern male by whom time itself is divided, a man who looked out for dispossessed and disenfranchised, a man who was in every way their ally and friend and confidant, their defender and champion, their intercessor and advocate.

Tell them about Rabbi Jesus. Then do better than that. Show them. Summon Christly courage: be an ally and up-stander.