

TOGETHER WE GROW: THE GIFTS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN; ACTS 16:1-5; MARK 10:13-26; 11.8.09; THY/WPC

Their contributions were remarkable by any measure. Many are familiar – Sarah and Miriam – the better halves of Abraham and Moses; Esther, for whom a book of the Bible is named and saved her people from extermination; Mary, the mother of Jesus; Mary Magdalene, utterly devoted to Jesus; Martha and Mary – the sisters of Lazarus.

But there are also the names that ring only a distant bell. Their deeds less famous but no less spectacular.

Deborah – Israel’s only female judge; a leader of the troops, prophetess and poet. Jael – who used her charm and a tent peg to assassinate a ruthless warlord bent on Israel’s destruction; Judith who used her charm and the very sword of a treacherous general to kill him and end his threat to God’s people. These were not fainting wall flowers.

Rachel and Leah, competitive sisters, wives of Jacob, mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Rahab who ran an unpretentious little establishment in the red light district and hid the spies of Joshua who’d come to gather intelligence on Jericho before the walls came tumbling down.

Rebecca, mother of Jacob and Esau who fiercely fought for Jacob’s blessing. The witch of Endor – a fortune teller who clued in Saul to his ominous fate. Queen Vashti, a feminist before her time who refused to be King Haman’s sex-object.

And those are only a few of the women of biblical record. Not to mention the women Jesus met on the dusty roads of Galilee: the woman at the well; the woman with a hemorrhage; the woman whose daughter was possessed of an evil spirit to name a few.

Their stories are as full of suspense as a summer beach novel and vastly superior to anything so-called reality TV has to offer.

What distinguished them was their willingness to put themselves on the line, repeatedly against all odds, for the purposes of God.

In doing so they are as impressive as their male biblical counterparts; as fearless as the boy David; as cunning as Jacob; as true as the beloved disciple; as loyal as Peter and Paul.

As we move through these weeks of fall toward November 22, Dedication Sunday when we will make our financial commitment in response to God’s many blessings upon our lives – we remember and celebrate today God’s blessings we have received in the gifts of women and children.

Any such accounting, ought to begin with the women of the bible – about whom we know far too little; were it not for them there may be no story to tell. In the Old Testament they embody a frontier spirit, in the New Testament they are the exemplars, more than anyone, of faith itself.

But before we turn to Lydia and some contemporary women I’d like to consider a strange anomaly.

It was a stunning fact that the early Christian movement turned the political and domestic arrangements of the ancient world on their head.

Suddenly, in the new Christian family and society, men and women held equal status. The patriarchal bias of the world at the time was muffled for a moment as those first Christians treated one another equally regardless of their worldly status. 'In Christ is neither male nor female, slave nor free but all are one,' wrote the Apostle Paul. Those first Christians believed and lived that truth.

Unfortunately, their early experiment did not last. Men were elected representatives of the early churches; men met in councils to debate church theology and polity; men decided to exclude women from the first circles of leadership. Only in recent times has the male dominance of organized religion been called into question and changed.

This is ironic because the very words used to depict the God of the Old and New Testaments include an abundance of female pronouns and metaphors.

It is odd that with so excellent a tradition of women role models that fill the pages of Scripture, and the feminine qualities of the Divine embedded in the original languages including the stories of Jesus, it is odd and a serious injustice that women were methodically excluded from the organizational hierarchy and decision-making.

It took a sustained, concerted effort for the church to close its mind and the doors of opportunity to its own female leadership.

But despite the barriers and obstacles before them, women have stepped forward to give and serve and lead in ways that have saved the mission of the church time and again.

Take Lydia. It would be hard to find a more relevant example for us. She was a trader of fine textiles; an affluent businesswoman; a homeowner with a house full of servants.

She lived in Thyatira, gateway to Asia Minor and Europe. Because she appeared to hear Paul preach, because she was converted and baptized, then offered her home and resources to the Apostle to help spread the good news, we are here today. God used her to reach a continent.

I say her example is relevant because she was a professional woman of at least middle class means and used her financial resources to further God's cause.

Lydia's financial support and the use of her home gave the Apostle exactly the resources he needed at exactly the right time to continue to spread the news that death was defeated and God was reaching out to all people.

It's too bad money has become tainted in some church circles. It is a tool and a symbol. It can be used boldly and extravagantly or sparingly and hesitatingly. And while Jesus said we cannot serve two masters, God and money, he went on to talk about our use of money as a barometer of our faith. The subject of money shows up more in the New Testament than any other topic – probably because it is so tempting to think that money and not God is our ultimate security.

Lydia found her ultimate security in the message Paul preached and she didn't hold back. In fact, she wasn't even solicited but stepped forward on her own to offer what she had.

You see, her life was changed by the message that death no longer ruled the world. The account of Jesus' death and resurrection filled a deep absence and quenched a deep fear in her. She resolved to do anything so others could find the same hope.

That's the kind of gift that started and kept the church running for two thousand years. A Lydia gift, given so that others can find life and hope.

It's not surprising we've had our own Lydia-givers here at Westminster over our century and a half. **Miss Emily Holmes** who became a member in 1870 and served as the director of Westminster House on the East Side of Buffalo when young immigrants, some of them no more than teenagers, were struggling to learn parenting and housekeeping skills in a strange new land.

Mrs. Mary Reed whose Sunday School class over a half century ago was an institution. She gave each student a red-letter bible bound in olive wood from the Holy Land as well as the Miracles window in this sanctuary. She is recalled as lovingly as any pastor who served this congregation. **Dottie Millard** of our own time and her right arm **Grace Rich**. Dottie inherited the leadership of the early childhood program as a temporary assignment from Dr. Butzer and transformed it into what it is today – the gold standard for early childhood education in Western New York.

Esther Crane and **Becky McNeill** were our first female elders which took the strength of those biblical women when you consider that they served a session of 32 elders 31 of whom were male, probably dressed in suits and ties. Esther was instrumental in putting the interior life – the life of spiritual formation – on our congregational radar.

There are many more I could mention. Maybe should mention. But the point is we've been blessed with women members and staff, whose gifts were given like Lydia's because they wanted to spread life in a world of death.

And we have lots of Lydias in this very room today.

Women who've been blessed and want to be a blessing to others.

And children. The mission of the church from the very beginning was to widows and orphans – the most vulnerable of society.

It's safe to say that every child is a gift to the life of any congregation that child belongs to.

It wasn't their innocence Jesus pointed out but their unreserved trust. Trust he said God wanted to build a kingdom on. The trust the children of this congregation (and their parents) place in you and me to be the church is not only a gift of priceless value, it could call out the very best we have in us, if we let it.

Westminster is blessed with an abundance of children in our Sunday School, in our after school tutoring program, in the early childhood programs.

That's a lot of trust for a church to live with and be responsible for. The question is what we intend to do with it. In a way, it's like those talents the master gave to his servants.

If what they discover here is that their trust in God and in God's people to be a tangible force for good in the world is validated, we will have touched the future through these boys and girls when they grow to adulthood.

If we take seriously the gift of this day, the gift of one another, the gift of women and children – it's really quite overwhelming.

Responding to such blessings could reorder our priorities, our values, our sense of what we are doing here in the first place.

Lydia opened a whole continent with her response to the news that death no longer ruled the world. What continents is God trying to open up through you and me and the witness of this congregation? A new city? A new Western New York? You can almost hear them: Sarah and Miriam, Rachel and Leah, the woman at the well, Emily Holmes and Mary Reed, Dottie and Grace, Esther and Becky...trust, serve, give without reservation they are saying to us today. Amen.