

The Stones Will Speak: Building a House of Spirit and Hope

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In Luke 19, we read, “The disciples began to rejoice and praise God, shouting about all the powerful acts that they had seen. . . . And some of the religious authorities in the multitude said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples,” He answered. “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” (Luke 19: 37, 39-40)

The anointing spirit is usually imagined as something that comes from above – dove, wind, fire, oil running down. But this passage speaks of an anointing from below, the spirit rising up from the earth itself. From the rocky, wayside, underfoot places the very stones will cry out.

This is what our foremothers did who spent their lives making our ordination possible. They pushed out of the tombs of exclusion and constraint that held their lives in check, and rose up from the earth. They came through the rock, breaking out of the tomb from inside by sheer exuberance, determination, and spirit – and it was just a beginning.

Thirty years ago when women first began entering the ministry in more numbers, most congregants had never experienced a woman as their pastor. Our presence changed things. Quietly at first, like a murmur of pebbles washed by a stream, women began to speak to women ministers about the realities of their lives. Male ministers had rarely been trusted with the difficult and often life-shatter-

ing truths about rape, battering, childhood sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancies, job discrimination. Theology and pastoral counseling textbooks were silent on these topics. But our presence created a space in which women spoke to us from the flinty, muteness of their hard lives and their resilient love. We learned from them and with them about what puts life at risk and how life can be saved.

I remember when Lucia came to see me. “Maybe because you are a woman priest you will understand my problem.” Her husband was beating her. “I went to my priest twenty years ago,” she said, “He told me I should rejoice in my sufferings because they would bring me closer to Jesus. He said if I loved my husband I’d bear the beatings just like Jesus born the cross. I’ve been trying to follow his advice, but now he’s going after the children.” She fixed her sad brown eyes on mine and asked: “Is what the priest told me true?”

For a moment I couldn’t speak. Just that past Sunday I’d preached a sermon about how love never breaks relationship, bears all things, endures all things, takes no thought for its own pain, but gives everything for the other. I knew that in order to answer Lucia’s question I would have to re-think my theology. I did find my voice, “God doesn’t want you to accept abuse. God wants you to live.” She smiled a big smile, “I knew I was right, but it helps to hear you say so!” Lucia went on to take the actions that protected her life and her children’s lives.

Because of our presence as women in ministry countless stories have been spoken, heard and responded to with transformed theologies, new understandings of pastoral care, and new work in Christian ethics. And we’ve brought these stories into the academy. There’s been an explosion of women’s scholarship in Biblical studies, preaching, justice work, eco-feminism, and economics that take women’s lives seriously. Through our ministry and scholarship stones that were rejected have become cornerstones. [Rocky places where we’ve rested our head have, like Jacob’s pillow, been raised up as marking stones, “This is none other than the house of God.”] Places of silence have become places of singing.

Now is no time for the music to stop. The theological creativity of women ministers and theologians is giving birth to deeper visions of salvation -- ones that direct us away from salvation through violent sacrifice and towards actions of love that honor the relational bonds of life; that respect our bodies, souls and minds as the good gift of God, sanctified and blessed; and that build just and sustainable communities.

I believe that through our shared efforts and leadership we will see the church become a house of living stones, built of the rocks from the wayside, reflecting all the colors and cultures of the earth. A house of spirit and a house of hope, rebuilt from the ground up.

To build this house of spirit and hope we must rethink our theology in many ways. Those of us who are white, for example, need to be thinking more deeply about habits of white privilege and benevolent paternalism through which we keep ourselves as the central narrator, the lead dancer, or the architect of the house. It just isn't always about us, white sisters, and when we don't get that we miss seeing how we can be part of writing a different story and dancing a different dance. I was aware of this need on Monday night when, in the midst of our beautiful worship service, our gifted dancers presented God as a white woman who pulled her black baby back when the child went after other gods moved by the beat of African drums. This is the script those of us who are white need to do our part to change, not replicate. We can learn from such moments and we must.

The bold future of our ministry and our theological work will arise as we form richer understandings of love from the rough earth of our experience, molding from the clay of our struggles new shapes of love that move beyond benevolent paternalism, beyond pieties of self-sacrifice, and beyond salvific schemes that are nothing more than cultural imperialism and uncritical complicity with old patterns of injustice.

To build the house of spirit and hope, we need to listen more deeply and think more carefully about what lesbian, bisexual and transgender clergywomen are saying. LGBT people are revealing the face of the Spirit in new ways. Unfortunately, at the moment, our denomination censors the witness of women in ministry who live in loving committed partnerships with other women. Had this consultation created a space for the explicit voices of LBT clergywomen, it might have risked a loss of funding or exposed people to being brought up on charges.

This active silencing is something we've lived with for a long time now. Women have found courageous and subversive ways to speak their truths. Did you hear the new knock knock joke? I say, knock knock. You say, Who's there. Answer: I'm not supposed to tell and you aren't supposed to ask. But the point I want to make is theological: When the church silences the voices that arise from the body of our lives, from the earthy reality of who we are, it hampers the testimony that makes God known. It binds the spirit, constrains revelation. It places the church in the role of the religious authorities who told Jesus to silence his disciples.

The statement in our United Methodist Discipline on “Our Theological Task” says the witness of Christian experience is a primary source of our theology. It doesn’t work to make this affirmation and then turn around and pass legislation that prohibits us from consulting this source! The church must be willing to know love’s name and hear love’s voice if we are to witness to love in our preaching and teaching. The Bible says, “Thou shalt not bear false witness!” So let us not leave this convocation without the following simple truth being said:

We would not have full ordination rights for women in the United Methodist Church today were it not for the women who loved women, were it not for our lesbian foremothers and sisters who have been our advocates, our mentors, our seminary professors, and our ministers. These are beloved ones of God whose faithfulness to the church has far outdistanced—so far—the church’s faithfulness to them.

Let’s also not leave this convocation without lifting up the witness United Methodist women are making about the hidden face of war. What women know about war must inform and transform our ministries now and in the future if we are to build a house of spirit and hope.

Here’s what prompted me to listen and think more deeply. One year in the parish I served, a conflict broke out between the younger women in our church and the women of the Wednesday Bible class. The younger women had proposed a project to raise public awareness of the growing stockpile of nuclear weapons in the world by placing posters on the city’s buses. The Women’s Bible Class – women who’d been meeting together for 40 years – objected. “The church is spending too much of its energy working on political issues,” they said, “and besides, why should we be raising questions about military strategy? It isn’t our place.” But then Myrtle called a halt to this talk. “How can you say we have no place having an opinion about this?” She looked around the table at her sisters in the Bible class. “Every one of us here knows that our men came home for World War II broken. We’ve spent our lives holding together the pieces that war broke. We did our best to take care of them as well as our children. And never speaking of it, always saying it was a good war. We know there is no such thing as a good war.” After that, the all the women of the church came together to support the poster project.

[In Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*, Jesus’ mother Mary is depicted as grieved but not outraged by his death. She suffers with him, but she accepts the necessity of his crucifixion. This portrayal of Mary embodies what Christian theology since the crusades has pictured as women’s proper role in relationship to the divine requirement that God’s son and our sons and daughters be sacrificed: mute

acceptance. But women are changing this now. Women are telling the truth about the harm war does on all sides, to the environment, to children, to culture, to the souls of all it touches.]

United Methodist lay woman, Celeste Zappala, has co-founded Gold Star Families for Peace, with Cindy Sheehan to give voice to families who've lost loved ones in this war. [Celeste's United Methodist faith rings clear and strong in her public words. She always communicates deep respect for soldiers and military families. She honors her son Sherwood's commitment to service that led him to join the National Guard in 1997. But she questions the morality and legality of the U.S. war against Iraq. For her, love is something more than self-sacrifice, and service is about assertively caring for life not submitting in mute obedience to folly and violence.]

Celeste writes, "When we buried Sherwood on May 4, 2004, I knelt beside his coffin and vowed I would not be quiet, that I would speak the truth for him. We can't hide from our dead, or from the facts. We have to take responsibility for what's happening and insist on an end to the lies and killing."

[She goes on: "This has been a rough trip for all of us, and nothing we can write or say or do – no amount of logic or righteousness gives us the thing we want most, the lives of our sons -- the chance to see them grow old and have lots of kids, the chance to share holidays and silly conversations and most of all to hold them and tell them we love them. That has all passed away with them. Believe me when I tell you that despair is a companion who always seeks us out, beckons and awaits at the corner. And the force that bows that despair is the powerful love of the community] . It really boils down to this, that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in to a single garment of destiny – what affects one affects us all. Love is more than an active word: It is indeed the only power we possess, and it is also the challenge to hatred and stupidity. [We take strength and inspiration from each other, facing the tasks that lay ahead-promising to hold each other up, while we all walk by faith not sight on the path that someday leads to that promised land, the place that King dreamed of and prophets described and that whispers to the human heart when despair is strangling us. The place where love triumphs and the garment is complete."]

Celeste embodies a different understanding of a mother's love—born not in medieval crucifixion theology, but from her life experience at the United Methodist Church of Germantown, Pennsylvania. She is a strong stone crying out, showing that fierce love protests theologies of redemptive violence. Holy mothers do not bow their heads in pious gratitude for death. Instead, they call for accountability, justice and peacemaking as the true face of love.

This is what the stones from the wayside are making audible: The voice and face of love. This is the voice that calls us into the future and it is singing, “Oh, I keep so busy working for the kindom I ain’t got time to die.”

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