

Tree of Life, Sunday, March 1, 2015

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship.

– Louisa May Alcott

Reading Matthew 26:6-13

Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head, as he sat at table. But when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for a large sum, and given to the poor.”

But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.

Lyrics to “Tree of Life,” by Eric Peltoniemi

(Note: These are all the names of quilting patterns.)

Beggar's Blocks and Blind Man's Fancy,
Boston Corners and Beacon Lights,
Broken Stars and Buckeye Blossoms
Blooming on the Tree of Life.

Chorus: Tree of Life, quilted by the lantern light,
Every stitch a leaf upon the Tree of Life.
Stitch away, sisters, stitch away.

Hattie's Choice (Wheel of Fortune), and High Hosanna (Indiana),
Hills and Valleys (Sweet Wood Lilies)
and Heart's Delight (Tail of Benjamin's Kite),
Hummingbird (Hovering Gander) in Honeysuckle (Oleander),

Blooming on the Tree of Life.

We're only known as someone's mother,
Someone's daughter, or someone's wife,
But with our hands and with our vision,
We make the patterns on the Tree of Life.

Sermon: *Tree of Life*

(c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

I have inherited a number of quilts, some of them from my grandmother, who pieced worn out pajamas, dresses, and shirts into designs to warm her family. I imagine she could have looked at her quilts and told you which part of whose lives the various patches came from, but those stories are lost to me now.

Some of the quilts are steeped in even more mystery, like the pink and white quilt I have been told is “the Cape quilt.” The Cape quilt came through the Stocker line of Cape Cod fishermen. Or, to be more precise, a mother, daughter, or wife of one of those Cape Cod fishermen. I don't know who made it or for what occasion.

Two quilts came from Steve's aunt Althea. Althea didn't make the quilts; she rescued them from a neighbor who was throwing them out. The neighbor had pieced the fronts of them, but had never added batting or backs. A good Maine Yankee, Althea was horrified at the thought of the quilts going into the trash, so she took them, planning to finish them. But after they sat on her sewing pile for a number of years, she gave them to Steve's mother, who also planned to complete them. They sat in Steve's mother's sewing pile for many years before she gave them, unfinished, to me. Me! I own a sewing machine. That's the extent of my quilting experience. So I paid a quilter, whose name I no longer remember, to finish the quilts.

So many sisters creating those quilts! And so many stories lost.

Whenever I hear the song “Tree of Life,” I think of all those women – named and nameless – whose stitched pieces have warmed me through the years.

*We're only known as someone's mother,
Someone's daughter, or someone's wife,*

*But with our hands and with our vision,
We make the patterns on the Tree of Life.
Tree of Life, quilted by the lantern light,
Every stitch a leaf upon the tree of life.
Stitch away, sisters, stitch away.*

That has long been a favorite song of mine, for I feel those women in my heart. Even though my life has afforded me many more opportunities than most of my foremothers had, even though I have a voice they never had, they are part of my soul: I have a sense of just who they are, even in their silence, even with their untold stories, even with their unnamed names.

The legacy of contributions of unnamed, unrecognized women is so long as to appear endless. The story of the woman with the ointment is roughly 2000 years old. Here was a woman who saw exactly what was in store for Jesus. Her heart told her he would be killed, so she anointed his body with the costly oils normally used to prepare a body for burial. The Gospel stories, which often depict Jesus' disciples as a little clueless, tell us the disciples' names. But the name of the woman with the ointment, who knows exactly what is going on, is lost in the dust of history.

Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her, says Jesus. But who is she? How do we remember our nameless foremothers?

One way is to work for justice in their memory, to build a world that honors women, tells their stories, and provides them with equal rights.

March is Women's History Month. International Women's Day – otherwise known as International Working Women's Day – is one week from now.

The Socialist Party of America organized the first International Women's Day in 1909 to commemorate the 1908 strike of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Women%27s_Day)

That first celebration was two years before the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, which killed 123 women and 23 men. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangle_Shirtwaist_Factory_fire)

It was three years before the famous Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence Massachusetts – that of the slogan “a worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too,” (A worker deserved both fair wages and dignity.) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1912_Lawrence_textile_strike)

It was 10 years before the 19th amendment was passed, giving women the right to vote, 11 years before the amendment was ratified, and 13 years before women's right to vote was fully secured by the Supreme Court decision in *Leser v. Garnett*, on February 27, 1922. That case found that the women's right to vote applied even in states where the state constitution granted suffrage to men only. (How a Little Known Supreme Court Case Got Women the Right to Vote, by Lily Rothman, <http://time.com/3716603/leser-v-garnett/>)

Women were uppity 100 years ago! Organizing strikes and women's day celebrations, forming labor unions, daring to say that deplorable sweatshop conditions were inhumane, daring to say their lives and work were worth something, daring to say they should have a voice, a say, a vote. We owe much to their vision, their sense of outrage and justice, and their persistence.

Incidentally, many of those women – particularly the women working in the sweatshops – were immigrants. Today, as many in our country vilify immigrants, we might do well to remember that women owe much of their freedom and workplace safety to earlier generations of immigrants. A blessing be on their memories.

In my lifetime, many things have changed for the better for women. Doors opened to me that I never would have dreamed as a child. My second-grade teacher taught that girls grew up to be nurses or secretaries. Yes, right there in public school, that's what my teacher said. She also said girls were good in English and boys were good in math. But I have watched women enter professions my second grade school teacher would have been amazed to see: medicine, law, engineering, finance, industry, higher education.

Oh, and ministry. When I was a little girl I had never heard of a woman minister. When I felt called to the ministry during my teenage years, I had never met a women minister. Now more than 50% of ordained UU ministers are women.

In my lifetime, I have watched women's pay gradually climb from 59% to 78% of what men earn for equal work. In my lifetime, I have watched women begin to pursue education at unprecedented levels.

For the past 20 years, women college graduates have outnumbered men. Today, roughly 25% fewer men than women graduate from college. Women are more likely to complete graduate school, too.

Not all is rosy, however. In my lifetime, I have also witnessed the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment to be added to our Constitution. In my lifetime, I have witnessed women gaining reproductive rights, only to have them increasingly chiseled away in recent years. Consider the irony that in our country there are those lobbying for a personhood amendment granting equal protection to unborn children when the women whose bodies bear those children enjoy no such protection, explicitly.

Now, as ever, women are more likely to be poor than men are. Last fall the White House Council of Economic Advisers released a report that analyzed the gender gap. The report disclosed that women are still over-represented in the lowest paying jobs and are vastly under-represented in the highest paying ones. For college educated women and men, wage discrepancies begin almost immediately, with women being hired at lower pay and the pay gap widening as time goes on.

<http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2014/10/31/women-more-likely-to-graduate-college-but-still-earn-less-than-men>

And that's just a brief review of women in America. In some other areas of the world, women's rights are horribly circumscribed. Probably all of us can bring to mind the story of young Malala Yousefzai, shot in the head by the Taliban who attacked her on her school bus. Her crime? Advocating education for girls.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) – whose work we support with our Guest at Your Table collection – uses gender as a filter when determining which populations most need assistance. Noting the disproportionate human rights violations women suffer, the UUSC specifically focuses on:

- Denial of educational opportunities
- Gender-based violence and sexual harassment
- Limited livelihoods and substantial pay gaps for equal work

The UUSC partners with grassroots organizations in countries all around the world, including in the United States, that help women gain their rights. Here is just one example: In Darfur, the UUSC partners the Peaceful Families project to connect imams and women leaders. Together they provide a

theological context for women's rights, aiming to reduce domestic and gender-based violence. Because the imam has credibility in his community, the people listen to his word about such violence. Creating partnerships with imams thus is a critical step towards change.

(http://actnow.uusc.org/site/PageNavigator/womens_rights.html)

All over the world, the UUSC works on issues of women's health, safety, education, nutrition, rights to basic necessities like water, and fair compensation.

So, what does all this mean for our congregation? First – the obvious: With our congregational focus on ending inequality, we need to pay attention to what is happening to women – in finance, health care, education, safety, and job security.

Second– a challenge – or at least a perplexity: I have recently been reading a series of articles in the *New York Times* about women at work by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant. One of the articles, “Speaking While Female,” especially caught my attention. The article described a phenomenon familiar probably familiar to most if not all of the women in this room: the experience being interrupted and quickly dismissed when speaking in a meeting.

Sandberg and Grant write: *When a woman speaks in a professional setting, she walks a tightrope. Either she's barely heard or she's judged as too aggressive. When a man says virtually the same thing, heads nod in appreciation for his fine idea. As a result, women often decide that saying less is more.*

That phenomenon occurs everywhere, from the Board room to the Senate, to press conferences.

The authors noted that when President Obama held a press conference at end of 2014 and called on eight reporters – all of them women – it made international headlines. “Had a politician given only men a chance to ask questions, it would not have been news; it would have been a regular day,” Sandberg and Grant observed.

I have been thinking about that article for many weeks now, wondering how that phenomenon plays out in churches. Here people mostly listen to me; I am the minister, so my role plays a part in that. And I think this congregation is composed of sensitive, thoughtful people, too. But I wonder about the people who are not here. In my lifetime, as I have witnessed the number of women clergy increasing, I have also watched the number of men parishioners decreasing precipitously. Is there a connection? When I

was a child, the minister was always male, but the church leadership was also male. In fact, I remember how big a deal it was when my childhood congregation elected its first woman president. But now the population of our congregations is so predominantly female that it's hard to find men to serve in any volunteer capacity, much less as leaders.

Of course, there could be – and probably are – many factors for the shift in congregational demographics, but part of me has to wonder if some of it has to do with truly accepting a woman as a spiritual leader. I don't know the answer. I simply have the question: What does it really mean to listen to a woman, experiencing her as having credibility? Does our culture need to make some changes to bring women's voices to the table in equal measure to men's voices? How do we do that?

Third – the spiritual: I believe that when any group of people struggles disproportionately to others, the spiritual well being of all is affected. Certainly the group that struggles in body, struggles in spirit, too. But those with relative privilege suffer a diminished spiritual depth as well, because matters of the heart and soul get cloudy when overlaid by things like guilt or arrogance or privilege or insensitivity or blindness.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” said Dr. King. To that I add that trampled spirits anywhere affect spiritual awakening everywhere.

I offer those thoughts in memory of the nameless ones: the quilters, the picketers, the tenders of cradles, and the dreamers of dreams.

Our congregational focus on ending inequality is a good one – good for our world and good for our own hearts and souls. As we take up our work, may we be reminded of those famous words of one of our foremothers whose name we still know: Abigail Adams. “Remember the ladies.”

Bread and Roses, James Oppenheim (Sung)

As we come marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill-lofts gray
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing, "Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses."

As we come marching, marching, we battle, too, for men --
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes --
Hearts starve as well as bodies: Give us Bread, but give us Roses.

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient song of Bread;
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew --
Yes, it is bread we fight for -- but we fight for Roses, too.

As we come marching, marching, we bring the Greater Days --
The rising of the women means the rising of the race --
No more the drudge and idler -- ten that toil where one reposes --
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses.