

Sunday, May 12, 2019 – Celebrating the Gifts of Women on this Mother’s Day

The First Reading is Exodus 1:15-22

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

One: The word of the Lord

All: Thanks be to God

The Second Reading is Acts 16:11-15

¹¹We, Paul, Timothy and Silas, set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

One: The Living Word of God

All: Thanks be to God

The Message is entitled, *Courage is Essential*

We know today as Mother’s Day, a day that Anna Jarvis worked to have recognized in order to honor motherhood and mothering. Anna was the ninth of eleven children and her mother knew the pain of loss, for seven of Anna’s siblings died in infancy or early childhood. Anna’s mom inspired her to work for recognition of mothers, for she said, “I hope and pray that someone, sometime, will found a memorial mother’s day commemorating her for the matchless service she renders to humanity in every field of life.” On this day, we recognize the courage of not only mothers, but of all women.

For Chelsea Clinton writes, “It’s not always easy being a girl – anywhere in the world. It’s especially challenging in some places. There are countries where it’s hard for girls to go to school and where women need their husband’s permission to get a passport or even to leave the home. And all over the world, girls are more likely to be told to be quiet, to sit down, to have smaller dreams.” This is true in our world today, it was for Anna Jarvis, too, and it certainly was for the women’s whose stories we heard this morning from Scripture.

Chelsea continues writing to young girls in her 2018 Children’s Book entitled, *She Persisted Around the World*, “Don’t listen to those voices.” Don’t listen to these voices that attempt to silence the beauty of what God has created in you. Don’t silence the passions that God is at work doing within you. Don’t listen. Be courageous.

“The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, ‘When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him.’ This wasn’t just some neighborhood despot. This was the ultimate political powerhouse of Egypt and he commanded Shiphrah and Puah to participate in genocide, killing all male Hebrew babies. The king had the power of life and death over these midwives. Imagine the courage it took to defy the king’s command. Shiphrah and Puah put their own lives at risk in order to preserve life.

Do you know a woman who has put her own life at risk in order to preserve life?

The king summoned the midwives again saying, “Why have you allowed the boys to live?” They courageously responded to his inquiry, saying, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women, for they are more vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” Shiphrah and Puah had allegiance to a power greater than this human king, for they feared God. They put their lives in God’s hands and acted with courage in spite of the potential personal cost. They practiced what we would call today “civil disobedience.” They chose life, over death even if it meant the political powers imprisoned or killed them. We celebrate Moses as a great hero of our faith, yet Shiphrah and Puah’s resourcefulness, courage and action saved Moses and hence the whole people of Israel.

Who are the resourceful and courageous women of faith in your life? Who has helped you journey safely through life, giving you to the opportunity to bring forth life in other?

During the 1600’s, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz grew up in Mexico, and most girls did not go to school. After reading and studying on her own, Juana Ines asked her family if she could disguise herself as a boy so she could go to university, they said no. Yet, she courageously persisted finding tutors who didn’t mind teaching a girl. Then she became a nun in part so she could focus on her studies and her writing. Her extensive library had over 4,000 volumes eventually. She was known as a nun who demonstrated the courage to challenge opinions and speak out for her beliefs. Sor Juana Ines wrote poems and plays that are still celebrated today. She also published the first argument for a woman’s right to education in the Americas.

Just seven years ago, we learned of a courageous young woman named Malala Yousafzai. When she was eleven, she began writing about how much she wanted to get an education, even though some people in her native country thought girls shouldn’t go to school. The Taliban threatened Malala, but she courageously persisted in writing about her dreams for herself and girls everywhere. On October 9, 2012, when Malala was fifteen, a man boarded her school bus and shot her. Even so, Malala didn’t give up. She said this following her attack, “the terrorists thought that they would change our aims and stop our ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage were born.” Malala, at 17, is the youngest-ever Nobel Peace Prize winner and she still works hard in the hope that one day every child will be able to go to school.

Who are the women in your life who courageously challenged societal conventions to demonstrate another way forward for you and for others?

Now women were very low on the social scale in first century Palestine. Yet, Lydia was a woman with status, for we learned from the text that she was a worshipper of God, a native of Thyatira, as well as a purveyor of purple cloth. In case you were wondering where Thyatira was geographically, it was in Asia, the very region the Holy Spirit forbid Paul, Silas and Timothy to go. Yet through a vision Paul was directed to Macedonia, which leads them to Philippi, a leading city in Macedonia as well as a Roman colony.

Philippi is where the Roman Empire was powerful and popular. This was the heart of the Empire’s project in this corner of the world, a place that lived like an extension of Rome itself. Maybe that is why Paul didn’t make his way to a synagogue, if there was one, that is. Instead, on the Sabbath, they went outside the city gate by the river, where they supposed there would be a place of prayer. Paul and the others didn’t encounter men though, they encountered women and one woman was specifically mentioned, Lydia. Through this passage we learn that God goes before us when we share God’s word

with others for God opened Lydia's heart, not the charismatic preaching of Paul. God acts first, making the way possible for us to respond.

Lydia is transformed by the hearing of the word and her faith becomes immediately active. She and her entire household is baptized and then she defies social norms and offers her home as a place of hospitality. Commentator Eric Barreto writes, "Social and cultural barriers crumble, and this corner of the empire is beginning to be changed by God's grace. The author of Acts says that Lydia "prevailed upon" (NRSV) Paul and his companions to stay with her and accept her hospitality. There is only one other place in the New Testament where this word translated as "prevail" is used. It is in the Emmaus story on Easter evening, as the two traveling disciples urged the risen Jesus to stay with them that night (Luke 24:29). That evening Cleopas and his companion were transformed, just as Lydia and her entire household were.

Transformed by God's grace, we, too, are to prevail. We are to be courageous and persistent in living out the grace we have received in our everyday lives. Courage, I believe, is essential for vibrant and alive faith.

Now Merriam-Webster defines courage this way: Courage is the mental or moral - and I'll add or spiritual - strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear or difficulty. As Paul reminds Timothy, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love."

What stories of courageous women come to mind for you today?

I shared in Wednesday's devotion that my mom worked as an aircraft assembler. I remember the sea of workers flooding out of the plant, when I had the opportunity to use the family car. I would come to pick her up from work and it was easy to spot her, as she was one of the very few women on the assembly line. Hers was one story out of many of how difficult to work in what was historically a man's field, hydraulic systems of aircraft. She was one of only two women in that shop; but she courageously persisted.

I suppose I didn't fall far from the tree, so to speak, because I remember being given the opportunity as a 24-year old chemical engineer to work on a 26-inch gas pipeline replacement project. My engineering manager said, "I have a job for you and it won't be easy." I would be only the second woman ever to be on a pipeline job and he cautioned me saying, "It didn't go well for the first woman." So, go and meet the project manager this afternoon. I did. I showed up at the trailer on the job site in high heels and a suit. I won't ever forget his face. As he interviewed me, he tried hard to dissuade me. It was pretty obvious that he and I would learn soon enough that others didn't want me on the job either. Maybe the courage of my mom's work experience, gave me the courage to work in that environment, for as Chelsea wrote, "Don't listen to those voices," that tell you to have smaller dreams. Let me just say it was an experience that took courage, but in the end the project manager said, "Well done."

I give thanks for the courageous women before me who followed God's call into the ordained ministry. I once met Margaret Towner who was the first ordained female minister in our denomination in 1956. Her stories were amazing and it took incredible courage for her not to be silenced by those voices, even once she was ordained. Her courage as well as the courage of many other women has paved the way for women like me to follow God's leading in our lives.

Although, on this day Mother's Day I have chosen to focus on women, we all know it takes courage to follow God's leading in our lives no matter who we are. It takes courage, especially if societal norms or principalities and powers are challenged. It takes courage to even claim to be a person of faith today, when the culture around us is saying that religion is irrelevant. In a culture and world that is fraught with divisions, and the rhetoric of hate and violence is all too common, and wars seem to continually erupt, it takes courage to love others as God has loved us, and to extend the grace we have already received through Christ Jesus.

In the face of power, Shiphrah and Puah stood strong. In the face of social norms that worked to silence Lydia, she prevailed. What will you do? What will we do? Will we let those voices clamoring

around us silence us? Will we let those voices dissuade us from the work that is yet to be done to bring justice to all? Will we give up our dreams that this world can be what God intends for all of creation? I pray not.

Let us persist and persevere, trusting that God goes before us. Yes, courage is essential for all of us! Amen.