



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Why Church? Because women are called.

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 7:36-50

June 18, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Anna Owens

Louisa Woosley was born in March of 1862 in the hills of Kentucky. She was brought up in a Baptist family, and as early as the age of 12, began to experience God calling her into formal ministry. This caused her a deep anxiety—both because of what she believed about a woman’s place in church and the household but also because she didn’t know of any other women who’d ever been preachers before. When she married her husband, a farmer, she prayed fervently that he might catch the gift of preaching so that she could serve at his side. He remained a farmer. Instead, Louisa continued to experience the call to preach and serve to the point that she made herself very, very ill over it. So she read the Bible from cover to cover and made note of every place that women were mentioned. Upon finishing her reading, she determined that God had not overlooked women in the place and order of ministry. So when the opportunity presented itself in 1887 for her to fill the pulpit of Cumberland Presbyterian Church, she did just that. Just two years later, she was ordained by Nolan Presbytery, which caused all kinds of problems in Kentucky and up and down the east coast. She served the rest of her life as a faithful minister, leading revival movements all over the country. At the time of her death in 1952, our denomination was still four years away from officially ordaining women as ministers of the word and sacrament. Louisa was described as small in stature and very modest. This unassuming woman is not who you’d expect to find leading the charge for the ordination of women but she is exactly who God had in mind, and praise be to God, for that.

In our Scripture lesson this morning, we encounter another woman who we might not expect to find at Jesus’ feet. One of the things I love about Luke’s gospel is that Jesus goes to a lot of dinner parties. I love a good dinner party. I like to think of Jesus, reclining with his friends, sharing a meal, sharing stories, breaking bread.

But a suspicious number of Jesus’ dinner parties end up being kind of awkward and this one is no exception.

Consider the scene we just heard read for us. Jesus is at a Pharisee’s house. The Pharisee was a man named Simon, and we might read in between the lines that Simon had invited Jesus to show off this interesting man to his friends. Before they’d been there very long, a woman comes in—a woman everyone at the table knows as ‘that woman.’ Every community has one of those. ‘That person.’ You can imagine the eyes cutting across the table by those in the know. She doesn’t belong. She shouldn’t be here. What is he going to do?

And when she comes in, she sits at Jesus’s feet and begins to weep? Well, that’s the moment when some of my aunts in South Carolina would have gotten up to fix themselves another drink, you know what I’m saying? Fresh ice to jiggle around while they tut-tut their discontent. I’d imagine there was also a little bit of excitement. Finally, that woman is going to get what’s coming to her. They wait, with baited breath, the air buzzing in anticipation. And then gasps when she breaks an alabaster jar of expensive oil and pours it over Jesus’s head—right there at the table.

It’s clearly not how Simon expected the dinner party to go. He’d invited over this very interesting guest to entertain his friends and that woman was stealing his spotlight! Surely, he thinks to himself: This man can’t be a prophet. If he was, he wouldn’t be associating with someone like that. To signal to us that Jesus is a prophet and that he can read Simon’s mind, Jesus quizzes him with a little parable about people indebted to a money-lender who have their debts wiped clean. Simon, a little slow on the pick-up, eventually catches on. Do we think he’s more angry or embarrassed as Jesus goes on to point out that Simon had committed the faux pas of not offering Jesus any water upon his arrival, or a customary kiss in greeting, or anointed him as an honored guest? But ‘that woman’ had.

Today is the third in a sermon series we're calling "Why Church?," where we're exploring the main reasons younger people aren't coming to church anymore. The question is fair. Why church—when so many religious people act like Simon the Pharisee and so many nonreligious people are like 'that woman,' looking for meaning and connection and truth in a world that heaps judgment and shame upon them. One of these reasons—the one we'll talk about today—is that the church is anti-women. And you know what? It certainly has been. In many ways, it still is.

In case you're wondering: Yes, we know it's Father's Day. It wasn't an intentional slight against the dads among us, but the timing does seem apt after the news this week from the Southern Baptist Convention. If you don't know, 13,000 Southern Baptists gathered in New Orleans for what we might think of as their version of a General Assembly. And 88% of the attendees voted to uphold a decision to disfellowship Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, which had been removed from the Southern Baptist Convention in February over its decision to hire a female pastor. It's not an easy thing to see unfold, even as a woman ordained in a denomination that affirms women's leadership. It is infinitely worse for women who feel God's call on their lives but also find themselves called to be members of a Southern Baptist congregation.

But we're not going to pick on the Southern Baptists. Not today, anyway. The log in our own eye is big enough. I count it a true privilege to be here among you, to serve a vibrant congregation alongside an accomplished and talented staff, at a church that has, at least currently, more women pastors serving on its staff than men. We have come a long way as a denomination and I am so hopeful for our future. But we also have a long way to go. There are plenty of churches in our own denomination that don't fully affirm the gifts of women, that pay lip-service to equality but don't have meaningful policies or practices that support the full inclusion of women into the life and leadership of our churches. Of the churches I've served, including the church I grew up in and where I interned in seminary, only one of them has ever had a woman serve as senior pastor and head of staff and she co-pastors that church with her husband.

We might ask ourselves, "What's taken us so long?" There is no good reason, as far as I can tell, in Scripture or otherwise, that women should have been excluded

for so long. The early church itself was a model for an equal society. Jesus counted women among his disciples, which was revolutionary for his day. There is a mountain of evidence that Mary Magdalene was a pillar of the early church equal to Peter. That Mary, mother of Jesus, was a bishop, that Lydia wrote the Book of Hebrews. It's clear to me that the church itself has always been pro-women. So the better question might be not "What's taken us so long?" but instead, "What happened?"

I would argue that the issue arises not with the church itself, which was formed as a radially inclusive community where all might find welcome, but with Christendom—with the marriage of Christianity and the Roman Empire—and the ways that Christianity still marries itself to the culture today. The Roman Empire was not pro-woman, or 'pro' much of any kind of equality. It could only successfully exist if some were in and some were out; if some were in charge and others were subservient. This has borne itself out in some really insidious ways through the millennia, creating a culture in which "better than" became the guiding principle. Men were better than women, white was better than black, straight was better than gay. You get the idea.

Some of us have still internalized those messages, even when they're about us. Even I thought to myself, "You know, I really appreciate the invitation from Rodger to preach but maybe he should take this one, to give it a little more authority."

This brings us to the point in the sermon where I have to bring up a topic that might get some mixed reviews: Feminism. I know, church people get really squirrely about it. Some of you might even be thinking, "Feminism? And on Father's Day?!" Stay with me.

I'm not talking about the kind of man-hating, hyperbolic depiction of feminism often portrayed in films and on television. I'm talking about the writings of Elizabeth Johnson, Mary Daly, Delores Williams, Kwok Pui-lan, feminist theologians of many cultures and backgrounds who have been leading the way for women to have a place in the seminary, classroom, in academia, in the pulpit, and everywhere in-between.

Feminist theologians guide us back to Scripture to think a little differently about classic doctrine because while the Bible is the inspired word of God, it was clearly written by men. Women in Scripture are often two-dimensional, defined by their ability (or inability) to have children. They fight and bicker. They're petty and

mean. Women speak surprisingly little, even in books of the Bible named for them! Look at Ruth. Poor Ruth speaks maybe four lines in the whole book. It's really Naomi's story and it might as well be called, "A Mother-in-Law's Manifesto: How to Get Your Daughter-in-Law in Line." It's a story, written by men, instructing the Israelite women to assimilate the non-Israelite additions to their families through the necessary intermarriage with outsiders.

Feminist theologians invite us to look at old stories with fresh eyes and wonder about those for whom the story remains untold, or only partially told. Surely, Eve had more to say in the garden. I'm certain she grieved when Cain killed Abel. After all, she lost two sons that day. Feminist theologians look to Shiprah and Puah, the brave midwives who delivered Moses and then hid him in a basket among the reeds, sparing his life. They wonder about Mary, mother of Jesus, and what she has to teach us, all of us, about responding faithfully to God, even when we aren't sure we've got what it takes.

Biblical women aren't the only women whose stories have been half-told. Did you know that pioneer of nursing Florence Nightingale, known as the "Lady with the Light," was actually known among those at her hospital as the "Lady with the Hammer" because she once took to a locked supply closet door with a hammer to get in when a General was blocking her way? But newspaper editors in the United States thought that description might offend the sensibilities of its readers, so they changed it to something they deemed more suitable. We've only just begun to arrive at a point where untold stories are coming to light—when women's stories aren't being dulled or rewritten in case they offend the delicate sensibilities of those who've never had the privilege of knowing a woman who would take a hammer to a door to help her patients, no matter who's standing in her way.

Indeed, friends, while Christian culture—Christianity—has been anti-women, women have always been called to serve in the church. We need look no further than Presbyterian Women to know that's true. Long before they could be ordained, women were raised up as leaders, proclaiming and studying the Word in their circles, running mission and service projects, caring for one another in times of need.

Feminist theologians invite us to consider a world that looks different from the one we live in now. The

goal is not to reach equality as partners with men in a society that continues to be unjust. The goal is to transform society entirely—into one that values all voices, in which all are called, all are loved, all are cared for. It's a world that acknowledges that no one person or group owns the copyright to God's revelation. It's a vision for a community that knows that the more we know about one another, the more we know about God.

Scripture tells us that God is like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, that Jesus is a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wing. And if God cares this way for us, how much more so might we be called, as the church, to show God's tender love for the world, refusing to forsake those who've lost their way, gathering the neediest and loneliest, the wayward and the grieving, under the protection of God's nurturing love?

Women have always been called into a world filled with those like Simon the Pharisee who would prefer a hierarchy that pits people against one another, that favors some and excludes others, that benefits the powerful and creates even more hardship for those already struggling to survive. Women have followed the lead of so many nameless who've gone before, known only by the sons they bore or the sins they committed, including 'that woman,' the woman at Bethany, lavishing Jesus with the kind of love, gratitude, mercy and compassion Jesus gives his life for—the kind of love, gratitude, mercy and compassion he raises us to new life for. Christian women have led the way in declaring that another world is possible, one in which there are no "haves" and "have nots," one in which the lowly are exalted and the mighty are humbled, a world where all have enough, and are enough. This is the life God calls us to and it is possible because the God who defeated death can do more than we could possibly ask or imagine. If that isn't the case, then what are we all doing here?

So may we all—not just the women among us—may we all continue to follow in the footsteps of Sarah and Hagar, Ruth and Naomi, Mary and Lydia, Hildegard and Joan of Arc, Louisa Woolsley, Sally Wright, Melanie Hardison, Dionne Boyce, Alice Whitson, Jessie Light-Wells, Sarah Are Speed, Caroline Batson, Essie Koenig-Reinke, into the goodness of God's grace and mercy, lavished on us for the sake of the world. May we heap upon each other not judgment and shame but compassion and love. May we weep with gratitude for God's presence borne out through one another in our midst,

and may our tears wash the feet of those who don't yet know they're welcome here because the church has not always been a safe or easy place to be. May we go boldly into the future toward which God is calling us, seeing that our strength lies in our tenderness, our might in our vulnerability, and our power in our ability to confess

and forgive. Thanks be to God for the faithful women who have led us here and may they continue to do so for the life of the church.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.