



The Gifts of Women

Worship Resources for Mennonite Heritage Sunday, October 27, 2013

Introduction

Today is Heritage Sunday. It is a day that comes around once every year when all congregations across Mennonite Church USA are invited to join together in celebrating and remembering our heritage as Mennonites. This year, the focus of Heritage Sunday is on remembering the many different ways that the church sometimes has and other times has not valued the gifts of women. We will be remembering times of joy and times of pain. We will be acknowledging the diversity of thought there is in our country and in our congregation in terms of what it means to value women according to our Christian faith. As we worship together today, let yourself bring to mind your own experiences and also create space in yourself to hear and ponder the experiences of others. May our worship be an opportunity to reflect on our own journeys as people striving to live together faithfully as loving children of God.

Call to worship

Adapted from Sing the Journey #133

Leader: O God, who called all life into being,

All: the earth, sea and sky are yours; women and men are yours.

Leader: Your presence is all around us;

All: every atom is full of energy, every face reflecting your own.

Leader: Your Spirit enlivens all who walk the earth;

All: with her we yearn for justice to be done,

Leader: for creation to be freed from bondage,

All: for the hungry to be fed,

Leader: for captives to be released,

All: for each person you've created to be valued and cherished,

Leader: for right relationships between all of your children,

All: for your kingdom of peace to come among us. Amen.

Singing

As tranquil streams (*Sing the Journey #51*)

Jesus, help us live in peace (*Sing the Journey #52*)

Like a mother who has borne us (*Sing the Journey #91*)

We are people of God's peace (*Hymnal: A Worship Book #407*)

Text

Galatians 3:26-28

1 Corinthians 12:4-27

Drama

Setup: Arrange 4 women at the front of the worship space in a wide semi-circle on stools.

Characters:

Woman #1: Frustrated with the lack of opportunity there is for women in the church, she is eager for significant change.

Woman #2: Hopes for continued movement toward gender equity in the church and wants changes to be made gradually and in ways that avoid upsetting anyone.

Woman #3: Believes some changes need to be made in order for women to be properly valued in the church and also believes certain roles should remain open to men only.

Woman #4: Offended by the desire some women have for leadership, she believes faithful women should be content with the role of offering support to male leaders.

2: (Spoken as an introduction to the congregation, preferably while standing forward from her stool) In 1981, the Mennonite Church held its general assembly at the university campus in Bowling Green, Ohio. Women attending the assembly were invited to gather together in order to discuss issues of leadership and authority and to respond to three questions:

- What about being a Mennonite woman brings you joy? Pain?
- How do patterns of Mennonite leadership nurture your life? Assist your personal growth? Fail to respond to your unique “woman” needs?
- What one change do you think is important to the life of women in the Mennonite church?

The women who organized this gathering also put up large strips of paper in the women’s bathrooms with these three questions written at the top and plenty of blank space for women who passed by to leave their responses. A rich conversation developed on those stripes of paper, and the following drama is a series of excerpts quoted from the comments that were left in the women’s bathrooms in 1981.

(Character **2** goes to sit on her stool. The first line each character speaks is said to the congregation)

1: I heard a woman say that she learned early in life to never win in any competition with a man – for winning that way was the sure way to lose.

2: Being a woman in the Mennonite church gives me joy. In the context in which I worship a woman has a role of great respect. Her ideas are encouraged and implemented. Opportunities are available for many positions of leadership, and there is total acceptance of my personhood. One change I’d like to see

is the encouragement of young females who show aptitude for pastoral ministry to be counseled toward training for that role.

3: I am very liberated but feel a woman's place in the church is not preaching. While she can be of great importance in the church with her impact, I feel preaching is a male role to be filled only by males.

4: Women should stop trying to assume leadership and authority. We should desire to serve without recognition and assume the helper role to the leadership of men under God!

(Characters turn toward each other for conversation)

1: There is a place for men in the pulpit, but it is definitely *beside* women. I feel called but no one can hear it. Not even me.

2: All the women I've heard speak this week spoke with clarity and meaning. Doesn't that speak for women's gifts?

4: Very deceiving. What about First Corinthians and the order of headship: God, Christ, man, then woman?

2: I would like to see us as a church take the approach that God has given *everyone* a gift and focus our attention on how we can best recognize and use these gifts.

1: What good would that conversation do? In a society where the males make the decisions, what choice or influence does a woman have anyway?

3: Now you're just blaming the male Mennonite leadership for problems that we women self-create.

4: Amen!

3: Women have not been given the opportunity to use their gifts and talents as much as they should. But, they are getting out of their role when they demand an equal role with men. Women are to be virtuous keepers at home and should not have authority over men.

1: I'm frustrated that women are still being denied leadership roles in the church! Mennonite women must become less passive in their relationships with men. We must believe that our opinions and beliefs are *valid* and worth sharing with others!

4: You're crazy, and the joke will be on you years from now when you want to be heard in the church and no one will listen precisely because you are woman.

1: I've experienced pain from men in the church, but I have experienced far more pain from other women who feel women only exist to produce children, cook and clean, and occupy a pew in the church.

2: It's okay for some of us to want to stay where we as women have always been, but it's okay also to do the work of God in different capacities. Being a wife and a mother and a homemaker is a *joy* and a

meaningful and *fulfilling* experience. But, it's not for all women. Leadership is certainly servanthood for men, and it's servanthood for women too.

3: Okay, but if you force an issue you won't get the results you want because people have a habit of resisting being forced into anything.

2: Yes, let's raise any concerns lovingly. We'll be heard better that way.

1: When the oppressed speak to the oppressor they are not heard unless they speak with such numbers, such strength and unity, that they can no longer be "turned off." Women – this is our challenge!

4: Women's ornamentation is to be that of a meek and quiet spirit!

3: Yeah, let's not get "pushy" or "hard."

1: It's not pushy or hard to ask that as women we see ourselves as people, not just extensions of our husbands and children. We must be aware and informed and do some thinking and speaking. We do have something to contribute and we should get busy already and do it! We are more than sexy little playthings for men.

3: (Jokingly) Sometimes it's fun to be a sexy little plaything for a man. Let's not deny ourselves that!

1: Are *they* sexy little playthings for *us*?!

2: (Uncomfortable and attempting to distance herself from this line of conversation) Being a Christian is what brings me joy.

4: I like manly men and ladylike women, understand? I love being a woman and am glad God made *men* to be heads of homes.

1: Does being a ladylike mother stifle your ability to think and learn and speak for God as well? I am an equal! I want to be free at last!

4: You're only free to be a bond slave of Jesus Christ.

2: Women, we should speak respectfully to each other. Let's be open to really listen and try to hear each other and understand where each other is coming from in the spirit of love. We are each unique in the role we have been called to.

3: Let's relax and just be women. God made us and loves us. That's all that matters.

1: Yes, let's *be* women and celebrate Eve, the star of Genesis 2 and 3 and far more theologically astute than Adam.

4: That right there is why I believe that even today Paul would tell women to be silent and learn at home.

3: Yes, let's leave the preaching to the men.

1: Why? Should we just ignore the preaching gifts we have? We can serve the church with them if it will let us!

2: And what about women who want to be leaders – to whom leadership comes naturally and is a God-given talent, and who are skilled at doing a good job of it? Does God bestow gifts to put under a bushel? Not all women should lead and not all men should lead either. But some are well-qualified and should be given the chance.

3: You're moving too fast with pushy ideas. It pushes me backward instead of forward. Let's not spoil a good thing by being too radical.

1: If women cannot exercise their gifts then it seems to me that the New Testament and Christian faith cannot be relevant to women. Then what are we left with? Where can we go?

(Pause. Characters turn forward and speak their last lines to the congregation)

3: I think women have it great. I just don't have any complaints...

4: I thank God for the privileges I have as a woman. I don't feel good about the type of leadership some women are demanding to have. In my opinion, if God has given me the abilities of leadership there are probably lots of areas where I could serve *without* infringing on the roles of men.

1: Years ago, when our grandmothers fought for Universal Suffrage, men *and* women used these same arguments to try to stop them. Given time and determined effort we will win them over and women will finally be recognized as full persons in the church, as well as in the law. This is my prayer.

2: God bless you all, and I mean all.

Confession & assurance

God of love,

You made women and men in your own image;

each one of us precious in your sight;

each one of us different from one another and uniquely gifted.

We confess that there have been times when we as the church, and as individuals, have diminished the value of women and inflated the value of men in ways that prevent right relationships among us.

We have struggled through complex conversations about your vision for the roles of women and men in your kingdom.

It has sometimes been difficult for us to know what to do with our differences in the midst of this profound conversation which touches each of us so personally.

We've not always understood how to hold love together with justice as we embrace.

We have hurt one another.

We have been hurt by one another.

Even today, we are imperfect. The chauvinism of our culture which objectifies women sometimes forms us without our knowing it, women and men alike.

We need your grace, your healing, your transformation.

We need you to open our eyes and help us see the path toward your kingdom,
in which women and men and all people regard one another with a spirit of mutuality,
in which we, together, are loved, forgiven, and free. Amen.

(To the congregation)

Be assured that God hears us, loves us, forgives us, and remains at our side as we continue on the journey.

Singing

O healing river (*Hymnal: A Worship Book #377*)

Reflection

Invite someone to share your own congregation's history of resisting and embracing the gifts of women. This is a time to acknowledge honestly and vulnerably the ways your congregation has failed to value women, a time to celebrate the ways women have been valued, and a time to explore what your congregation is now being called to in the journey of faith toward gender equity.

Litany

Leader: We celebrate the gifts of women.

All: We celebrate the gifts of all people.

Leader: God has given each person a purpose in this life and in this community of faith.

All: We will seek out, nurture, and give thanks for the many gifts among us.

Leader: At times, when women have come with gifts we were not expecting, we have failed to receive them.

All: We failed to recognize the Spirit of God within them.

Leader: Let us have open minds and open hearts.

All: Let us expect the unexpected.

Leader: For there are many different members but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you," anymore than the head can say to the feet, "I do not need you." Each part is indispensable.

All: We are the body of Christ.

Sending song

One is the body (*Sing the Journey #72*)

Blessing

May you know in your deepest heart that you are valuable, gifted, and worthy of love. May you know that every person you meet is equally valuable, gifted, and worthy of love.

--Written by Hilary J. Scarsella

Further Reading

Books:

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Web Resources:

Mennonite Women USA

<http://mennonitewomenusa.org/>

Women in Leadership Project

<http://www.mennoniteusa.org/executive-board/women-in-leadership-project/>

--Compiled by Joe Springer and Steve Nolt