



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2017

Honorable Mention

"What if God Were a Girl?"

By Rev. Jordinn Nelson Long

Sermon delivered to the Unitarian Memorial Church, Fairhaven, MA

February 5, 2017

Some years ago, very early in my seminary journey, I stood with a group of ministers and laypeople at a regional conference, discussing a small congregational challenge, when a senior colleague suggested, half in jest, that prayer might be needed. I'm comfortable with invocations of Spirit, and so I began, aloud, "Heavenly Father, we ask that you . . . "

And that's as far as I made it. My colleague elbowed me right in the ribs, and said "Who!?! NO."

I looked up, stunned. "Those words are damaging," she explained. The prayer, and the conversation, were over.

I felt misjudged and misunderstood. And what I did **not** feel was a call to analyze the interaction any more deeply. In particular, I felt no need to look closer at this "Heavenly Father" character, where I got him from, or what he meant to me.

Later, this same minister broached the issue again, suggesting that I might need help—like, mental help—coming to terms with my religious past. I was outraged. "If you need to see God as a man," she advised, "and only as a man . . . you need to figure out why that's ok with you."

This turned out to be a relatively short answer. It was ok with me because it's what I was taught, in a Christian church so liberal it preached evolution from the pulpit. I was never told or taught in any way I can think of that I was "less than" or inadequate because I was a girl. Instead, God was male in the way that gravity exists, and our job is to adapt our lives to the shape of reality, and to find meaning within it.

As my friend Beth, who is both a lifelong Latter Day Saint, AND one of four much-heckled members of the University of Wyoming Campus Democrats (I was one of the other three), explains:

I believe that the perceived inequality of gender roles in the Church isn't a particularly relevant or appropriate place for those of us on the progressive side of the political spectrum to spend our energy. Simply put, I don't believe our traditional and well-placed outrage at something smacking of inequality or even "separate but equal" is applicable here. I believe this because, at my core, I believe God created me with a divine role and that my gender is intrinsic to that role..

Had I been able to frame thoughts through my outrage, Beth's words are what I would have tried to convey. This is the way it is. And I'm loved as one in Christ regardless. No questions. No doubts. Except, mental note, don't try to pray with Unitarians.

I might still be in that place, which I understand and respect, but I had something of an involuntary feminist awakening soon after—I process I never wanted, and which I understand why others are hesitant to embrace. Who doesn't want to believe that the world is as fair as we were once taught? Who wants to be a victim in any story, or to cop to the daily risk of being victimized? Who wants to live with the heartbreak of seeing the truth behind the false narratives? And of course, no self-respecting woman wants to be . . . angry.

As feminist activist Gloria Steinem once said: the truth will set you free. But first, it will piss you off.

There are things hidden in the fabric of our social structure, once seen, that cannot be unseen.

And what led me to seeing was my plan, early in seminary, to critique the feminist scholarship around the Martyrdom of Perpetua. One of the earliest texts of the Christian faith, and one which claims to be written by a woman.

But then, by myself, in the dusty stacks of a research library, I found something else. Pages and pages of work by those “feminist scholars”—women like Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, explaining, methodically, the theft that has happened.

Women were among the prominent missionaries and leaders in the early Christian movement. They were apostles and ministers—like Paul—and some were his co-workers. They were teachers, preachers, and competitors in the race for the gospel. They founded house churches and, as prominent patrons, used their influence for other missionaries and Christians.

And the Christian movement was radical, and many pronged. The Arians, an early Unitarian-group, the Gnostics, with female and male co-Gods, and numerous others, all trying to take the message and the spirit of Jesus and run with it. And the seismic shift of revolution underpinned it all, and that revolution meant something not just for religion, but for women. Greco-Roman society was deeply patriarchal, and the early Christian movement destabilized this.

Early writings from the men looking on beheld these developments with fear—Christians were paying for their lifestyles with their lives. Torture and martyrdom met many. Some embraced this with joy, but others were not quite so

millennial about things; greater societal acceptance was needed if the fringe movement was ever going to live into its potential. That acceptance came through a direct and intentional sacrifice of women's leadership, and an erasure of the traditions that allowed it to flourish.

A new day came for Christians in the fourth century with the emperor Constantine's embrace of Pauline Christianity—this new orthodoxy became the law of the land, and by then, the promise of a new day for women's religious authority had by then been brought to a screeching halt.

Silencing women's voices and blocking their access to church power wasn't sufficient, however. Systematic removal of their voices from the pages of history came next. The poetry of Sappho is burned nearly into oblivion (what we have, out of an estimated 700 compositions, is 4 complete poems and 264 fragmentary lines. A male editor recently republished them, with the title, "Complete works of Sappho.")

All but traces of the rival branch of early Christianity go up in smoke as well. We lose the source texts of gnosticism, which not only celebrated women's ministry but worshiped a feminine divinity alongside the masculine. We know about these things because they were so powerful that others wrote about them. But direct evidence, as with so many women's stories, has been taken from us.

This was such a revelation to me that I suddenly found a question, everywhere, one I might have asked when I was a child, had it occurred to me:

What if God were a girl?

And I'm not the only one to have asked.

I suddenly felt desperate for answers, and colleagues suggested author Sue Monk Kidd. She's the author of *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair*—but also of two notable works of feminist scholarship. Kidd explains that women are invited to live their entire lives in a series of socially acceptable boxes—and calls the “what if God were a girl?” question the spiritual awakening that each woman must make to become self-actualized.

And asking the question lands us right in the middle of this current political moment. What's happening now feels unprecedented, and yet, from the perspective of women's rights, I'm not so sure. I first preached a version of this sermon four years ago, in the midst of Barack Obama's presidency, and in an intense part of what was then being called “The War on Women.” Remember? Rollbacks in progress made since the equal rights era, well-funded and relentless efforts to eliminate Planned Parenthood, refusal to expand what is literally the worst family leave policy in the developed world. This has been going on continuously. The first Supreme Court decision to chip away at *Roe v. Wade* was written in the early 1990s. That is now a generation ago.

What I now understand is that when we talk about women—our rights, our place, our voices- we are having a conversation about honor. Kwame Anthony Appiah wrote a book called the Honor Code, and it's now required reading at Meadville Lombard, my alma mater- He argues that wide-scale social changes happen not because people make novel moral arguments—the moral arguments are the same, and have been around for generations. Social revolutions happen when we play to our “deep and persistent concern for status and respect.

We need others to recognize who we are and what we do.” The system in which we recognize one another- and refuse to do so- is a tough as nails but often invisible set of honor codes. They are carrots and sticks for behaving in ways the system recognizes. And those run deep, and have been linked with ideas about “male” and “female” identities for as long as we’ve been telling stories.

Examples of these rules- and I realize that many of them seem dated, but let’s really think about where they’re in play, and particularly where shame or shaming attach: *Men can seek sex with women wherever it might be available. Women must say no to sex except under very specific circumstances, and then probably should not enjoy it. Men own the public spaces, including the sidewalks, the scaffolding, and the sky. When women are in public spaces, they should expect to be talked to or treated differently and out loud—by men-- depending on the way they look.*

I don’t think we shame any of these social realities in a real way, but imagine if the change the genders. *Women can seek sex with men wherever it might be available. Men must actively seek consent for sex, and should not enjoy it, except for on special occasions. Women own the public spaces. When men are in public spaces, they should expect to be treated in specific ways, based on how they are dressed.*

If we laugh or feel anxiety, hearing this list, it’s because we know innately that the rules have been violated. What rules? The ones we pretend aren’t there, because after all, this is an egalitarian nation in 2017. They are the rules of the honor code.

So now, let's take a risk together and explore something we haven't spoken about this year. Not before the election, and not after it, either. The campaign of Hillary Rodham Clinton.

[one-sentence highlights of content from Politico, International Business Journal, the Washington Post, re: lying and truth-telling, held up sequentially]

And let's conclude with the New Republic. This was published on November 8th, and in the assumption that Clinton was going to win—the editors wanted to take a tough look at how Clinton had been treated during the election, and what that said about us. “Trump can't be trusted. His candidacy has flummoxed fact-checkers, and his capacity for lying is unprecedented in presidential politics. She's honest and trustworthy. Donald Trump is not.”

“That voters believe otherwise,” it concludes, “is a triumph of branding over facts.” And here, like every benevolently inclined male author writing about this, this man gets it wrong. This story is not a triumph of branding. It is a triumph of sexism.

It is a triumph of the same mores that have erased women for millennia.

Here's the thing. NPR last fall explained that Fewer than 1 in 5 members of Congress are women. At Fortune 500 companies, fewer than 1 in 20 CEOs are women. And if men and women had an equal shot at the White House, the odds of this happening just by chance are about 1 in 18 trillion. And when they looked deeper at what's going on, they found that we—people of all genders enmeshed in American society—encounter a paradox when we deal with women's leadership.

Seeing a woman in leadership requires us to call forth what we believe about good leaders—mostly a list of masculine words—and what we believe about good women—an entirely other list of words. Putting them both together causes real cognitive dissonance, and leaves women who lead to walk a real tightrope. Be more manlike, and sacrifice pieces of ourselves? Be more gentle, and forego the ability to call it like we see it? Move forward as our full selves and be called a cheat and a liar and untrustworthy by a nation of people who are reacting, at an unquestioned level, against the untrustworthiness of our own paradoxes?

And don't think that I don't consider these things as your minister. That I don't know, every time I speak, that I'm either making space or giving it. This respectability trap doesn't work for women.

And it doesn't work for men, either. As one man said to shame researcher and author Brene Brown, I have a wife and daughters and they would rather see me die on that white horse than know that I am struggling. Brown realized in that moment that we need to broaden the conversation around shame and gender, and she has since made a discovery. Shame is experienced the same way for women and men, but it is triggered very differently—because what we have been taught is not ok is so very different.

In our society, unpartnered men go twice as long as unpartnered women without experiencing the physical touch of another human. Stay at home dads are staking a claim that men have not made before—for platonic physical intimacy, like cuddling with their children—because, having seen few models of it, they are having to make it up as they go, guided by their guts and their love.

Men are bullied, threatened, terrified by one another, and this is true across so many venues that I need to clarify that here I am talking about teammates, fraternity brothers, and coworkers, and not street gangs. In the wake of the Miami Dolphins bullying scandal, in which one teammate allegedly threatened the career and then the life of a rookie via text message, journalists and sports commentators lined up to shame not the aggressor, but the victim for reporting the abuse. Citing this, one columnist begins his call for a kinder, gentler day in football with, “If you have feelings or a penis, cut one of them off; I’m here to start a fight.”

This is not a system set up by or for the benefit of women. But it’s hard to argue that it’s healthy for men, either. Or children. Or other living things.

We engage this struggle, then, and we do it with our faith in two ways. We do it expanding, intentionally, our own conceptions of the holy, knowing that what we name as most high is what we order our own lives around. What does it feel like to go back to your earliest conceptions of God and imagine a woman? I challenge you, this week, to spend some time with that, whoever you are. God as love . . . with a feminine face. And this isn’t me telling you that you need to embrace feminism. But I have a feeling that the God you threw out may have done some damage before leaving the premises. Check it out.

Second, we invoke our faith in demanding that the state—that our society and its governments at all levels—treat gender according to a NEW honor narrative. One that says that unconscious bias and unquestioned privilege are indeed shameful.

In this very moment, something larger is waiting to say yes to us. The real us, and every time we live into that courageously, we make space for the person next to us, and the child watching us, to do the same.

Amen.