

Pastor Courtney Steitz

Sermon for 6/14/2020

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It may seem odd to begin a sermon honoring the anniversary of the ordination of women, women of color, and LGBTQ+ pastors with a Gospel reading where Jesus calls men to serve as his disciples. But today we remember that Jesus calls unlikely people into service. These unlikely people are not surprising because they are incapable, but unlikely because of how society responds to them.

After all the earliest disciples that Jesus calls are kind of a rag-tag bunch. Rabbis would normally ask the best and the brightest of their students to become their disciples. The individuals they would ask would usually be those that excelled in study of the Torah. This description would not apply to the men that Jesus has just called to be his disciples. Being a fisherman was a respectable career in the first century, but the best and brightest Torah scholars did not go on to become fishermen. And Matthew was a tax collector! Tax collectors were considered traitors because they worked on behalf of the Roman government instead of working to protect their own people. These are unexpected disciples for Jesus.

And in our Old Testament passage, God is calling the people of Israel to follow God as a community and a nation. In many ways the Israelites are a somewhat surprising choice. At this point in Exodus, they do not have land, they do not have any military might or strength, and they have just come out of slavery—not exactly the flashiest or most impressive people group in the Ancient Near East at that time.

And in fact, God does this over and over again through Scripture—choosing individuals and communities that society would have overlooked. Throughout the Old Testament, women play a vital role in the nation of Israel, Miriam, Rahab, Ruth, Deborah, Abigail, just to name a few. And Jesus specifically empowers and reaches out to women in a multitude of culture defying ways. In our Gospel reading, Matthew provides a list of twelve men who were integral to Jesus' ministry, but this is not an exhaustive list. The Gospel writers lift up Mary, Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna as important supporters of Jesus ministry—both with their presence and financially. Paul includes numerous women in his ministry too: Lydia, Priscilla, Junia, and Phoebe. It is women who first discover the empty tomb and preach the Gospel the first time, there are women that found some of the earliest churches, and women fulfill key leadership roles throughout Scripture, all in spite of cultural expectations.

In the eyes of the surrounding world, these women may have been unlikely candidates to help lead and shape God's church, but God uses their faithfulness and leadership for the sake of God's kingdom. But somewhere along the line in church history old suspicions and prejudices snuck back in and women were once again relegated from pastoral and leadership roles within

the church. In many denominations in our country and in our world, this continues to be the case. Despite these restrictions, in my life I have known many women who have helped to form and shape faith in me. My grandma that brought me to Sunday School every weekend, my college Pastor who taught me how to read the Bible, women pastors who showed me that being a woman and a pastor was even possible, women seminary professors who taught me about inclusive theology and how to speak and preach. I bet each of you can name several women who have played an important role in your own faith formation and development.

While we have been talking mostly about women we also celebrate two other important anniversaries this year. It is the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women of color and the 10th anniversary of the ordination of LGBTQ+ pastors. Both of these groups have faced discrimination, hardship, and barriers when they have sought to share their gifts with the wider church. So this year we recognize these important anniversaries and celebrate the gifts that all people bring to the church, even those that our society and our culture overlooks.

As we celebrate these anniversaries, it is important to note that God never stopped gifting or calling women or LGBTQ+ pastors into service. Countless people have served faithfully in the church without the formal recognition of ordination, including many of you. We celebrate this anniversary of when the *church leaders* recognized the gifts that others had to share. While we are celebrating 50 years of ordination of women and 10 years of ordination for LGBTQ+ pastors, God is not done calling and equipping those for leadership and ministry that our society overlooks.

These surprising leaders and unlikely disciples can be found all over the place, if we pay attention. When I was working in Greeley with refugees, I was also a part of a refugee congregation. Their pastor is a Karenni woman named Naju. For a long time, Naju was uncomfortable claiming the title of pastor because in her culture it was odd for a woman to take on such a position of leadership. As a refugee she faced oppression in her home country and continued discrimination once she got to the United States. She had only been to school for the first few years of her life. Despite multiple obstacles, Naju was and is a phenomenal pastor. She knows the needs of her community and can pray at length for each family without needing a printed list. She teaches adults and children, and seeks to help and serve her community. She is clearly gifted and called, no matter what society might think of her on the surface.

And so this Sunday lets us give thanks for the women and LGBTQ+ pastors that God has called and that have been ordained by our church. Let us give thanks for all those that God has gifted and invited into service to the church. And while we give thanks, let us keep our eyes open for those our culture thinks of as the least, and let us not be surprised by the many gifts they have to share.

Amen