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Her Story: Forming a Woman's Voice in the Pulpit

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

HER STORY:
FORMING A WOMAN'S VOICE IN THE PULPIT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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BY
MINDY SMITH

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Preaching as Story.

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I consider this research to be a celebration of the incredible gifts of preaching women have brought to the church and an encouragement for the future women to preach boldly. This is a continuation of my undergraduate degree at Whitworth University when Dr. Dale Bruner challenged me to think theologically about the women who preached in the scriptures, and Dr. Nancy Lammers Gross at Princeton Theological Seminary who reminded her preaching students, male and female, to preach faithfully to a world desperate for the good news. Their influence runs throughout this research.

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ABSTRACT

Story is a paradigm for how women shape their preaching identity. Women preachers benefit from developing their voice through the stories of women in scripture, and the voices of women from the past and present day who have found their authentic preaching voices. Shaping a voice through story is a model in which the preaching identity can develop, and as a result minimizes insecurity, stress and fear around the craft of preaching.

Section One defines the preaching identity and examines the elements that form identity. It explores the challenges that have impacted how women understand their role in preaching. Section Two identifies and analyzes the other approaches writers have taken to support women preachers in voice development. This includes voice retrieval, voice restoration and spiritual work. It concludes by suggesting where these approaches fall short and what is needed to develop a meaningful preacher identity. Section Three presents the theological argument of the power of story as a possible solution. Looking first at how stories are formidable tools to shape identity, story, is presented and evaluated as a paradigm to develop and strengthen women's voice in preaching and ministry. Section Four and Five contain a book proposal for *She Proclaims: Stories of Women Who Preach*. This book will be written to help women preachers think about the craft of proclamation through the stories of exemplary women preachers. Section Six provides a postscript and suggestions for further research.

INTRODUCTION

The first day I arrived at Princeton Theological Seminary, I dumped my few belongings into my small dorm room and headed down to the welcome picnic for new students. Nervously, as I stood in line to spoon up some potato salad, I caught the eye of a woman across the table reaching for a hot dog bun. We both looked at each other curiously. After exchanging names, and where we were from, we quickly realized we shared a mutual friend. We instantly connected. She too was starting seminary the next day. Her name was Anna. After working in a Christian non-profit that served professional women, Anna left her career and was pursuing her call to ordained ministry. We finished our meal and took a walk around campus. Anna, looking distraught, described a somewhat traumatic experience that had happened to her the night before. She had arrived early to campus and was eager to explore. Anna found the chapel that sits near the center of campus. She described how she quietly walked into the empty chapel that evening, sat alone in a pew, and began to pray. As she stared up at the staircase which led to the large and intimidating pulpit, fear consumed her. She had a pit in her stomach. “How will I ever be able to preach?” she asked herself. As a way to hopefully ease her anxiety, Anna mustered the courage to go and stand in the place where she would be asked to preach one day. Her heart rate increased as she slowly headed toward the pulpit. Once she arrived, instead of walking up the steps, she froze. She turned, sat down, and began to weep. Fear gripped her. “I will never be able to do this. I have no voice here,” she told herself. She felt a clear call to be a pastor, but was terrified to preach.

Over the next three years, by sheer determination, Anna pushed through seminary. But with every speech class, preaching class or internship that invited her to be upfront,

Anna was overwhelmed with anxiety. She would obsess over manuscripts, have trouble sleeping and eating prior to the engagement, and once it was over, would regularly criticize her own performance. Now, over ten years later, Anna – an ordained minister of word and sacrament – still struggles to call herself a preacher. Her community and congregation have affirmed her gifts in preaching and her gifts in ministry, yet she still cannot fully own her voice as an authentic instrument of God’s work in the world? Why has she struggled with this fear for so long? What has held her back? How can she feel a clear call to ministry, and at the same time such deep anxiety surrounding her preaching voice?

In my current role as the Campus Pastor at Whitworth University, I am continually drawn to young women who are trying to discern their gifts for ministry. When I propose that they consider using their talents in preaching, most young ladies are quick to deflect and discount the suggestion. Unfortunately, a large percentage of churches in the United States are still confronting questions about whether or not women are even qualified to be pastors. Because of the oppressive messages heard regularly by women in the church, it often takes them longer to claim their voices which, in turn, influences their identities as preachers, teachers, or pastors. It took me almost ten years of professional ministry before I could claim my own identity as “preacher.” My journey has inspired me to study the key influences that aid in the development of women’s voices in the pulpit, and to create a resource to help more women refine their craft as preachers.

My hope for this work is threefold. First to make a scriptural argument for the ways in which the female voice in the pulpit is not only biblical, but necessary for the

continuing work of God's kingdom on earth. Second, to investigate the ways in which the female voice has been suppressed in the church and how to retrieve it. And third, to tell the stories of women preachers who have claimed their gifts of proclamation as an encouragement to young women growing into their own preaching identity. If women can overcome the stigma of a church culture which does not value their voices, and instead hold fast to the God who created those voices – both male and female – their preaching voices will be strengthened and be heard.

The dissertation artifact will tell the stories of commendable women preachers who have gone before us and have carved the way forward; those who have moved into their call regardless of the considerable hurdles. These are women who faithfully honed their gifts of preaching and discovered their own authentic voice. They preach with conviction, enthusiasm and authority. These stories have the power to form young women into exemplary preachers who will proclaim the good news for generations to come.

SECTION 1:
THE PROBLEM

Of all the skills a pastor needs to bring into his or her ministry, preaching is the most demanding. It involves listening to the congregation, crafting persuasive and theologically sound arguments, having an articulate and winsome delivery, and establishing an authoritative voice. It is an incredible task to take on each and every week. Yet, for women, preaching is difficult for additional reasons. As women move into the pulpit of churches, their presence is still questioned. Recognizing this tendency, Nancy Lammers Gross puts it this way, “even women of strong call, conviction and gifts are to apologize with their bodies and their physical voices for presuming to preach or lead in worship, or for simply occupying pulpit or chancel space.”¹ Many women who are gifted preachers are unable to claim their preaching identity. They do not have clarity on how to form an authoritative preaching voice when their role as preacher is still questioned because of their gender. This results in a weak understanding of who they are as preachers which harms the delivery of the message and the way the congregation is shaped through the proclamation of the Word.

To begin to understand this problem, one must first define the “preacher-identity” and how this identity effects the craft of preaching. At the most basic level, the preacher-identity is the way the preacher understands herself as an authoritative voice or proclaimer of the good news within a particular context. It is out of this lens that the preacher is able to view him or herself in order for people to respond, listen, or participate

¹ Nancy Lammers Gross, *Women’s Voices and the Practice of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), xviii.

with the one preaching. Trygve Johnson defined the preacher-identity by referring back to the definition Augustine created, “Augustine believed the homiletic identity is properly understood as one whose task it is to give instruction and expose the meaning of the scriptures and the doctrines of the church—to teach people the truth.”² Based on this definition, the female preacher’s main goal is to be seen and acknowledged as an authority on the truth of the scriptures.

The preacher identity is not instantaneous but develops over time. Preachers describe the ways in which the preaching voice strengthens through practice and experience, changing in different contexts due to the needs of the congregation. Identity Theory psychologists, Peter Burke and Jan Stets, stress that “identities are learned and adopted over time, and they are constantly changing. This is because identity is created using a feedback loop.”³ For example, a young female preacher moves into the pulpit in which a woman has never preached prior and then perceives her preaching-identity based on the response from the community. The community will either affirm the effectiveness of the preacher or will question or deny her position of authority. The woman’s identity as a preacher can be influenced based on the affirmation or dismissal by the congregation in which she serves.

This feedback from the congregation becomes crucial for the woman to claim her preaching-identity. Negative feedback has the ability to create problems for the women just starting out. The preacher’s primary question for themselves must be rooted in a sense of clear purpose. Does the preacher believe God will use her to establish God’s

² Trygve Johnson, *The Preacher as Liturgical Artist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 55.

³ Peter J. Burke and Jen E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

purposes in the message delivered? If she believes this truth, yet the feedback loop is not affirming her but instead sending her a message that God is not using her because of her gender, her identity is ultimately in crisis. As Trygve Johnson puts it: “Identity shapes practice; if you know who you are, you know what to do. If you do not know who you are as a preacher, then your preaching suffers.”⁴

What causes this identity crisis and negative feedback to persist? The reasons are numerous, yet stem from a church culture that is still rooted in a traditional belief system in which only men are called to preach. Women are rarely seen preaching or in positions of authority in churches, and if they are seen, it is briefly, in the background, or shuttling children to Sunday school. Because of misinterpretations of specific biblical texts, an unsupportive church fearful of cultural change, communities vested in male-only leadership, and bias against the female voice, the criticism and questioning of their identity as preacher persists. The result is that women who long to claim themselves as preachers are struggling to live into their preaching-identity in a church climate that is still unsure. Ultimately, women struggle to develop their authoritative preaching voice and subsequently the congregation and the preacher suffers. Thus, more and more women are not preaching with clear conviction which is harmful to the building up of the church, because when women do not preach, the church suffers. Carolyn Curtis James in her book, *Half the Church*, explains, “When half the church holds back – whether by choice or because we have no choice – everybody loses and our mission suffers setbacks. Tragically, we are squandering the opportunity to display to an embattled world a gospel

⁴ Johnson, ii.

that causes both men and women to flourish and unites us in a Blessed Alliance that only the presence of Jesus can explain.”⁵

The Problem of Theology

The word of God is living and active. It is an authority meant to form us into followers of Christ. Yet, there are some texts that have caused division and confusion around issues of how we are to build up the body of Christ. The texts about women in authority in the church, women’s role in marriage which suggests a subordinate posture, and texts against women preaching have aided in the problem of women claiming their identity as preacher.

Every year I speak to college students who are baffled and shocked to see, for the first time, a female pastor and preacher. Their comments are consistently: “I like you, but my theology does not support you in this role.” Their home church communities have taught and modeled to them this simple fact: scripture does not allow women in any authoritative role. The result of such teaching leaves many young women completely unaware that preaching is even an option for women, let alone allowed. Thus, their first exposure to women in ministry necessitates a questioning of their beliefs, their place, and if they even belong. The theology which informs this oppressive message creates a monumental barrier for those who are beginning to discern a call to ministry. There is both an internal and an external push against them. Internally they feel a call to preach or to teach, but externally the churches they affiliate with do not affirm women in these

⁵ Carolyn Custis James, *Half the Church: Recapturing God’s Global Vision for Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 19.

roles. Early in a woman's preaching career there are questions surrounding her preaching identity. She asks herself, "Is it really ok for me to be here?"

The two scriptures which many use to argue against women preachers are from the writings of the Apostle Paul. First, his first letter to the church in Corinth: "The women are to keep silent in the churches for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves just as the law also says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home. It is improper for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Cor 14:34-35). Second, in his first letter to Timothy, Paul advises that "a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve" (1 Tim 2:11-14). Well-known author, theologian and pastor John Piper, uses 1 Timothy 2 to exclude women to preach in his church. "Women are not proper extensions of male leadership. To allow them is to question the authority of the Bible."⁶

Using these texts, and others in Paul's writings, one Presbyterian pastor defended his position this way:

And he [Paul] says, the reason that this is to be this way in Ephesus is not because of some *ad hoc* problem that you have, but because this is the way that God made men and women to relate. In other words, Paul says that the reversal of roles that is contemplated when the all-male qualified teaching office is violated in the church is precisely the same circumstance that we see played out in the Fall of man where Adam abdicated his responsibility as the covenant keeper and Eve started a chain that led to the fall of man. So, this is his rationale for women not teaching or exercising authority in the public assembly. This is a directive,

⁶ John Piper, "Can a Woman Preach if the Elders Affirm it?" *Desiring God*, last modified February 16, 2015, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/can-a-woman-preach-if-elders-affirm-it>.

“Women, don’t preach. It’s not your job.” Don’t get up in the pulpit and preach; that’s a job for qualified male elders.⁷

This pastor was able to use scripture to claim that gender prohibits women from the pulpit. It is positions like this one that leave harmful, devastating impressions on women. This type of language leads young women to believe that if they even begin to discern a call to ministry and preaching, they are blatantly going against scripture and the moral law of God.

A culture and society rooted in patriarchy has preferred to build a church ordered by men, and has used scripture wrongfully to defend this position again and again. “Patriarchy is a framework that has been in place for millennia, the social context into which both Judaism and Christianity were born. It is important for Christians to see patriarchy as an unjust and sinful system which must be rooted out and supplanted.”⁸ This theology against women must be confronted, probed and named as a fundamental wrong, not of God, or best for our church. To move toward a new and fresh critique of theology “often makes people uneasy; it requires a genuine change of heart, conversion, and openness to a new vision.”⁹ This fear of changing the traditional ways of worship has led to the continuation of a narrative which assumes women are not supported as preachers.

⁷ J. Ligon Duncan, “Silent in the Church: Why Women Can’t Preach,” Sermon, last modified August 6, 2003, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/silent-in-the-church-why-women-can-t-preach>.

⁸ Mary Buckley, “Panel: Women and Power in the Church,” last modified January 15, 2013, accessed September 9, 2017, <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/article/viewFile/3062/2681>

⁹ Ibid.

The Unsupportive Church

The lack of women's voices in the pulpit thus continues to perpetuate the interpretation of these controversial texts, which maintains the message: women are not welcomed in these specific roles. Instead of looking more deeply into these texts (which I will do in section 3) to see the cultural parameters surrounding Paul's instruction and how language explains Paul's direction to a particular church conflict (not making a universal stance), a number of religious institutions (listed below) use these texts as tools to support complementarian structures. These texts have resulted in an oppressive narrative. She is second. She is to blame. She is deceptive. She must cover her head. She must be silent. Thus, women's voices are not regularly being heard.

Although women have made significant strides within the Churches of the United States in the last one hundred years, the statistics still present a sobering reality. As much as the feminist and women's movements have advanced women into more and more equal opportunities in other fields, the church is still reluctant. This very limited and restrictive view of scripture has led numerous denominations to keep women out of ordained or director roles.

In April of 2007, the non-profit organization CBE International, whose mission works to, "promote biblical justice and community by educating Christians that the Bible calls women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world,"¹⁰ published a report titled, "US Denominations and Their Stances on

¹⁰ "CBE International Mission Statement," last modified Autumn 2017, accessed November, 6, 2017, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/content/cbes-mission>.

Women in Leadership.”¹¹ Their study was based on written statements and did not necessarily reflect what actually occurred in practice within any particular denomination listed. The research was collected from each denomination’s websites which offered official statements on the issue of women. The excluding category is comprised of denominations that do not ordain women and do not allow women to preach. “These denominations do not necessarily deny women any kind of leadership—many allow women to serve as Sunday school teachers, musicians, youth workers or ministry leaders to women only.”¹² Their findings confirmed although twenty-one denominations affirm women preachers thirty still do not.

Figure 1: Denominations that do not allow Women to Preach

1. Evangelical Mennonite Conference	16. United Episcopal Church
2. Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches	17. American Baptist Association
3. Mennonite Brethren Churches	18. Primitive Baptists
4. Anglican Catholic Church	19. Apostolic Lutheran Church of America
5. Anglican Province of Christ the King	20. Church of the Lutheran Confession
6. Christian Episcopal Church	21. Concordia Lutheran Conference
7. Southern Episcopal Church	22. Evangelical Community Church-Lutheran
8. Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod	23. Evangelical Lutheran Synod
9. Evangelical Free Church of America	24. Lutheran Ministerium and Synod
10. Church of God Mountain Assembly	25. Great Commission Association
11. Apostolic Christian Church of America	26. Pentecostal Church of God

¹¹ “US Denominations and their Stances on Women in Leadership,” last modified April 2007, accessed June 16, 2017, <http://www2.cbeinternational.org/new/E-Journal/2007/07spring/denominations%20first%20installment--FINAL.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

12. Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church	27. Christian & Missionary Alliance
13. Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches	28. Bible Presbyterian Church
14. Presbyterian Church in America	29. Orthodox Presbyterian Church
15. Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America	30. Presbyterian Reformed Church

Figure 2: Denominations that do allow Women to Preach

1. Mennonite Church USA	12. Episcopal Church in the USA
2. Alliance of Baptists	13. American Baptist Churches USA
3. Vineyard Movement	14. Evangelical Catholic Church
4. Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ	15. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
5. African Methodist Episcopal Church	16. African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
6. Salvation Army	17. The Free Methodist Church - North America
7. United Methodist Church	18. Wesleyan Reform Union
8. Evangelical Covenant Church of America	19. International Church of the Foursquare Gospel
9. International Pentecostal Holiness Church	20. Presbyterian Church (USA)
10. Christian Reformed Church in North America	21. Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
11. United Church of Christ	

In addition, a Pew Research report revealed that while many major religious denominations in the United States now allow women to pastor churches and synagogues, only 11% of American congregations in 2012 were led by women, according to a National Congregations study. A key informant from the congregation, such as a minister, priest, rabbi, or other staff person or leader, was asked the gender of their

current religious leader: 1,110 (88.6%) responded male and 143 (11.4%) responded female.¹³

Figure 3: Gender of Religious Leader by Year

	1998	2006-2007	2012	TOTAL
Male	89.4% 1016	92.1% 1314	88.6% 1110	90.1% 3440
Female	10.6% 120	7.9% 113	11.4% 143	9.9% 376
TOTAL	100.0% 1136	100.0% 1427	100.0% 1253	3816

Even as church institutions have voted to move toward a more egalitarian approach in the roles of women, there are still relatively few women, by comparison, who are actually doing the job. This reveals that even as churches are open to women moving into positions of authority, women still are not in those positions. The above chart indicates that from 1998 to 2012, women in religious leadership positions has increased by less than 1%. Why the slow increase? Fear of change may be the primary reason.

The women who have moved into lead staff positions within their denominations still face tremendous challenge, as they are tasked to change the overall cultural perception of women preachers. Other researchers have recognized the tensions women preachers face in the pulpit and are working to pinpoint where it originated. In 1981, Jackson Carroll, Barbara Hargrove and Adair Lummis wrote *Women of the Cloth*, compiling data from interviews with clergywomen, clergymen, lay leaders, and other church officials in nine Protestant denominations. The authors describe the high degree of

¹³ Association of Religious Data Archives, "Quality Data on Religion: Gender of Religious Leader," last modified Spring 2012, accessed November 5, 2017, http://www.thearda.com/ConQS/qs_236.asp.

investment they recognized from people in the church. Yet, they found that with the threat of change comes the tendency to cling harder to the old way of doing things.

The primary concern is the tension between tradition and change in which all organizations exist in modern society. This situation is exacerbated in the churches by the strong ties in the minds of most people between religion and tradition on the one hand, and on the other by continuing organizational precariousness of American churches as voluntary organizations. Given a strongly male-oriented clergy pattern in the Christian tradition, a woman in the pulpit may be expected to arouse concern among traditionalists and perhaps threaten an already shaky organization.¹⁴

Because of the voluntary nature of the American church there is a vested interest in the members who commit to their local church's flourishing. If a specific church is built upon a tradition which is male-only, the fear of change or possibly losing members is too great a risk to take.

Some churches worry that if they were to consider hiring a woman, it could upset the congregation. Historically, there has been a vested interest in preventing women from entering into the established system equally. Fear surrounds the unknown, and making a major change, like moving a woman into a preaching role, would be disruptive and upset the framework in which the organization was designed. Mary Buckley argued that patriarchy, the rule of the fathers, is the name of the structural system which has prevailed.

In sum, these structures of both society and the Church have so long oppressed women that they have been accepted as God-ordained, and are internalized by women themselves. These structures are unjust and evil, even when carried by a long tradition, for they tend to make women powerless. The issue is not simply that some men are dominating and oppressive, but that the very framework of both society and church anchor this oppression and powerlessness.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jackson Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair Lummis, *Women of the Cloth* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 140.

¹⁵ Buckley.

Even if a national, institutional church does permit women to preach, the local church may not readily accept the change and the implications it will have to their traditional understanding of worship.

When congregations are prevented from hearing a woman's voice preach, the result is that congregants become accustomed to the male voice in the pulpit. Many church-goers have learned to prefer a strong, masculine, booming voice speaking with authority. It brings a sense of security, authority, and trust. Subsequently, the idea or sound of a female voice preaching sounds strange. Thus, the problem persists. Carroll, Hargrove, and Lummis highlighted the reluctance to make room for the female voice in the pulpit.

Lay leaders may also be reluctant to hire a woman simply because they believe that the majority of their congregation opposes women in the pulpit. In fact, Lehman postulates that a major block to parish hiring of women ministers is not lay leaders' personal sexism or opposition to women pastors, but rather their fear that hiring a woman might upset other parishioners, with ensuing, deleterious effects on the whole congregation.¹⁶

Whether they blatantly opposed women preachers, or subtly resist them when hiring for positions of authority, the research concludes that the majority of churchgoers prefer men, and often they prefer men simply because of the sound of their voices.

Humans prefer leaders with lower-pitched voices, whether they are male or female. Consequently, male and female candidates with lower-pitched voices may be more likely to win elected offices. Women are vastly under-represented in leadership positions across the globe. More specifically, because women, on average, have higher-pitched voices than men, and because higher-pitched female voices are judged to be weaker, less competent and less trustworthy, the characteristics of this vocal signal could help explain why women are less likely to hold leadership roles than men.¹⁷

¹⁶ Carroll, Hargrove, and Lummis, 140.

¹⁷ Casey A. Klofstad, Rindy C. Anderson, and Susan Peters, "Sounds like a Winner: Voice Pitch

Many young women who are discerning a call to ministry are looking for female role models in the church, but they are simply hard to find. The search becomes long and arduous. Some are prone to discouragement, or worse—giving up. I write for them.

The Survey

As I began to research this topic I believed that fear of change was the primary reason women were not allowed to preach regularly in the pulpit on Sunday mornings throughout America, but I was also curious to discover whether there were more contributing factors. I was eager to interview women in pastoral roles and hear their stories related to preaching, specifically. For the past ten years, I have participated in a yearly summer conference called the Whitworth Institute of Ministry (WIM). As the campus pastor at Whitworth University, I have a role in creating the weekly schedule for this gathering, teaching workshops and leading the conference. For the last two years, I have hosted a women's luncheon in the middle of the week. The first time we gathered, I was surprised by the energy in the room, and how quickly women began to share grueling stories specific to their pastoral roles. The room naturally became a safe space for women to share with others who understood the joys and demands of ministry. As the conversation continued, more and more women described their struggle with preaching. It was then that I became curious about how women grow in their preaching craft and into their identity as preachers. How is it that some women can preach with such confidence while others find it overwhelming, stressful and unfulfilling?

Influences Perception of Leadership Capacity in Both Men and Women,” last modified March 14, 2012, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/279/1738/2698>.

During the summer of 2016, I invited all of the women attending WIM, who considered themselves to be preachers, to join me for lunch. There were twenty in attendance that day, and our conversation was specific to preaching. They spoke of mentors, professors in seminary, responses from their congregation, and offered tools regarding how to handle the continual struggles surrounding wardrobe and appearance. I asked for their wisdom in writing the questions for a mass survey that I planned to send out the following September. We shared together for nearly two hours, and I was impressed by their wisdom, thoughtfulness and passion for the subject which I am studying. Through their insight and the wise counsel of other respected women preachers in my life, I launched a survey ¹⁸on September 15, 2016 in which seventy-four women responded. The questions in the survey were as follows:

1. If you identify yourself as a preacher, what experiences, training, calling, etc., enable you to claim that identity?
2. How do you think that your preaching (or the preaching of women) is different from the preaching of men?
3. How have you been encouraged as a preacher (by your church, family, professors, etc.)?
4. Describe some joys you have had as a preacher.
5. Describe some challenges you have faced as a preacher.
6. In what ways are you continuing to grow as a preacher? And as a woman preacher?

¹⁸ After working with my advisor to develop the survey, I designed it through Survey Monkey. I posted the survey on-line via social media and sent the link via email to all the women who had attended WIM and were interested in my research. I also invited many of my former female students who were in pastoral roles to take the survey as well. Many of my colleagues sent it along to women in their networks. I was overwhelmed by how many women responded and were energetic to participate in the research. Seventy-four women responded to the survey between October 1 and November 30 of 2016.

The results of the survey came from a variety of different women from across the country. Out of the seventy-four surveyed, thirty-one identified as Presbyterian (twenty-six Presbyterian Church USA and four Evangelical Covenant Order, one Evangelical Presbyterian Church). There were twenty-four women from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America who completed the survey, along with one from the United Church of Christ, one from the Reformed Church of America, one Christian & Missionary Alliance, one Pentecostal, one Episcopal, and fourteen participants who did not identify with one specific denomination (or skipped filling out that question). They varied in their years of experience and schooling, yet all would claim preaching to be a part of their vocation in ministry. The most striking commonality amongst the women surveyed were issues surrounding their preaching-identity in direct correlation to the strength and development of their voice.

When considering issues of voice-formation it is important to understand the voice in two distinct categories: the *authentic* voice and the *actual* voice. Nancy Gross, in her book, *Women's Voice and the Practice of Preaching*, defines authentic voice as “a women’s perspective as expressed in a sermon ... it will refer more broadly to the entitlement to speak, to the right to articulate one’s viewpoint, one’s perspective on a biblical text or experience in the world.”¹⁹ The *actual* voice, on the other hand, will consider issues around the physical voice as an instrument and consider its pitch, tone and delivery. The *actual* voice, if too high, too squeaky, or too harsh can become a

¹⁹ Nancy Gross, *Women's Voices and the Practice of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2017), xix.

distraction to the listener and affect the way in which the sermon is received and understood. Nancy Gross describes the unique challenges for women:

Many women struggle to speak, to use their physical voices, for various reasons. Some have not yet discovered their public voice; a woman in this situation does not realize she has a dimension of her voice that is suitable for speaking in a public context, or she knows she has a voice but thinks it is inappropriate to use it. Some have had their voices silenced by forces outside of their control; someone or something in their past has told them not to use their voice.²⁰

When asked about challenges they have faced as women who preach regularly, twenty-one out of seventy-four women mentioned their voice. In the findings, the participants reflected on their *actual voice* and how it is received, as well as their *authentic voice*, the one which shapes and guides their message from the pulpit.

Nearly 30% of the women surveyed mentioned the sound of their *actual voice* being problematic for listeners in their churches. When a woman becomes the proclaimer, the research shows that some listeners are uncomfortable simply because of the tone of the female voice. One female preacher received this feedback from a parishioner: “I don’t like the quality or tone of her voice.”²¹ Others recounted occasions when parishioners would mention that their voices were “too soft,”²² or “too high pitched.”²³ Another preacher described the pressure from her congregation to lower her voice when one member told her she needed to “preach like a man,” and another member came to her directly and said, “Our sound system does not carry a female voice as well as a male

²⁰ Ibid., xiii.

²¹ Survey responses were numbered to ensure anonymity. Citations will reference the survey number only. Survey responder #6.

²² Survey responder #26.

²³ Survey responder #14.

voice.”²⁴ Two women expressed that men complained they “couldn’t hear me.”²⁵ Another woman struggled to develop a “loud but not brash sounding voice.”²⁶ In addition, a parishioner came to a woman preacher after a sermon and complained that her voice, “hurt my ears,” and another was told her voice was “too high-pitched to hear.”²⁷ When two women brought up positive comments about their *actual* voice, it was because their voice had a lower tone. “I’ve been told many times by the congregation members that my voice is strong, low, audible, and clear.”²⁸ Moreover, another described her voice as “mezzo,”²⁹ and many in the congregation appreciated it.

Few people consciously think about their voice until they speak publicly. Women who interview for a position as a preaching pastor will likely be judged by the tone and tenor of their voice, their delivery and its speed. The voice is not an easy thing to change. The way one speaks is one of the most fundamental parts of individual identity. “The intricate acoustic patterns which comprise speech affect how we’re seen in terms of our personality, our emotional state and even our professional competence.”³⁰ When women have repeated, negative feedback on the quality of their voice, it can be difficult to claim authority or be seen as a trusted pastor.

²⁴ Survey responder #20.

²⁵ Survey responder #33 and #64.

²⁶ Survey responder #63.

²⁷ Survey responder #68.

²⁸ Survey responder #70.

²⁹ Survey responder #27.

³⁰ David Cox, “Is Your Voice Trustworthy, Engaging or Soothing To Strangers?” last modified April 16, 2015, accessed December 3, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/blog/2015/apr/16/is-your-voice-trustworthy-engaging-or-soothing-to-strangers>.

Women in the survey also referenced the challenge of developing their *authentic* preaching voice in the pulpit. This included designing how each would express her unique voice as a proclaimer. For this, the preacher must consider style, preparation, structure, function, and delivery as key elements when learning how to create a sermon. One woman said it this way: “I’m still new to this whole preaching thing. So practically speaking, I’m still growing as a preacher as I find my voice and style, and even as I continue to refine how I prepare.”³¹ For the younger preachers, the task of proclamation is still an art form they are learning to develop. Voice formation is a part of how she will form her identity as a preacher. Another younger preacher explained it this way: “I’m learning I do not have to be so apologetic in my language. I’m learning to use *my* voice more than the voice I think I should be using.”³² The development of the *actual* and *authentic* preaching voice can take years to mature, as it not only includes and involves pitch, but tone, pace, articulation, expression, conviction, and personal perspective as well as personality, ethnicity and culture.

Because one’s identity as “preacher” is formed through the feedback loop of the congregation, when the voice is highlighted as a negative, the woman can feel that her preaching-identity is not strong, or that she is not a respected authority. Thus, the message is sent: you are not a preacher. Nancy Gross gives voice to this common struggle.

I know women who can write brilliantly, poetically, compelling, articulately, powerfully. But when it comes to speaking, rendering, and preaching what they have written, their voices are without imagination or range or power or authority. I know women who have fire for the gospel pent up in their bones, but since they

³¹ Survey responder #3.

³² Survey responder #32.

are not allowed to preach from the pulpits of their own churches, they have shrunk their voices to fit the size of their assigned roles. I know women who have been told that they are so very *nice*, but their voices are so (fill in the blank): unpleasant, high, soft, tiny, screechy, muddled. . . I know women who have insightful and important things to say, but who cannot say them with the conviction they feel.³³

Women often become frustrated because not only do they hear feedback about the sound of their voice but in addition they receive comments about their outward appearance, such as wardrobe, choice of hairstyle, or their taste in shoes. It is a common to hear stories of women standing at the door, greeting people after the service, who feel condescension because of comments about their voice or appearance, rather than feedback pertinent to the sermon itself. Frustrated and disappointed, they become discouraged, and the negative feedback loop persists. This criticism has the power to halt the preacher-identity from forming.

In her book, *Wrestling the Patriarchs: Retrieving Women's Voices in Preaching*, Lee McGee worked with young women to reframe how they move ahead within the struggle of voice-formation, knowing it is common. McGee outlined four main issues for women preachers which draw upon four disciplines as the source of the conflict that are involved in women discovering their authentic voices as preachers. These four included: 1. Developmental psychology 2. Behavioral psychology 3. Church history 4. Spirituality. The author's psychological insights about the development and suppression of women's voices "illumine the history of women who have been named saints or who are esteemed for the richness of their theological and spiritual insight."³⁴ The research showed how

³³ Gross, xix.

³⁴ Lee McGee, *Wrestling the Patriarchs* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 15.

women psychologically form their voice is in direct correlation with how they form their identity. For example, McGee presented research done by Carol Gilligan. In her book, *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan revealed the differences between men and women in the decision-making process. She concluded women have a strong emphasis on the impact their decisions makes on others. Whereas, men focus on ethical principles and moral dictates. “Women also reflect on the impact their actions might have on specific individuals. Women ponder what impact an action might have on a significant other.”³⁵ Gilligan’s then pursued work focused on the moral decision-making of adolescent girls. Gilligan became intrigued with what has been termed “relationality” which is understood as women’s responsiveness to others. In her article “Exit –Voice Dilemmas in Adolescent Development,” Gilligan concludes that for girls, seeing and knowing can threaten relationships. “Not seeing, not knowing and not voicing are evident in the behavior of girls as a means of preserving relationships.”³⁶

McGee then analyzed how they develop their own sense of self and voice. The research examined how young girls discerned when it was safe to be seen and what was safe to describe. “They are studying how girls weigh what is seen, what is heard, and what is known versus what is safe to express to peers or adults.”³⁷ One researcher cited a case in which the phrase, “I don’t know,” was noted 67 times by a 13-year-old girl, and the same girl, when tested at age 14 said, “I don’t know,” 135 times.³⁸ When a young girl

³⁵ Ibid., 41.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 46.

³⁸ Ibid., 45.

says, “I don’t know” is she acknowledging a lack of voice? “The responses coupled with observations seem to confirm that the girl is abdicating her voice. She seems to be refusing to say what she knows, probably due to loss of confidence about self, reality, and relationship security.”³⁹ The findings claimed that young girls (at much higher rates than the young boys) are more concerned about acceptance, and the perceptions by others, which causes them to be less assertive and forthright with their opinions. The result is conscious and subconscious suppression of their voice.

When McGee presented this research to women preachers, the reactions varied. Many found the data helped them to identify and understand experiences they had yet to name for themselves. Women preachers affirmed that these concepts helped them to identify particular issues with which they had wrestled as preachers: relationality, voice, and agency. One woman put it this way:

We’ve named a problem, but it is not mine alone. I’m not the problem. Rather, the problem is generated outside of me and shared by lots of women. So, I am not weak or neurotic or anxiety-ridden which is what I thought might be the case. We named the issue. It exists in me. It’s generated by forces inside and outside of me. It’s a problem for me, for congregations, for the church, and for the culture. Instead of feeling inadequate, I can now focus on the task of how to respond to the problem. I am working now on what I can do to preach with less tension and greater effectiveness. These research findings have freed me and energized me.⁴⁰

By accurately identifying the problem, the findings highlighted and revealed that this is not an individual issue but a systemic problem. The research also revealed that the problem of forming a strong preaching identity, may in fact, come from the way women begin to form their own sense of self from a young age.

³⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 48.

McGee's theory of preaching, which is distinct from any other form of public address or oral communication, is one in which the woman feels called to express what she knows. "Yet, in the very process of preaching—of "giving voice" to what she sees and knows—a woman risks her relationship to God, her relationship to self, and her relationship to others."⁴¹ These risks include being ridiculed, questioned, or shamed for using her voice in a traditionally non-receptive environment. Because the risk is so great, insecurities inevitably arise. McGee's interviews with women continually named the tension and fear regarding voice this way: "Do I dare say what I believe?"⁴² This question coupled with the question "Do I belong in the pulpit?" hinder women from developing a strong and authentic preaching voice.

The problem McGee discovered and has persisted is this: women preachers struggle to develop their authentic voice in the pulpit which negatively affects how they form a preacher-identity. This identity crisis disturbs the women preachers' ability to own their spiritual authority and how they are heard as a proclaimer.

Section three will develop the thesis that the solution to form a healthy preaching identity for women is rooted in the stories of women in scripture, and faithful women who preached in the past and currently who claimed their preacher-identity and spent their lives preaching boldly.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The previous section identified the difficulties that women preachers face when they are developing their voice. This includes the interpretation of scripture which keeps women silent, along with churches that continue to cling to deep, historic practices. In addition, the female voice, how it is perceived, developed and strengthened to claim its authority also brings with it much challenge. Others have recognized this problem and have researched women preachers and voice-formation and have differing views on how to rectify the problem. Some researchers focus on the importance of strong role models to help the voice-formation process begin. They emphasize the need for more women to mentor young women preachers. Others believe voices can be trained, exercised, developed and strengthened. This theory argues for women to practice and work hard to form voice: both actual and authentic. Others who see preaching as a spiritual gift, stress the need for the gift to be tended through spiritual disciplines, spiritual directors and cultivating one's own personal relationship with God. They argue that a strong preaching voice will emerge as a result of a close connection to the work of the Holy Spirit. Whether it is through hard work, a strong mentor, or the Holy Spirit, women's voices in the pulpit need to be strengthened. It is crucial to consider the breadth of research within the homiletic field to understand the differing approaches to voice-formation so that the church may continue or in some cases begin to encourage and equip women to preach.

Voice Retrieval

Lee McGee's book, *Wrestling with the Patriarchs: Retrieving Women's Voices in Preaching*, stresses the importance of a multi-disciplinary effort to reclaim the woman's voice. McGee draws upon developmental and behavioral research to show how both the culture and the church condition women to mute their authentic voices. McGee highlights the internal and external conflicts surrounding what social scientists call *voice loss* and *voice retrieval*. She begins by recounting her own story and the questions she was pushed to ask herself in her formation as a preacher:

I considered my own evolution as a preacher. Initially, my preaching intimidated the preachers I admired—all men. My preaching was filled with scholarship. I realized I had learned to preach from role models primarily rather than books or instruction. I realized that all of my role models were male. How could I find my own voice and style as a preacher? What I did was to keep preaching and adapting my style. I decided that preaching was oral communication with a large group and, therefore, a new medium for me.⁴³

McGee asks the fundamental question all women must face when developing the craft of preaching: "How can I find my own voice and style as a preacher?" McGee argues that discovering one's own sense of identity must begin with strong role models. It might sound ironic to look to others to find one's self, but McGee believes it is within this process of relationship with other women preachers that women begin to develop the confidence needed to preach from what they know, what they believe, and that for which they feel conviction. She attributes the struggle to maintain and develop an authentic voice to the lack of role models.

Educational theory illuminates this struggle. Educators have long stressed the value of role models in education. I have found role models to be a wonderful resource in educating women about voice retrieval and in teaching preaching.

⁴³ Ibid., 17.

Positive role models help women overcome internal tension and ambivalence due to the risks inherent in voice use and preaching.⁴⁴

The research I conducted last fall revealed that the influence of role models was overwhelmingly important in the formation of women preachers. Role models, both male and female, were necessary in order for the women to have confidence in taking another step toward the pulpit. Three women wrote in the survey of the importance of seeing and hearing women preachers in order to feel the same confidence to pursue a call toward preaching. “I didn’t realize I could be a preacher as a woman until I was in college and witnessed a female pastor for the first time. I wouldn’t be where I am today if it weren’t for those first campus pastors modeling for me a woman in the pulpit and naming the gifts they saw in my life that would enable me to do the same.”⁴⁵ Such role models are not only living examples of how to do the work of pastoring and preaching, but also represent a strong encouragement to young women. Their presence in these roles acts as an invitation to young women who are discerning a call to ministry. When they see other women following God’s call they feel affirmed to move in the same direction. Role models present possibilities that young preachers may not have previously experienced.

With the help of strong role models, McGee argues that women will be able to begin the process necessary to develop their own authentic voice in the pulpit. McGee explained her process of voice retrieval, meaning as “consistently living in the realization that God gives us gifts, resources, voices, and power. It means being suspicious of self-

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁵ Survey responder #3.

denial.”⁴⁶ In order for the voice to be retrieved McGee created a formulaic process of slowing down, listening, practicing new behaviors and building character and confidence.

McGee’s voice retrieval included two elements of work: the retrieval of a woman’s voice and the church’s receptivity to it. She ran workshops for women preachers and the questions she invited her students to consider included:

- How can a woman preacher address her ambivalence regarding voice use and the risks of voice authenticity?
- How can a woman preacher retrieve her voice and use her voice to preach more effectively?
- How can congregations and the church welcome women’s voices, that is, how can congregations listen attentively and openly so as to “hear” and “engage” with women’s voices as preachers and leaders of the church?⁴⁷

Following time to reflect on and discuss these questions, McGee presented her five-step process of voice retrieval:

1. Separation: of the woman from negative messages.
2. Validation: of the woman’s experience.
3. Association: with other women for affirmation, affiliation, and empowerment.
4. Authorization: to learn strength and accountability of oneself.
5. Negotiation: to test out what has been gleaned, trying new behaviors and thought patterns.⁴⁸

This work of voice retrieval, McGee believed, is so important because of the intentionality it promotes in a woman. “Self-awareness and voice-awareness lead to a consciousness of power and resource in oneself. No matter what decisions are made

⁴⁶ McGee, 52.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 74.

regarding voice use, a woman experiences a new sense of power and control.”⁴⁹ The work of acknowledgement and awareness of voice is in and of itself a beneficial venture.

McGee’s work highlights the crucial need to invite women and the church into an intentional conversation. This begins by having more women speaking on Sunday mornings. Their presence is an invitation to other women and sends a message that women belong up front. A strong process of voice retrieval for the women called into congregations begins by looking more deeply into their struggle, acknowledging their voice, and ultimately, a stronger sense of self will emerge from the woman. McGee suggests that if churches invite women preachers and their congregations to reflect on women’s voices and how they are heard and perceived, the female voices in their midst will inevitably become stronger and more effective.

Role Models

Carol Noren’s book, *Women in the Pulpit*, also argues for the importance of role models needed for women to begin to form their identity and voice. “The first function of popularly cited role models, then, is reminding women clergy (and those they serve) of the presence of women in the history of their faith.”⁵⁰ This acknowledgement of the history has a powerful way of affirming their own self-understanding of the work. Catholic writer Joan Chittister described this type of role model saying, “The good news is that great women have always walked the earth ... their footprints are still clear ...

⁴⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁰ Carol M. Noren, *Woman in the Pulpit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 33.

their presence has changed things both in church and society.”⁵¹ Noren explains that a second function of role models is “*establishing precedent* for the woman preacher’s calling, language, and efforts to challenge traditional patterns of ministry and understanding of the nature of the church.”⁵² Noren claims, “Women clergy suffer from a shortage of opportunities to see and hear other women preaching. It is true women can appreciate and learn from male role models, yet their homiletical development would be enhanced by exposure to a greater range of preaching styles and methods *as manifested by women*.”⁵³ For many women the witness of another woman preaching was their first step toward intentional homiletical development.

Voice Restoration

Nancy Gross worked with women for over twenty-five years as a minister and professor of homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary. In her new book, *Women’s Voice and the Practice of Preaching*, she devotes a chapter to how women should form their voices for preaching. Gross explained that she is not a speech pathologist, but has an eclectic array of skills around “training, experience and knowledge about the body and how it produces sound, pastoral awareness of women’s issues with their bodies, and theological conviction about the gifts women bring to ministry.”⁵⁴ She tells her personal story of conflict in accepting her own body. She argues that “in order to understand

⁵¹ Joan Chittister, *Womanstrength* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 28.

⁵² Noren, 34.

⁵³ Noren, 39. Italics in the original text.

⁵⁴ Gross, 91.

women's struggle to speak, we need to explore the connection between the messages females receive about their bodies from an early age and their inability to employ their voices as full-body instruments in the service of the proclamation of the gospel."⁵⁵ Gross then claims that women need to discover a love for their own bodies in order to connect deeply with their physical voices. This connection and awareness to voice is how women are to form their voice. Gross instructs preaching workshops for women and asks the following questions:

1. Give three to five adjectives that describe your literal, physical, speaking voice.
2. In what ways did you find greatest pleasure employing your voice as a child? Do you still use your voice in that way today? Why or why not?
3. In what ways did you find great pleasure employing your voice as an adolescent? Do you still use your voice in that way today? Why or why not?
4. Has your voice ever been critiqued? In class? By church members? What was said?
5. How did you respond to the critique?
6. What is your favorite speaking context? Where do you most like to speak publicly?
7. What is the most memorable sermon you have ever heard? Who preached it? Do you remember the preaching voice? What was distinctive about it?
8. When and where have you been encouraged to use your voice? Where has been the permission-giving?
9. When and where have you been discouraged from using your voice? Where has permission been withdrawn?⁵⁶

The function of the exercise is to get women thinking about all of the issues in the past or present which may affect the way they use their voices. Ideally, this conversation

⁵⁵ Gross, 48.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 92.

happens between four to six women, in order that they can share their stories, be validated, and express mutual support. Each woman would then practice preaching in front of the group to gain feedback.⁵⁷ This process of voice restoration for Gross is,

... an integration of the truth of our own experience, the claiming of our body, the willingness to give our body over to proclamation of the Word, and the nurturing of the vocal mechanism that gives shape to sound and meaning to speech. There is precious freedom in being given permission to be in our bodies, to learn to nourish and nurture our bodies for the purpose of expressing our own truth and the Truth of the gospel, and knowing all along that it is not really about us at all. It is about the self-giving that is made possible by self-love, a giving of ourselves made possible by loving our bodies, a love that is mandated by the gospel message, not prohibited. In the end it is about being free to witness to the redeeming grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁸

The Spiritual Gift of Preaching

In contrast to McGee's and Gross' work, there are also many books about effective women preachers that do not emphasize voice retrieval or restoration as the most crucial part of the formation of the woman preacher. Simply put, many see voice formation as a divine act of God. If God gives a woman the gift of preaching her voice will not be silenced. These women do not spend much time training their voices in order to preach, but rather, spend more time listening to the Holy Spirit for the upcoming message from God.

Eunjo Mary Kim, in her book, *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice*, highlights the story of Jarena Lee, an African-American woman born in 1783, who was called to preach by divine appointment.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 89.

Whenever she stood behind the pulpit, Lee was empowered by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and in turn inspired her listeners. Every moment she preached, she felt free; her tongue loosened; her lips touched; and her heart warmed with the love of God and souls. During her preaching, her listeners often wept and mourned for their sins and rejoiced for God's grace of forgiveness.⁵⁹

Similarly, Martha Long Ice in her book, *Clergy Women and their Worldviews*, interviewed seventeen clergy women and found voice-formation was not the primary means of connecting with their congregations.

While gathering data I listened to sermons delivered by five of the informants as well as by numerous other clergywomen. They are, indeed, superior communicators, in my estimation. None had affected pulpit voices; none used stilted religious language; all maintained direct eye contact with the audience and seemed either to use no notes at all or to be exceptionally free of dependency on written materials.⁶⁰

Ice and Kim would both agree that superior communicators are generally remembered for executing their craft with excellence. Powerful sermons are preached when the Holy Spirit moves in profound ways in the hearts of the listeners. When hearts are warmed, when the congregations are captivated by the message, the communicator's gender is a non-issue. The women highlighted in Ice's book are strong proclaimers and free from any manuscript that might tether them to a pulpit. They naturally make connections with their listeners, they are passionate about the gospel message they feel called to proclaim, and they know their audience. They would argue that these effective women are simply called by God to use their appointed gifts and they do just that. They allow the Holy Spirit to move through them and see themselves simply as a mouthpiece.

⁵⁹ Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 103.

⁶⁰ Martha Long Ice, *Clergy Women and their Worldviews* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1987), 93.

Women's Voices: Personal Stories from the Survey

A woman in my survey who has served in ministry for ten years recognized areas in which she has grown spiritually through preaching. She found a direct correlation between her preaching and her own deeper, spiritual work, which brought about boldness and a stronger voice in the pulpit.⁶¹ In contrast, a woman who had spent over thirty years in ministry had a different conviction on how her voice formed her sermons. “I can only respond from my own experience, knowing that my appearance, voice, and demeanor flow from who I am as a woman. My voice isn’t strong in the same way a man’s might be. I think the integrity of the preacher depends on one’s sense of calling and one’s listening to the Holy Spirit in the creation of the sermon; that is true for a man or a woman.”⁶²

The majority of the women surveyed described the key to their voice-formation as an internal call of God and an external call from their community in which their abilities and gifts were recognized by friends, family, mentors, classmates, or professors along the way.⁶³ When they received positive feedback on a sermon they connected back to the work of the Holy Spirit in their own lives. For these women, when they feel an intimate connection with God they notice their preaching voice strengthen. “Feedback early on from listeners helped me realize I had gifts useful for preaching. When people were able to articulate specific lessons gleaned or named Holy Spirit moments where they learned something (that I was not even intending to communicate), I realized, ‘Awesome! God

⁶¹ Survey responder #18.

⁶² Survey responder #11.

⁶³ Survey responder #43 and #22.

can us me in this!”⁶⁴ Another respondent similarly described, “I have had people claim that I was preaching about them, or that they heard me say something that I know I did not say. I think it is the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, but they blame it on the preacher!”⁶⁵ Of the seventy-four women surveyed thirty-seven of them mentioned the Holy Spirit as a key element in what has continued to form them as preachers. Many of them spoke of moments of connection they were able to make with parishioners. Feedback such as, “That was just for me today,” or “I am still thinking about that sermon,”⁶⁶ is a powerful encouragement for the preacher to feel affirmed in their use of their gift. It is a strong reminder of the call they are living into when the power of their words are affecting the spiritual formation of the listener. One woman who shared her story of formation included areas of experiences of simply listening to good preaching from men and women specifically in a church which addressed women in leadership from a biblical perspective. She was given numerous opportunities to preach as an intern and in seminary. These experiences contributed to a deep awareness of a call to be “a messenger of the good news.”⁶⁷ This call of the Holy Spirit, this deep sense of vocational identity, is one contributor which fuels the drive for many women to keep preaching despite all the challenges. Twenty-four women surveyed pointed to the work of the Holy Spirit. Whether while preaching, in a conversation with a church member, or a light bulb moment had by a listener of the sermon, those moments make the work of proclamation

⁶⁴ Survey responder #6.

⁶⁵ Survey responder #15.

⁶⁶ Survey responder #38.

⁶⁷ Survey responder #18.

worth every challenge. One woman who has been in ministry for thirty-two years recalled people in her congregation telling her, “the Spirit speaks through her sermons.” Her greatest joys are “moments when there is absolute silence in the sanctuary because the Spirit is opening eyes, minds, and hearts, and the feeling I have when the Spirit is there.”⁶⁸ For some it is a spiritual discipline in which they rely heavily on the Holy Spirit to be an active participant. “On days when I have felt less prepared or anxious about the scripture for Sunday, I’ve just started writing and the Holy Spirit shows up.”⁶⁹ Another described her preparation this way:

I enjoy the preparation moments of preaching, in God’s strength. I try to only preach the message that the Holy Spirit has first and foremost spoken into my life. Those moments of sweet fellowship with our great God are moments of great joy, and then I get to share that joy with others, even if the message is hard to hear. I continue to ask the Holy Spirit to begin in my heart and life so that I am a leader for others to follow. Walking humbly with our Lord is the first and foremost priority of any preacher, male or female. If I have an opportunity to preach in contexts or to any persons who may not be used to seeing a female in the pulpit, an effective witness to the power of that presence always begins with humbly seeking God’s message for God’s people; He takes care of the rest!⁷⁰

The most intriguing testimony from the surveys comes from a pastor named Anna who has served in ordained ministry within the Presbyterian Church for over 10 years.

My sense of call to preach came about through a community. Before seminary, I had no interest in preaching mainly because the thought terrified me. I could not imagine I would ever be able to do such a thing. Yet, people kept saying things like, “Anna you are going to end up in the pulpit someday.” My preaching professor and fellow seminarians affirmed in me a gift for preaching. Left to my own scarcity, false-self thinking, I may not even have attended a seminary with a required preaching class. Today, when fear, doubt, and resistance grip me before, during or after the preaching moment, I check in with God, simply asking God to show me if I am still called to preach. So, for today, I will believe I am still called. This reveals to me I am not in charge and thank God I am willing to trust God

⁶⁸ Survey responder #37.

⁶⁹ Survey responder #24.

⁷⁰ Survey responder #30.

with my path. I said, “I don’t want the pulpit” most of the three years in seminary, yet passed all the ordination exams the first round. Upon graduation, I received an award for Excellence in Practical Theology and God showed me again the fruits of being a willing participant in how God would have me serve. All these things help me to claim my identity as preacher.⁷¹

The work of the preacher culminates in the powerful work of the Holy Spirit who calls even when the preacher feels inadequate, unqualified or insecure. The work of the preacher is to continue to be faithful, honing the craft, trusting God’s voice will be heard through the faithful mouthpiece God chooses.

The literature shows that there are many ways to train and strengthen the female voice. It can be retrieved and restored after past hurts and reconnected to as an instrument of the body. A strong female voice through this training might very well exegete a text, write a beautiful manuscript and read a sermon. Yet, is that enough? Is that where the authentic preaching voice is truly formed? Section Three will review an alternative hypothesis: that story-telling and story-catching are critical elements in the development of strong women preachers.

⁷¹ Survey responder #73.

SECTION 3:

THESIS

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside
the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.
O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it.
Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is
right; for my mouth will utter truth;
— Proverbs 8:1-7

The Story

Story is a powerful paradigm for women to strengthen their preaching identity. Story can provide meaning and purpose and offer a vision for ministry. Story has the potential to inspire and empower a woman to preach within a church culture that still may not affirm her voice. Stories resonate with the way of scripture and offer strong support and encouragement for the young woman who is just starting out.

When I think back on the season in my life when God asked me to begin to consider seminary I remember the heavy feelings of dread. Everything about seminary felt to me like being drafted into an institution I did not want to be a part of. God was inviting me into a new place and I was resisting. God would nudge me mostly through invitations from male pastors. “Have you ever thought about seminary?” they would ask. Internally I would pull back hard, but externally I would smile and sheepishly say, “Not really.” Yet, the question they asked always sent me reeling. “What young women go to seminary?” I couldn’t see it for myself. I had no vision of women in formal pastoral roles and I resisted the idea for myself. I thought God had it all wrong.

I remember quite clearly a distinct moment in my discernment when I stopped pulling back and began to listen. I was seated in the balcony of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington. The church was known for its large sanctuary, formal choir, professional music, thoughtful liturgy, and incredible preaching. That morning I saw a young woman walk into the pulpit and I could not take my eyes off of her. She was only a few years older than me and stood confidently before the large congregation in a clergy robe. She was articulate, engaged with her listeners, and told great stories. She could preach! Watching her that morning I felt released from my struggle, and I heard a voice inside me say, "Well I could do that." It was as though what I had once perceived as impossible and burdensome, now had been transformed into a divine invitation and a beautiful opportunity. That morning I witnessed a young woman using her voice with authority and grace, and suddenly I could see a future previously hidden from me.

Soon after the service I went up to her and introduced myself and asked her to lunch. She energetically said, "Yes!" and we met the next week for Thai food. There over our chopsticks, I told her my whole story. All of my angst, worry, stress, and insecurities came pouring out. She smiled, nodded, and listened to me vent my fears around pursuing ordained ministry. She heard me. "I get it," she said. "Go anyway," she told me. I applied to seminary the following week and found myself in school the next fall. I felt the invitation, encouragement, and support to go and pursue my call simply by seeing another woman living out her vocation and hearing her story. My long struggle was resolved through the witness of a church culture affirming the woman's voice and a woman-affirming the divine call God had placed in my life.

Through my own journey of ministry, I have found that my voice is strengthened whenever I hear other women preach with conviction and authority. When I witness women who unapologetically use their gifts of preaching and have a passion for Jesus Christ, plus a humble reliance on the Holy Spirit, I am moved to dig deeper into my own work as a preacher. Whenever I encounter a woman who knows deeply their call and describes their preaching experience as, “I was made to do this.” Through intentionally growing in relationship with these women, through the sharing of stories, I have built a support system of cheerleaders and friends and my voice as a proclaimer has been embraced.

The primary hurdles women have had to overcome within the church are biblical, historical, and cultural. These obstacles have discouraged women and kept them from entering ministry because these hurdles seemed insurmountable. Yet, there is currently a women’s movement underway. The tides are changing because more and more women are overcoming the barriers rather than cowering before them. The future hope is found in the stories of women in scripture, learning the stories of particular women throughout church history, and listening to the stories of contemporary women preachers who have been called to persevere.

The voices of women are, first of all, developed through the stories of the women who have gone before them. The story must begin in scripture. Women throughout scripture proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ: subsequently, women’s voices in the pulpit are necessary for the fullness of God to be revealed. Moreover, we must look back at our own church history and become familiar with the women who fearlessly built a church amidst the cultural resistance. These women, using their divine gifts and prophetic

voices, were affirmed in the church because it was so apparent they were anointed by God. Finally, we need to hear the stories of women today who are continuing to pave the way forward. Through them, more women will hear the words, “Go anyway,” and stand up and follow the call of God to preach.

God’s Voice as Male & Female

God made “man and woman in his image” (Gen 1:27), and for the church to hear God’s voice as only male is to make God much too small. It communicates one facet of God’s character, but certainly not the whole of it. God is beyond our imagination and holds within Godself the image of all of us. It is crucial for a variety of voices to proclaim who God is so that the church does not limit God to only a partial expression of God’s character.

Voices are distinct and they are recognizable. Voice has the power to affirm the uniqueness of the culture and allows for particularities within certain contexts. This is in contrast to a church which prefers a singularly voiced reality that assumes that all persons experience God in the same way. It assumes all men represent God’s voice alone. “When distinctiveness is recognized and valued, the horizons of reality are broadened and truth becomes multidimensional. Stifling distinctive voices incorrectly alters the world’s vision.”⁷²

The female voice is an essential contributor to the work of the church. If the church is to come to terms with this idea, it will necessarily emerge from a posture of

⁷² Mary Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women’s Voice in Preaching*. (St. Louis, MO: Lucas Parks Books, 2014), 10.

humility and openness. Churches that prefer only a male voice in the pulpit under-represent the fullness of God's image. Gospel presentation only heard in tenor or bass tones makes an assumption that God, too, has a low, masculine voice. If listeners are not hearing the word of God through the entire scale of the sounds within the vocal range, then God's revelation is restricted.

If God's voice is both feminine and masculine, the pulpit can then become a natural place for God's full expression to be voiced. Jeremiah's description of God's encounter with Elijah is a powerful reminder of how God's voice is expressed in ways we would not have expected,

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kgs 19:11-13).

God's voice in this encounter is not booming, nor is it found in the midst of an earthly disruption. Here God's voice is gentle, quiet, whispering. It is nurturing and compassionate. The whisper is inquisitive and calm, yet still powerful enough to cause Elijah to cover his face. This voice is potent, not because it is loud, but because it is unexpected. Jeremiah, the writer of I Kings, describes Elijah's natural assumption to look for God in the great and powerful wind, or the shattering earthquake, or the massive fire. But the Lord was not there. Yet, the gentle whisper comes upon Elijah in a way that silences the crackling of the fire, and the sound of the rocks splitting. The voice is God's, and it sounds different than what Elijah was anticipating. God's voice is hushed and gentle. It has qualities which reflect the feminine.

Another image of God is as a mother bird sheltering her children under her wings. This is expressed in multiple ways within the Psalms and the Book of Ruth. “May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge” (Ru 2:12). The Psalmists used this imagery a number of times: “Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings” (Ps 17:8). “I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed” (Ps 57:1). Of all the prophets, Isaiah seems to be the fondest of painting God as an actual human mother as these three verses attest: “For a long time I [God] have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant” (Is 42:14). “As a mother comforts her child, so will I [God] comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem” (Is 66:13). “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I [God] will not forget you” (Is 49:15). It is not just the prophets who express the feminine nature of God. Even Deuteronomy portrays God as a mother eagle who, “stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft” (Dt 32:10b–11).

In the same chapter, Israel is reprimanded through feminine and masculine metaphors, “You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth” (Dt 32:18). Although it is unusual to hear God described as a mother in labor, it is important to pay attention to the metaphor. Kathe Schaff and Kay Lindahl, in their book *Women, Spirituality and Transformative Leadership*, highlight the tendency is reduce God to primarily his male qualities:

Actually, lest we be fooled by our own patriarchal inclinations to make God in our own small, puny, partial male images, the Hebrew Scriptures are full of the female attributes of God. ... Clearly, after centuries of suppressing the female imagery and the feminine attributes given in scripture in order to establish the

patriarchy of lords and kings and priests and popes and power brokers as the last word and only word of every failing institution in humankind--no wonder we are confused about who God is. But God is not! Scripture is clear: God does not have — and clearly never has had — an identity problem. Our images of God, then, must be inclusive because God is not mother, no, but God is not father either. God is neither male nor female. God is pure spirit, pure being, pure life — both of them. Male and female, in us all.⁷³

Jesus, as well, uses female images to depict himself when he laments over Jerusalem.

Jesus, who was very much a man, still expressed his full divinity through female imagery he used to identify himself:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord (Lk 13:31-35).

Could it be that in this moment of deep heartbreak and lament, Jesus' voice could sound feminine? He describes the people of Jerusalem as his children and is sobbing over the loss of them. He likens himself to a wailing and grieving mother hen who has just lost all of her children. The groans of pain and anguish created by that loss are deep, maternal, and instinctive. Jesus uses his voice in both feminine and masculine tones in order to express the divine nature. Both of these voices are of God.

Jesus' Invitation to Women to Preach

Not only were God's and Jesus' voices feminine at times, but Jesus instructed women to use their voice to preach the gospel as well. Jesus set the ultimate example for the treatment of women. In building up the church and its ministry, Jesus taught both

⁷³ Kathe Schaaf and Kay Lindahl, *Women, Spirituality and Transformative Leadership*, (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2012), 60.

women and men (Mt 14:21, 15:38). Women were among his followers. They made the long journeys on foot along with Jesus' more well-known male disciples, (Mt 27:55, Lk 23:49, 55), and many of these women were mentioned by name in the gospels.⁷⁴ Those named include Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem (Mk 15:40-41). Jesus saw women as an integral part of his mission, to gather and send them so that God could be fully glorified. Throughout the scripture, Jesus stops for women (Mk 5:21-45), acknowledges them (Jn 11), and blesses them (Jn 1:12). Jesus also sent women with the gospel message. Bonnie Thurston, in her book *Women in the New Testament*, suggests that in John's gospel, "the ministry of Jesus begins and ends in the company of women. Within that inclusion, women also exemplify the response to Jesus that the evangelist is seeking to engender."⁷⁵ The Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4) and Mary at the tomb (Jn 21) are the two stories worth a closer look.

The Samaritan Woman at the Well

Jesus, on a journey between Judea and Galilee, stops in the middle of the day to draw some water from a well. While there, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman who has come during the heat, at midday. It is assumed that she is unwelcome at the well at the usual times of drawing water, which were typically morning and evening.⁷⁶ Jesus surprises her by asking her for a drink. Jewish men did not speak to women in public.

⁷⁴ John Bristow, *What Paul Really Said About Women* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 2011), 53.

⁷⁵ Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 83.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Jesus breaks both a cultural and an ethnic taboo, as well as a religious prohibition, and begins a discussion about “living water.” Jesus takes this opportunity to ask her about her husband, and then reminds her that she has had “five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband” (Jn 4:16-19). It is significant to point out that woman at this time were not allowed to divorce their husbands. Theologian and author, Leonard Sweet suggests, “For this woman to have been divorced this many times was most likely because she was barren.”⁷⁷ Thus, the woman Jesus is speaking with has a story rooted in pain and rejection. As the conversation goes on, the woman asks him questions and she responds intelligently to Jesus, (Jn 4:20, 25). “For the first time in the Gospel, to her Jesus both reveals his messiahship and uses the “I am” self-designation that characterizes John’s Christology (vv.25-26).”⁷⁸

In light of this precious encounter, the thirsty woman, leaving her water jar, went back to her town. And there she began to proclaim: “Come, and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah? He told me everything I ever did” (Jn 4:29). They came out of the town and made their way toward him. Many of the Samaritans came out and listened to her and from that town believed in him because of the woman’s sermon. When Jesus arrived in Samaria he stayed with them for two days and many more became believers. They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.” (Jn 4:39-42). In this moment the woman becomes the first proclaimer of the gospel!

⁷⁷ Leonard Sweet, DMin 783, Zoomchat, October 14, 2016.

⁷⁸ Thurston, 83.

New Testament scholar and protestant minister Bonnie Thurston, in her book *Women in the New Testament*, identifies the Samaritan woman this way, “The woman returns to her village and shares what she knows of Jesus and leads many to believe in him—thus in effect fulfilling the role of the first apostle/evangelist.”⁷⁹ The first apostle, evangelist and preacher are how the woman at the well is described according to John’s gospel.

Dale Bruner’s commentary on *The Gospel of John* references Origen concerning the text of the Samaritan woman at the well. Origen pinpoints a divine call on the woman to go and preach through the significance of leaving her water jar and running off into her home city. “At the literal level, this shows the tremendous eagerness of the Samaritan woman who forsakes her water jar and is more concerned for how she may benefit the multitude than for her humble duty related to material things.”⁸⁰ Origen concedes, “The woman is almost turned into an Apostle! The woman having become a vessel of wholesome discipline, lays aside as contemptible her former tastes and desires.”⁸¹ The woman in essence is no longer thirsty, because in her encounter with Jesus she has tasted the living water he promised. Once her thirst was quenched she was sent to go and proclaim.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Bruner noted, Brooke Foss Westcott a religious professor and writer, explained the context and commented: “The Lord had set aside His own want: she sets aside her own purpose. However, she showed that her

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 279.

⁸¹ Ibid.

absence was to be but for a brief space, by ‘*leaving her water-pot.*’⁸² Westcott notices, in addition, that “the message she bore to the city was for all, for ‘*the [people]*’, [i.e.] for the inhabitants generally, and not her husband only.”⁸³ Thurston emphasizes this important point:

Moreover, John 4:38 is one of the most important uses of *apostellein* in the Gospel; it is missionary language used in the context of a woman who has been sent to sow so that the disciples can harvest. Just as the male disciples in the Synoptics left nets, boats, and counting house to follow Jesus, this woman leaves her water jar to return to her village and share the good news of the Messiah. She is the prototype of apostolic activity.⁸⁴

Furthermore, those she shared the good news with had powerful conversions. They were all-in. The townspeople reported: “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world” (Jn 4:42). Her words, her story, her *sermon* captivated the hearts of a town. They believed wholeheartedly that Jesus was the Messiah because she was a witness in her village. Bruner continues,

Bengel in his German Bible, sensibly noticed the difficulty she faced in her witness to her village: ‘Was it probable that just at that instant, and in that very place, the long expected Messiah had appeared to such a woman?’ Godet sees other details in John’s concise report: ‘What a contrast between the vivacity of her conduct and the silent meditative departure of Nicodemus! . . . There is great simplicity in the expression [she uses in her town]: [*‘he told me’*] ‘*all the things which I have done*’ (Jn 4:29). She does not fear to awaken by this expression recollections which are by no means flattering to herself.”⁸⁵

⁸² Ibid., 280. Italics in original text.

⁸³ Ibid. Italics in original text.

⁸⁴ Thurston, 85.

⁸⁵ Bruner, 280. Italics in original text.

Yet because of her zeal, through her story and her fearlessness to express her vulnerability, and because Christ affirmed her voice, she was able to preach. John says the Samaritan villagers believed, ‘because of the woman’s testimony,’⁸⁶ exactly the same expression Jesus uses when he prays for the disciples, “I ask . . . on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word” (Jn 17:20).

Story has the capacity and power to form us into believers. In a collection of essays called *The Healing Power of Spirituality: How Faith Helps Humans Thrive* Suzanne Coyle in her essay *Spiritual Narratives: Hope and Healing through Stories of Faith* highlights what occurs in the brain when we share stories. “The left brain’s job is to create stories to explain what happens in the world. This side of the brain relies on memory and general knowledge to make sense of what is happening. As the events transpire, the brain works to remember the events and constructs stories.”⁸⁷ Stories bring meaning and invite us to connect. Story-telling is how our brain processes allowing our faith to form through a deep understanding of the story of God. Throughout human history “humans somehow innately knew that the telling of stories was a way to convey human experiences through generations. And it has been through the telling of faith stories that believers have been able to transmit the essence of their faith to subsequent generations of believers.”⁸⁸

Scripture is story: it is the primary way Jesus communicates. Jesus prays that we would be a people who tell his story again and again. “In the New Testament the noun,

⁸⁶ John 4:39 NRSV; literally “because of her word.”

⁸⁷ J. Harold Ellens, *The Healing Power of Spirituality: How Faith Helps Humans Thrive* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Publishing, 2010), 191.

⁸⁸ Ellens, 191.

martyria, ‘witness, testimony,’ is used thirty times in the Johannine corpus and seven times in the rest of the New Testament.”⁸⁹ Testimony, telling the story of Jesus, is how people come to believe. Bruner underscores the “importance of human testimony in John’s gospel, for our text shows that the Samaritans came to faith ‘because of the message of the witness-bearing woman.’”⁹⁰ It is a woman who told the story first, a woman who became the first proclaimer. The woman spreads the message with wild abandon, leaving her old self at the well and taking her new faith home. Her word, her female voice, through the power of the Holy Spirit participates in the spreading of the gospel and the making of disciples.

Mary Magdalene

It is no accident that the first person to recognize and announce Jesus’ resurrection on the first Easter morning is a woman:

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her (Jn 20:11-18).

⁸⁹ Bruner, 284.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb when it was still dark and found that the stone had been rolled away. Jesus was no longer there. She ran to tell Peter and the others, and they, in turn, ran back to the tomb to find it empty. The disciples then returned to where they were staying.

It is essential to notice that Mary, first and foremost, is longing to be as close to Jesus as possible. Her heart is broken and devastated by grief. She is shocked that his body is no longer there, and is terrified that it has been stolen. Mary begs the gardener for help in her distress. She shows incredible strength and persistence. Her deep love for Jesus pushes her to seek him amidst the worst-case scenario. Bruner then highlights the power of the encounter:

Jesus says to her, “Mariam.” “She turned around, and she says to him in Hebrew, Rabboni! (which means ‘My Teacher’). This is Jesus’ shortest sermon in the Gospel of John and I think, his most dramatic: the vocative “Mariam!” The Good Shepard knows his sheep and “calls them by name,” and his sheep “know his voice” (Jn 10:3-4). This one word, Mary’s own name, spoken by the most significant person she had ever known, changed her whole life. She is the first person, ever, to experience the personal presence of the Risen Lord. When she turned to him at this moment, human history took a turn to a responsible hope for the vincibility of death and, so, to the conquest of the meaningless.⁹¹

Everything changed in that moment. In that meeting, the truth of the Christian faith stands in the quiet of the garden. Death is defeated. And Mary is the first to experience it. Mary is privileged to see the Messiah fully alive. Her encounter humbles her and strengthens her simultaneously. In that moment, she becomes an apostle.

In all the Gospels, whenever a person encounters Jesus, they are given a mission. We see this with Mary: “But do this: Go tell my brothers, ‘I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God’” (Jn 20:17). He tells her to go tell all the

⁹¹ Bruner, 1152.

men. Tell them what she has seen. Shout it from the rooftops! Death has been defeated! He has risen! She is commanded to go and proclaim. “Use your voice!” Jesus tells her. Bruner points to Leon Morris, in his commentary *John* and highlights Jesus’ appearing first to a woman:

Morris is impressed with Jesus’ grace in sending this simple woman as his first apostle (the Fathers called Jesus’ women missionaries the *apostolae apostolorum*, the apostles to the apostles): There is moreover a wonderful condescension involved, for we have no reason for thinking of Mary as being a particularly important person. Yet it was to her and not to any of the outstanding leaders in the apostolic band that the Lord appeared first.⁹²

Jesus appeared to Mary, an ordinary woman, after his resurrection, and called her to go and preach to the others all that she had seen. She is the first apostle and through his voice – the voice of Jesus – she is given her voice. Women’s voices are to be used in order that the fullness of the gospel message will continue to be proclaimed to all the nations by women who stand on the truth that God has called them by name and is now asking them to go and proclaim.

Paul and Women

Paul’s writings create confusion for women in ministry positions, primarily because although he served alongside women in ministry, his letters to churches on occasion suggested that women should not participate in specific ministry roles. His direction that women should stay silent and never teach or preach in the church (1 Cor 14:34) clearly opposes the close of his letter to the Romans. There he names twenty-six church leaders, eight of whom are women. The list begins with Phoebe, a leader in the

⁹² Bruner, 1157.

church of Cenchreae, whom Paul claims protected many, including himself.⁹³ Phoebe carried the letter to the Roman church and the carriers would read the letters and comment on them. Therefore, Phoebe must have taught and preached as part of her duties,⁹⁴ with no concern from Paul over her being a woman while fulfilling such responsibilities. We learn from Romans 16:2 that Phoebe led an official ministry; she was a deacon, a designated office in the church. Paul uses the term *diakonos* for such a position in Romans. There is no feminine equivalent for *diakonos*, which implies that “there was no distinction seen between the office of male and female deacons.”⁹⁵ In light of this implication, it is important to recognize that Phoebe was a deacon, not a deaconess. Paul instructs the Christians to give Phoebe assistance and “help her in whatever she may require from [them], for she has been a benefactor of many” (Rom 16:2). Paul viewed deacons as “those who are responsible for the gospel, the ministers of the word of God.”⁹⁶ Therefore, “deacon” translated as “minister” did not separate Phoebe from the other ministers in the church of Cenchreae. In Paul’s eyes, she was simply a servant of God, fulfilling her call as a minister of the gospel.

Yet Paul wrote a letter to Timothy in which much of the controversy falls. He stated, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed

⁹³ Bristow, 56.

⁹⁴ Jonathan Moo, interview by author, Spokane, WA, April 14, 2016.

⁹⁵ Mary J. Evans, *Women in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1983), 123.

⁹⁶ Don Williams, *The Apostle Paul and Women* (Van Nuys, CA: BIM, 1977), 42.

first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (1 Tim 2:11-14).

When Paul commands the women in Ephesus should learn in quiet and full submission it is clear he is speaking to a specific group at a specific time in history.

The most likely reason Paul commands women to learn in quietness, restricts their teaching and argues for it, based on Eve’s description, is that there was a significant problem with women who had been deceived and were spreading their destructive teaching. One ought to try to understand this restriction within the occasion for the letter stated in 1:3-11, namely, false teaching. Similarly, at about the same time, Paul silences the teaching of the circumcision group in Crete “Because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach” (1 Tim 1:11).⁹⁷

Philip Payne, in his extensive research on the Greek in this text, discovered that “every occurrence of ἐπιτρέπω (permit) in the Greek OT refers to a specific situation, never to a universally applicable permission.”⁹⁸ Whenever this verb, “especially in the first person singular present active indicative, it is not well-suited to identify a universal prohibition.”⁹⁹ Payne argued a more faithful English translation to its usage in the Greek Bible is, “I am not permitting,” indicating a new, case-specific injunction in response to a problem in Ephesus that does not carry weight of church tradition.”¹⁰⁰ Payne continues highlighting other exegetical indicators that Paul did *not* intend a universal prohibition on women teaching:

⁹⁷ Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 335.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

1. The overall purpose of 1 Timothy is to silence false teachers, and there is ample evidence,¹⁰¹ that Ephesian women at that time were specifically influenced by and participated in false teaching.
2. Paul states in 3:1 “Anyone who desires the ministry of being an overseer a noble task. This is surely an encouragement to all who would hear these words, including women, to aspire to be an overseer. Would Paul encourage desire for forbidden fruit?”
3. Paul’s life and writings elsewhere did not follow this rule as universal. Rather, he mentions many women among his fellow workers in the gospel and involved in his teaching (1 Cor 14:34-35).
4. Timothy himself was taught by his mother and grandmother (2 Tim 1:5, 3:14-16).
5. Titus 2:3 commands older women to be “teachers of what is good.” Since Paul wrote this passage about the same time, he must not have intended a universal ban on women teaching.¹⁰²

Two of the more controversial Pauline texts which are often referenced in the arguments against women teaching and preaching in church, center on the notion of “headship.” “But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor 11:3). Additionally, in Ephesians, Paul claims, “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior” (Eph 5:23). It is unclear what Paul meant by “head.” The complementarian view of “head” defines it as “leadership or superiority.”¹⁰³ Theologian and Dean of A.W. Tozer Theological Seminary Sarah Sumner, in her work, argued there are other options for translating “head.” She stated our complementarian view would not have been true. Why then are women never asked to

¹⁰¹ See Payne’s Chapter 16.

¹⁰² Payne, 324.

¹⁰³ Karen Petersen-Finch, interview, Spokane, WA, April 14, 2016.

“obey” men in the New Testament?¹⁰⁴ Sumner concluded there is a deeper meaning behind the idea of “head” which does not rule out equality.

Christ	Man	God	Husband	Christ
Every man	Woman	Christ	Wife	Church

If we look at the chart from the right: The church is “equal” to Christ in that it is his body (1 Cor 12:12-14). A wife is equal to her husband in that she is “flesh of his flesh” (Gen 2:24). Christ is equal to God in substance, and woman and man are the same words as husband and wife in Greek.¹⁰⁵ Christ is equal to every man in that he took on human flesh (Phil 2:6-7). Yet, the top component of the pair is never asked to “submit” to the lower component; it is the other way around.¹⁰⁶ What can submission mean in a situation of equality? In Sumner’s thinking, submission means something close to “trust.” The top row is the head from the perspective that the lower row is asked to trust, but this is a headship which does not rule out equality.¹⁰⁷

Philip Payne also did extensive work on headship:

C.K. Barrett concludes that the meaning “ruler ... was not a native meaning of the Greek word.” Unfortunately, some advocates of male authority have misrepresented the lexical evidence, making such blatantly false statements as, “all lexical evidence suggests that the word head means authority,” and “All the recognized lexicons (dictionaries) for ancient Greek, or their editors, now give *kephale* the meaning ‘person in authority over’ or something similar; but not give the meaning ‘source.’”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church: Building a Consensus*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 183.

¹⁰⁵ Petersen-Finch, interview.

¹⁰⁶ Sumner, 183.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁰⁸ Payne, 122.

Today, modern science reinforces the metaphorical use of head for leader, but this was not the way in which Greeks thought. Plato moved the command center to the heart after Aristotle. “The ancient Greek world, exemplified by Paul’s use of ‘heart,’ commonly believed that the heart, not the head, was the center of emotions and spirit, the ‘central governing place of the body.’” Aristotle held that the heart was not only the seat of control but also the seat of intelligence.¹⁰⁹ When it comes to Paul, his heart and mission was, in every circumstance, to proclaim Christ crucified. Moreover, he wanted it to be done in a spirit of humility toward others and to God.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness (Rom 12:3-8).

Paul’s reminder is that by grace, all been given these gifts. Not only males or females, old or young, black or white, but all the members of the body. The Holy Spirit promises, as members of the body of Christ, we each have been given a gift.

If we seek to answer Christ’s prayer that we “would be one” (Jn 17), much like a physical head and physical body are one, in Christ submitting to the Church and the Church submitting to Christ, in submitting to (“trusting”) her husband, the wife “ends up submitting to herself.”¹¹⁰ The head trusts the heart, and the heart the head. “The husband

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Sumner, 198.

and wife participate together in a dynamic upward spiral of lifting each other up instead of putting each other down. They don't engage in battle with each other. As a result, they go up, up, up rather than down, down, down.¹¹¹ There is no power struggle. "On the contrary, there is genuine trust and love."¹¹² This is as it should be in the church: unity of both genders based on mutual respect, trust, and love. In addition, because of the equality between them and the two working to empower the other, there is no reason why women should not lead, preach, and baptize if they are called to do so. For if they fail to, the strength of the body will weaken and the living organism of the church will not flourish in the way Christ intended it to grow. The Master Gardner has called all the workers, male and female, to water the fields. The call is not to argue about who the workers are, but to invite more to pick up a water bucket and begin to pour out.

Historical Perspective: Women Who Paved the Way

For women to strengthen their voice, they must begin by listening to the stories of other women who have gone before them. Especially important are the stories of those within our own denominational history who boldly preached to a culture in which women were not seen as equals. Aimee Semple McPherson¹¹³ and Henrietta Mears¹¹⁴ were exceptional leaders in the American Church in the early 20th century. At a time in our history when women were far from guiding the church in any capacity, these two

¹¹¹ Petersen-Finch, interview.

¹¹² Sumner, 171.

¹¹³ Matthew Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

¹¹⁴ Marcus Brotherton, *Teacher: The Henrietta Mears Story* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2006), 8.

participated in God's mission in significant ways. What were the key factors in contributing to the confidence they found in proclaiming the Word to such large audiences, persevering through challenges, regardless of the personal costs, to serve God's people? Where were they similar? What influences contributed to their exceptional popularity and impact? How were they able to lead so impressively as women during a time when women were not even permitted to vote? Both Aimee Semple McPherson and Henrietta Mears had strong voices which formed them into exceptional teachers and preachers. Looking closely at their lives will allow us to identify key approaches for the future development of women preachers.

Henrietta Mears has been called the "grandmother of modern Evangelicalism."¹¹⁵ She was widely known for walking with thousands of individuals as they journeyed to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In addition, she helped disciple and train some of the major evangelical leaders of the 20th century including Bill Bright,¹¹⁶ Donn Moomaw, and Billy Graham.¹¹⁷ More than four hundred of her students went into vocational Christian ministry and founded over fifty influential ministries.¹¹⁸ During her time at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, she developed the college ministry from four hundred to four thousand students in two and a half years.¹¹⁹ Eventually, it became the

¹¹⁵ Wendy Murray Zoba, "The Grandmother of Us All," *Christianity Today*, September 16, 1996, 44.

¹¹⁶ Brotherton, 10. An estimated 3.4 billion people have heard the gospel through Bill and Vonnegut's ministry, Campus Crusade for Christ.

¹¹⁷ Brotherton, 12. Brotherton states that Billy Graham's message has reached billions of people over five decades in ministry.

¹¹⁸ Andrea V. B. Madden, "Henrietta Mears: Her Life and Influence" (master's thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1997), 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

largest Presbyterian Sunday School class in the world, with over six thousand members.¹²⁰ Beyond that, in 1933 she founded Gospel Light, a publishing company committed to producing creative, age-appropriate, biblical Sunday school curricula, which is still in business today.¹²¹ And, because of her strong voice, influence, and deep commitment to camping ministry, Henrietta Mears founded Forest Home Conference Center in Southern California in 1930.¹²²

This near-sighted, single, female, chemistry teacher began her ministry at thirty-eight and is still seen as one of the most impressive trail blazers of the American Presbyterian Church. Her passionate faith, coupled with her clear sense of vocation and calling, could not keep her from the life of ministry God set before her. She had to speak for Jesus Christ. Her voice rang deep within the hearts of her listeners and as a result, kingdom servants were formed because of her years of bold proclamation. Barbara Powers, who wrote Henrietta's biography and knew her well, described her voice:

Teacher has always had a versatile voice. It can range from soft, sweet, gentle, persuasive tones to thundering, stentorian syllables that cut straight through the granite of an uncompromising situation. She can be charming and gracious in a drawing room but can march heedlessly, fearlessly, and dramatically into any situation that needs quelling.¹²³

She was driven, did not take “no” for an answer, and was unwavering in her commitment to the message of Christ. Despite her lack of formal religious training, the leaders that Henrietta influenced,

¹²⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹²¹ Brotherton, 98.

¹²² Ibid., 112.

¹²³ Barbara Hudson Powers, *The Henrietta Mears Story* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1957), 174.

... are reproducing their kind wherever they go, for they learned from their beloved Teacher¹²⁴ that the true disciple trains other disciples to take his place. And this was her greatest dream – that her work in Hollywood might be but a spark to ignite brightly burning fires in every nation of earth so that, in coming generations, multitudes might hear the Galilean’s call and be saved.¹²⁵

Similarly committed to Christ and impassioned by a fiery faith was Aimee Semple McPherson. She has been described as a phenomenon who, “during the 1920s, a decade of larger-than-life-celebrities and of mass excitement, rocketed to public attention as a religious celebrity, a barnstorming evangelist often called the female Buddy Sunday.”¹²⁶ She made a North American impact throughout Canada and the United States, but by the time Aimee was thirty years old she had moved permanently to Los Angeles, California. She spent much of her twenties travelling across North America preaching in tent revivals. In 1923, she formally established Angelus Temple. “She called her new breed of Christian church the Foursquare Gospel, a complete gospel for body, soul, spirit, and eternity. Seating over five thousand people, this served as her center of activity. Backed by a sharp business manager (her mother), McPherson developed a large group of devoted followers.”¹²⁷

Aimee grew up on a humble farm in Ontario, Canada and described a beautifully, happy childhood. “So ended each happy, childhood day, with prayers and kisses, and Bible stories. My own childhood days being so blessed with Christian influence and Bible teaching, it always seemed to me that the home without a Godly praying Mother

¹²⁴ Madden, 2. Henrietta was commonly referred to as “Teacher,” an appellation that she treasured.

¹²⁵ Earl O. Roe, *Dream Big: The Henrietta Mears Story* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 224.

¹²⁶ Edith L. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody’s Sister* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), ix.

¹²⁷ Matthew Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

had been deprived of the greatest of all earthly blessings; that home has been robbed of the greatest of all earthly jewels.”¹²⁸ Aimee recalled being carried on the bicycle handlebars as her mother, Minnie, would pedal through rough, long terrain to get to the Salvation Army Meetings. What pride Aimee had in her mother, referred to as the ‘Sergeant-Major’ in the army.¹²⁹ And thus, the prayers of her mother began to weave into Aimee’s heart and soul. She delved into scripture, read countless books of literature and began to win awards.¹³⁰

Because of Minnie, Aimee was convinced at a young age that God had his hand on her for a divine purpose. She remembered the Young People’s rallies she would attend and it was customary for all the children to wear white sashes with colored mottos, such as “Jesus Saves” or “God is Love” etc. Her mother made her sash to read “God’s Little Child.”

And so she did hold me, for the fulfillment of her prayer,-through tempest and trail, sorrow and discouragement, that she might claim the promise and bring up the child in the way it should go, that when it was old it should not depart from it. Tell me little girls and boys who read this chapter, does your Mamma know Jesus? Does she pray for you that you may be a worker for Him someday?¹³¹

Both Henrietta and Aimee had faithful, convicted, God-fearing mothers. These mothers both instilled in them a deep sense of call, purpose and confidence to lead at a time when women were not seen in leadership. These mothers were deeply committed to a faith that expressed itself in lives of service and preaching the message of Jesus Christ.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹³⁰ Aimee Semple McPherson, *This is That* (Los Angeles, CA: Echo Park Evangelistic Association Inc., 1923), 26-27.

¹³¹ Ibid., 25.

Because Margaret and Minnie never wavered from this focus in their lives, their daughters were formed to preach the good news to millions.

Through the model of a strong spiritual lineage and deep experiences of faith, Henrietta and Aimee both had a clear call to ministry. Partnered with the presence of influential mothers in their lives, both Aimee and Henrietta had moving experiences of faith in the form of personal, physical healing. They were shown the power of prayer, and were taught how to call upon the Lord in times of great need and on behalf of others.

These two women, two luminaries of Christian ministry, had much in common. Born the same year in 1890, Henrietta Mears and Aimee Semple McPherson developed into the exceptional preachers and teachers they were under the tutelage of their respective mothers. Margaret Mears taught her daughter the value of prayer and scripture, and allowed her to develop her ministry skills by serving in increasingly substantial roles within the church.¹³² Even more so, she invited Henrietta to use her voice. She encouraged her to articulate her opinion, take initiative, and to speak up. She modeled to her a life of contribution and a deep interest in the spiritual well-being of others. Likewise, Minnie Kennedy championed her daughter from conception, and was her partner throughout her childhood to the peak of her ministry at Angelus Temple. Minnie and Margaret had deep love and high regard for their daughters that aided in a strong sense of self, forming them into women who were eager to speak, and who, ultimately, influenced a generation.

¹³² Laura E. Range, "The Grandmother of Modern Evangelicalism: The Life and Work of Henrietta Mears" (master's thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2008), 74.

Henrietta Mears and Aimee Semple McPherson both benefited from a loving mentor. These women had mothers who listened and provided comfort, but they also modeled to them a life of service, and challenged them to think deeply about their life of faith. Margaret Mears often asked, “What are you doing to contribute, Henrietta?”¹³³ Margaret Mears invited Henrietta to put herself in the center of the creation of things. She invited her to envision herself as the one who would actively strengthen the lives of others.¹³⁴ Similarly, Aimee’s mother Minnie Kennedy, had a persistent faith and showed a life devoted to God no matter the cost. She showed her young daughter a life of faith.

Mentors make a difference not only when they believe and speak of faith, but as they live a life which daily expresses the faith which drives them. This is where models of faith become formers of faith. Strong role models pose tough questions, serve the needy, create programs, and demonstrate an authentic prayer life, which all contributes to a life of sacrifice and service. In doing all these things, Minnie Kennedy and Margaret Mears helped to shape their daughters to do the same and to form their voices. They had a strong sense of self which aided them to live lives focused on others, driven by a divine purpose for the blessings on God’s people. Aimee and Henrietta are remembered and honored because their lives, not just their sermons, boldly preached.

Role Models & An Invitation

Role models help women to strengthen and form their voice and their preaching identity. Three women in the survey wrote of the importance of seeing and hearing

¹³³ Brotherton, 37.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 112.

female preachers in order to feel confident that they themselves could do the same. “I didn’t realize I could be a preacher as a woman until I was in college and witnessed a female pastor for the first time. I wouldn’t be where I am today if it weren’t for those first campus pastors modeling for me a woman in the pulpit and naming the gifts they saw in my life that would enable me to do the same.”¹³⁵ Of all the women surveyed nineteen out of seventy-four mentioned that the key component to their preaching formation came from someone giving them an opportunity, or extending an invitation to preach. Three told stories of being invited to preach when they were young and the powerful impact it had on them. When women in the survey were asked, “What has formed you as a preacher?” the answers varied, yet many women spoke of the training they received in seminary and role models. In addition, the majority pointed to the opportunities they had been given to preach as the key to their formation. These opportunities to practice in front of a live congregation encouraged women preachers as they began to hone their craft. One woman described her gratitude at being able to preach in different settings because, “Each setting challenged me differently and set me to focus on the Spirit in a new way.”¹³⁶

Courtney, a Presbyterian minister for over ten years, told her story at our lunch gathering about the pastor who formed her. From the time Courtney was three through the age of twelve, she had a pastor who loved her and walked closely with her in her life. Courtney was invited as a child to the platform to share who she was and what God was doing in her life. She had men throughout her life who asked her to speak and gave her a

¹³⁵ Survey responder #3.

¹³⁶ Survey responder #8.

space to proclaim, even at a very young age.¹³⁷ Courtney is a clear example of how important it is, not only for men and women to affirm the voices of women in their preaching gifts, but to go one step further and invite them to actually use their gifts. This sends a message to the woman preacher which claims: we need you, we respect you, and you are an authority. “My pastors in college and seminary were very supportive of my preaching and my first senior pastor gave me many opportunities to preach. Access to the pulpit, I believe, is a testament to pastors believing in your ability and calling as a preacher.”¹³⁸ Another woman shared a similar story in her survey,

I started preaching in my home congregation when I was confirmed in the eighth grade. Long before I was ordained, I identified as a preacher. It helped that my congregation and pastors always called it ‘preaching’ (not giving a message). They invited me to use the pulpit, preach using the text for that given day and I was expected to preach, not just give a talk from an early age. When I became a pastor, I worked with youth and adults in my congregation to learn to preach in this same way.¹³⁹

A moment of affirmation for a young woman or an invitation to come up and preach can solidify the call of God on their lives.

Another woman recounted the words of her childhood pastor who had given her many opportunities to preach, and in her exit interview from the college ministry, he told her, “He did not care what I talked about, but that I needed to continue to find ways to be in front of people and using my gifts for public speaking.” Once this opportunity has been experienced, if there are no other chances to practice, it can be devastating to the young preacher. One pastor described her most difficult challenge this way: “the experience of

¹³⁷ Large luncheon interview with women preachers, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA, July 20, 2016.

¹³⁸ Survey responder #19.

¹³⁹ Survey responder #55.

being overlooked as a pulpit candidate: I have faithfully attended a large church for over four years as an ordained minister in the larger community and have never been asked to preach.”¹⁴⁰ It is crucial for women to feel as if their community supports and affirms their gifts and subsequently encourages them to use those gifts.

The Power of Story

Though role models and invitation are important for forming the women’s voice, it is ultimately through story that the female preacher-identity is formed and strengthened. Not only do we need to reflect on the scriptural stories of women in ministry, and the women of the past who defied the odds and persisted in their preaching gifts, but in order for women to strengthen their voice they must allow the stories of others to form them. During my months researching the topic of women preaching, the greatest insight I have acquired is the idea that women learn best through sharing stories with other women. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the United Kingdom's leading independent think tank and their work aims to shape policy for international development and humanitarian issues. In February of 2016 they conducted a study on how women develop their voice. The report reviewed global evidence on the processes of change that enable women to have substantive voice and leadership in decision-making. The research focused on two key questions:

- What are the enabling factors for women’s and girls’ voices, leadership, and access to decision-making?

¹⁴⁰ Survey responder #12.

- What do we know about whether and how women’s and girls’ voice, leadership and/or presence in decision-making roles result in greater gender equality?¹⁴¹

They chose three key terms to define. Voice, decision-making, and leadership: these are elements of women’s empowerment. They describe a woman’s power to express her preferences, demands, views and interests, to gain access to positions of decision-making that affect public or private power and resource allocation, and to exercise influence in leadership positions. Women’s voice, decision-making, and leadership power may be present at the household, community, and national level, and may be individual or collective.¹⁴²

In order for women to move into positions of authority, they must have a strong sense of personal voice. In order to flourish, they need to work in a context which allows them to express their authority and influence. The research revealed that the woman’s voice is strengthened when it finds itself within a community of other women who affirm each other in their shared vocation.

Women organizing with other women around shared interests builds their capabilities for voice and influence. The experience of group cohesion and solidarity can contribute to self-affirmation at the individual and collective level, give support and legitimacy to gender equality agendas, and enable women to exert the collective power needed to shift gender norms.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Pilar Domingo, Rebecca Holmes, Tam O’Neil, Nicola Jones, Kate Bird, Anna Larson, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall and Craig Valters, “Women’s Voice and Leadership in Decision –Making: Assessing the Evidence,” *Overseas Development Institute*, last modified March 2015, accessed October 20, 2017, 7, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9636.pdf>.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10.

This finding is essential to the future of women preachers in the church. Knowing that women's voice has the potential to build strength and influence through a community is the essence of where the spirit of the Lord resides. The invitation is to come together to allow the collective to bring a new-found strength to the individual. Here, through the sharing of life together, where differing voices are celebrated and affirmed, the full expression of God is preached. This is the place where stories can be shared and in the telling of these stories women's voices will rise. Author Patricia Gould-Champ states it this way,

The substance of women's preaching is in our story. And it is in the story that women find their voice. The voice of women preachers is the ability to confront and comfort at the same time. The voice or substance of women's preaching is the ability to speak to people who are oppressed, hurting, and violated but who are nonetheless required to maintain and live from day to day. Women preachers help us to name our reality and to find hope in the midst. It would be fair to say that women weave the substance of their sermons out of the substance of their lives. Women see the text differently and therefore preach it differently. The images of God and women in the biblical texts are presented in ways that shock, challenge, and yes, anger those who have become comfortable with the given. The substance of women's preaching is freshness and the ability to make us look around and discover where we are as a people. This substance challenges those who have become comfortable but it serves to release in those of us in the wilderness a spirit of hope.¹⁴⁴

The future of the church, and its thriving, depends on the pulpit filled with a diversity of voices. Young and old, male and female, all from differing backgrounds, ensures that the gospel will be proclaimed and the message will be seen and heard by all. The Great Commission was for all. "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and

¹⁴⁴ Patricia A. Gould-Champ, *Women and Preaching: Telling the Story in Our Own Voice: Born to Preach* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000), 106.

teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:18-20). The call to make disciples, to preach the gospel, and to baptize the nations is not specific to gender. This is God’s work and God calls women and men to join in the holy work of proclaiming the story of God.

Conclusion

What does it mean to be a faithful woman preacher? I claim that beyond the practice, reflection and reliance on the Holy Spirit (acknowledging all of these to be important), what is essential in order for women to discover and strengthen their authentic preaching voice is to hear other women preachers tell their stories. It means being engaged in hearing women’s voices, past and present, and using one’s voice in conversation with God and with others. These stories have the power to inspire, empower, and create a vision that may have previously gone unseen. As I have listened to the stories of women who are female preachers, I was moved, inspired, and changed. My preaching voice became stronger, more confident and more authentic in knowing other women are telling the story of Jesus through their voices. Sadly, when you look through the current literature on women and preaching, the majority of the books only focus on the theological defense for women preachers. Most women are exhausted by theological debate and, instead of spending time defending their position, they would rather share their stories with young women preachers. Women would rather hear how God is moving, point to moments of sacred conversion, and bear witness to places where God was glorified because of their ministry. There is power in stories that move women to new places and to keep them focused on the call of God. I want to urge the church to

listen to the preacher tell her story and watch how other women will begin to form their voices.

When women preach something profound begins to happen. There is movement; the feedback loop is disrupted. There is a shift in the culture; young women become inspired and the female voice is no longer silenced. Instead of a single voice, the Spirit of God begins to move in new fresh ways. People begin to see the divine working to edify all of God's people. When a woman preaches she carries on a legacy of all the women who have pioneered before her and establishes her place among the saints who have claimed the retelling of God's story from the beginning. When she preaches we catch a glimpse of the coming of the eschatological kingdom of God. "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

SECTION 4:
ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The primary hurdles women have had to overcome within the church are biblical, historical, and cultural. These hurdles have discouraged women, keeping them from entering ministry because these challenges seemed insurmountable. Yet, there is currently a women's movement underway. The tides are changing because more and more women are overcoming the hurdles rather than cowering before them. Hope for the future is found in the stories of women in scripture, and in looking closely both at particular women throughout church history and contemporary women preachers who are called to persevere. They are reforming the church in new ways where men and women together proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

The artifact is a book that will tell the stories of the women who have blazed the trail for the next generation of young women preachers. There are stories of discouragement and hope, structure and freedom, routine and change. In all of them, God is at work. In particular, the book includes in-depth look at three contemporary female preachers. The Rev. Dr. Mary Hulst is the first woman to be ordained in the Christian Reformed Church in America. Her story of perseverance will encourage those who serve in denominations currently close to woman in leadership. The Rev. Dr. Amy Butler currently serves Riverside Baptist Church in New York City, where she is the first woman to be the senior minister, preaching in a pulpit that every sitting president has preached in, as well as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. Finally the Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil is the Director of Reconciliation Ministries at Seattle Pacific

University and preaches regularly at her church in Seattle, WA. McNeil is a Pentecostal preacher and did her graduate work at Fuller Seminary.

The book will also include a more in-depth look into the ministries of Aimee Semple-McPherson and Henrietta Mears and how their faithful and enduring ministries carved a path for women behind them to continue their legacy. These stories of other women may prompt women to gather in person to share and affirm the stories of their peers. It may ignite a conversation for women to continue to grow and practice their craft and live more fully into their preaching identity.

SECTION 5:
ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

November 17, 2017

Mr. Jeff Crosby
InterVarsity Press
PO Box 1400
Downers Grove, IL 60515

Dear Mr. Crosby,

Thank you for your support and encouragement of women writers and women in ministry! I spend most of my days in conversation with young, female, college students who have a deep faith in Jesus Christ, and are longing to serve in full-time ministry, yet the majority of them have a deep-rooted fear around preaching. I am an ordained Presbyterian Minister and have served in campus ministry at Whitworth University for the last ten years. As a seasoned preacher, I recognize how long it took me to own my preaching identity. If it wasn't for other women encouraging me along the way, I wonder where I would have ended up. I find myself often discouraged that even today, young women are sent the message that women who preach are going against scripture, and that they do not belong in positions of authority in the church. Subsequently, women are intimidated to explore preaching and feel cultural pressure from many churches that still believe the pulpit is not where women belong.

I seek representation for my work *She Proclaims: Stories of Women Who Preach*. Given your vested interest in the future of the church I thought my work might be of interest to you. The completed book would be approximately 200 pages and would include stories of exemplary women preachers and how they discovered and strengthened their voice in the pulpit.

Thank you for your consideration! I have attached the first two chapters for your review.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Mindy Smith

November 17, 2017
InterVarsity Press
PO Box 1400
Downers Grove, IL 60515

Dear Mr. Crosby,

I spend most of my days in conversation with young, female, college students who have a deep faith in Jesus Christ and are longing to serve in full-time ministry, yet the majority of whom have a deep-rooted fear around preaching. I have been in ordained campus ministry for the last ten years and as a seasoned preacher, recognize how long it took me to own my preaching identity. Even today, young women are being sent the message that women who preach are going against scripture and do not belong in positions of authority in the church. Subsequently, women are intimidated to be seen as an authority figure and feel cultural pressure from churches that still believe, “We do not support women preaching.”

I seek representation for my work *She Proclaims: Stories of Women Who Preach*. Given your vested interest in the future of the church I thought my work might be of interest to you. This would be approximately two-hundred pages and would include stories of exemplary women preachers who discovered and strengthened their voice in the pulpit.

I recently graduated with a Doctorate of Ministry from Portland Seminary, where my research centered on the voice-formation of women preachers. I spent many hours interviewing women across the country, from multiple backgrounds and representing the spectrum of denominations. Their stories are empowering and inspiring. I believe the best way to encourage young women to move into the pulpit is to continue to tell stories of the women who have gone before them. This book is meant to be a personal reflection on these women, and the wisdom they pass on to future generations of women pastors.

This includes an in-depth look at the preaching journey of Rev. Dr. Mary Hulst, the first woman ordained in the Christian Reformed Church in America; Rev. Dr. Amy Butler, currently serving at Riverside Baptist Church in New York City, and the first woman to be the senior minister preaching weekly in a pulpit that every sitting president has preached in, as well as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr.; and the story of Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil, serving as the Director of Reconciliation Ministries at Seattle Pacific University and preaching regularly at her church in Seattle, WA. McNeil is a Pentecostal preacher and did her graduate work at Fuller Seminary. All three of these women can preach the paint off the walls. I would be so humbled to tell their stories as well as those of Roberta Hestenes, Henrietta Mears, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Nadia Bolz-Webber and others in order that many other women might be encouraged to not fear the pulpit, but to step boldly into it.

Thank you for considering this proposal. I have attached the first two chapters for your review.

Sincerely,

Rev. Mindy Smith

Book Proposal

Title: She Proclaims: Stories of Women Who Preach

Author: Rev. Dr. Mindy Smith
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Spokane, WA 99218
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Hook:

Most women who have ever preached know the feeling of standing at the door after the worship service shaking hands with parishioners, and waiting for that one comment. “That’s was pretty good, but I have to tell you, watching a woman preach is like watching a dog walk on its hind legs.” This memoir is a compilation of reflections on numerous female preachers, the challenges they face, and the comments they endure, in a church that still isn’t sure what to do with them.

Overview:

In the church today, women’s voices in the pulpit are still a relatively unfamiliar phenomenon. Young women still question whether the church is a safe place for them to pursue full-time vocational ministry. The church is called to affirm and develop an orchestra of voices, high or low, feminine or masculine, in order that the full sound of God’s voice may be heard.

The primary hurdles women have had to overcome within the church are biblical, historical and cultural. These hurdles have discouraged women, keeping them from entering ministry because these challenges seemed insurmountable. Yet, there is currently a women’s movement underway. The tides are changing because more and more women are overcoming the hurdles rather than cowering before them. Hope for the future is found in the stories of women in scripture, and in looking closely both at particular women throughout church history and contemporary women preachers who are called to persevere. They are reforming the church in new ways where men and women together proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. This book will tell the stories of the women who have blazed the trail for the next generation of young women preachers to come. It will empower young women discerning a call to preaching to form their authentic voice.

Purpose:

- Encourage young women who are discerning a call to ministry
- Highlight the particular challenges of women who preach
- Share wisdom from the personal stories of exemplary women preachers
- Create a sisterhood of women preachers through their shared stories

Promotion & Marketing:

While some church traditions discourage women from the pastorate on biblical grounds other churches support the idea of female preachers in principle, but simply fail to take the steps necessary to cultivate women's gifts. The hope for the book is to be a resource for women discerning a call to ministry and preaching. It is meant to tell real stories of women who have persevered and endured amidst the challenges of a church that is still ambiguous about women's roles in church authority. I pray the book would be an encouragement for women to step into full-time ministry recognizing that they do not go alone, that there is a network of women who will cheer them on in their pursuit. Because of my role as a Campus Ministry in a CCCU school, I have many connections to young women across the country and know this book will fill a need. As the Director of the Preaching Academy through the Office of Church Engagement at Whitworth University, I speak regularly at conferences and will use social media outlets to promote the book at home and in my travels.

Competition:

- *Women's Voices and the Practice of Preaching* by Nancy Lammers Gross; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017.
- *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* by Mary Donovan Turner & Mary Lin Hudson; Lucas Parks Books, 2014.
- *The Woman in the Pulpit* by Carol M. Noren; Abingdon Press, 1992.

Uniqueness:

In a market where there is little written on the subject, this book is not meant to be a theological defense or a book of sermons by women, but is meant to look deeper into the journey of women who are extraordinary preachers, from a variety of different church backgrounds and affiliations. Their stories have the power to inspire and encourage young women to see the church as a place that needs their voice. While there are many books on building preaching skills and exercises around strengthening voice, there is no book that emphasizes the importance of sharing women's preaching stories as a way to strengthen the voices of future women preachers.

Endorsements: (author has contacted for endorsement)

- Dr. Leonard Sweet
- Rev. Dr. Mary Hulst
- Rev. Dr. Amy Butler
- Dr. Lori Wagner

Book Format:

Memoir-style; written in first-person voice, looking through a lens of a women preacher. Reflecting on the wisdom of the preacher through the mediums of sermons, conversations, and interviews with female preachers.

Chapter Outline:

- Introduction: A look into the author's backstory and her journey of developing her preaching voice.
- Pastor Mary Hulst: A closer look at the first woman in the Christian Reformed Church to be ordained in the United States.
- Pastor Amy Butler: A closer look at the first woman to be named the Senior Minister at Riverside Baptist Church in New York City.
- Pastor Brenda Salter McNeil: A closer look at an African-American Pentecostal professor and preacher who was born to preach, but was trained in a white, evangelical seminary.

Intended Readers:

- Primary Audience:
 - New and inquiring women preachers
 - Women who have struggled to find their authentic preaching voice
- Secondary Audience:
 - Veteran women preachers
 - The church

Manuscript:

The current manuscript is approximately 20,000 words and includes an introduction and three chapters in which individual preachers are highlighted: Mary Hulst, Amy Butler, and Brenda Salter McNeil. Author would need another year after book deal is signed to complete the book.

Author Bio:

The Rev. Mindy Smith graduated from Whitworth University in 1998 with a B.A. in Theology. After graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary in May 2006, Mindy returned to Spokane in summer of 2008. In October of that year, she was ordained as the Campus Minister in the Whitworth Chapel to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). For nearly ten years Mindy has walked closely with college students, training them for ministry. In the summer of 2015, Mindy began her doctoral work in preaching through Portland Seminary and graduated in the spring of 2018. Her research focused on how women develop their preaching voice. Mindy preaches regularly in chapel at Whitworth, serves as the Director of the Preaching Academy in conjunction with Whitworth's Office

of Church Engagement, and speaks regularly for churches, the university, and for student retreats. Mindy's love for preaching and her heart for young women who are discerning a call to ministry led her to compile a resource to encourage young women to develop their voice and pursue preaching.

Publishing Credits:

Building Altars: Selected Sermons from Mindy Smith; Published by Portland Seminary; 2017.

The Story Lectionary; Compilation of Sermons with contributions from Mindy Smith; Published by Portland Seminary; 2017.

Future Projects:

- **Listen to Her Voice:**
 - A website devoted to resources for women preachers as a place to network and to share stories, resources, and videos of sermons. It would include thoughtful ways to continue to push each other as preachers, to highlight successes, and to share in the journey together.
- **She Proclaims:**
 - This would be a weekly podcast interviewing women preachers, hearing their story, and listening to their sermons.

SECTION 6:

POSTSCRIPT

This research started when my passion for preaching began to emerge. During my first call as an ordained minister at Whitworth University, it did not take long for me to realize that as a woman pastor and preacher my role was to be a model for the young women on campus. Many female students came to me wrestling with issues of women in pastoral and preaching roles and were longing to learn more. This work is for them. It is meant to bring encouragement and support, and to promote the woman's voice within the church.

The work began to take shape when I was accepted into Portland Seminary and was invited to study under Dr. Leonard Sweet in the field of preaching. In our first advance together Len mentioned the deep and fruitful impact of Henrietta Mears. I was able to share with the group the influence she had had on my own ministry. The professors and mentors who formed me in my faith were disciples of Henrietta. That began my work to look more closely into her life and influence on the Church in the United States.

I wondered about the factors that contributed to Henrietta's and Aimee Semple McPherson's tenacity and endurance to preach in a time when there were very few women in authoritative roles within the church. I wanted to know what formed them and how they came into their preaching identity. My first semester's research compared these two exemplary women, looking for distinctive features within their formation as preachers.

During my second semester I explored the more difficult biblical passages which the church often uses to exclude women from preaching. I conducted interviews, researched both sides of the arguments and began to flesh out the theological reasoning for and against women preachers. During the following summer I hosted a conversation with thirty women preachers during our summer pastor's conference at Whitworth University. I asked them all to reflect on their experience as women preachers, and the conversation was rich. Women shared similar struggles, the numerous ways they still feel oppressed, and the clear conviction they have to continue to preach even amidst the tension. Because of that meaningful conversation, I launched a survey the following fall and asked women to share their personal experiences as preachers. The results of that survey pointed me at the issue of voice. It was a common struggle amongst the survey participants and that is how my primary research question developed: how do women form their voice as preachers?

My fourth term I looked more closely at what others had written on the topic. I interviewed theologians and preaching professors and accessed the wealth of brilliant minds who teach at Whitworth. I attended courses which emphasized women in pastoral roles and found indispensable learning opportunities for women to learn how to own their authoritative preaching voice. I was also invited to co-teach a preaching course in the Master's program at Whitworth and was able to work with women specifically on their craft of preaching.

I learned that too often women work to emulate a man's voice when they preach. The majority of literature on the topic encourages women to exercise their voice, own their bodies, practice breathing, and work hard on the particularities of the delivery. Yet,

the women I had in-depth interviews with about their voice formation, spoke of loving mentors, a deep connection with the Holy Spirit, and the strength found in witnessing other women preaching. When they heard the stories of women who were gifted preachers, other women found they could own their craft, claim their identity, and then feel freedom to proclaim boldly.

I was most surprised in my research by the amount of energy for this topic. Whenever I mentioned it to any of my colleagues, male or female, it was received with enthusiasm and interest. I believe there is much more work to be done in this area and I am excited to keep exploring. I would like to continue to survey women preachers and discover more about how the seminaries are preparing women specifically. I would like to explore the possibilities of publishing the book I have begun writing in order to get the stories of exemplary women preachers out into the public. I would love to launch a website in which women would find resources for preaching, encouragement, share stories, and see incredible women preaching.

Although women have come a long way, there is still a winding road ahead. Women still are questioned regarding the appropriateness of their role as preacher and I believe it is time for that sentiment to finally be put to rest. I want to work for systemic change, where women preachers become the norm, not the exception, in the deep hope that God's voice would finally be fully represented by both male and female voices together.

APPENDIX A:
ARTIFACT

She Proclaims:
Stories of Women Who Preach

Introduction

The sun was beaming down on the still water of Flathead Lake. It was early morning and the tears wouldn't stop. I remember my prayer, rocking back and forth, "What do you want me to do? What do you want me to do?!" It was all I knew to say and I repeated it over and over, the prayer getting louder in my mind. After getting to the point of screaming the question in my head, I was able to breathe, and I slowly whispered, "What do you want me to do, Lord?" I heard nothing other than the water lapping onto the shore. I was in crisis.

Through a series of circumstances, I had found myself at a fork in the road. As a woman pastor, I had been ordained for seven years, but was now unsure if the ministry was still a safe space for a woman like me, one who liked to preach. The year prior I had preached often, receiving strong encouragement in my gift, but was suddenly finding fewer opportunities to practice. I was longing to form my preaching voice but did not know how to proceed.

Two nights later, up in my little cabin on Flathead Lake, the internet led me to George Fox Evangelical Seminary. Applications were due the next week to begin a doctoral program called Preaching as Story. I read every piece of information on the program and felt God answering my question. The next week I went to my pastor and dear friend who had recently finished his doctoral work at George Fox, and I described to him my experience and my fear. I told him, "I have two small kids, I have a full-time job, and I am a wreck right now! I can't do this! This will kill me." He listened well, let me cry for a few minutes and then replied, "Mindy, this will be your lifeline. This will be the very thing that saves you."

Three months later, I began my doctoral work. It began the first evening listening to Dr. Len Sweet, with whom my pastor had recently studied. I had been introduced to his books and told of his creativity and charisma. He walked into the room and his presence filled it. He was tall, with long, silver hair. He had a deep voice, a voice that sounded like it had been singing most of its life. He began that night by telling us a story. At the end of the story, he continued teaching, “Behind every word is a backstory, and at the base of every backstory is an image or a metaphor. The mind is made first of metaphors, which it then turns into narratives, which then finally turns into words.” Len worked diligently with my cohort of students to seep this idea deeply into our spirits. His desire was that we would begin to approach scripture as a story, one that is not fragile, or that needs to be dissected verse by verse. The biblical story, he insisted, should be understood as strong; not something to be protected, but something to be understood. As preachers, our job is to tell the story, the details and the peculiarities, to observe the nuances, and to make those very familiar Bible stories of our childhood fresh again. Preaching should be a place where redundancy and novelty intersect in the hopes that the people in our churches would know the stories deep within their spirits. Because of the experience of learning from Len Sweet for the past two years, I was drawn to research around the scriptural stories of women preachers and the stories of women who have gone before us and currently who are preaching the gospel in powerful ways to capture hearts for Jesus Christ.

My research focused on how women form their preaching voice and the influence of their personal stories of strength and endurance. These stories, I believe, will empower and encourage other women to preach as well. I interviewed a variety of women and

asked them to tell me their backstories and the metaphors that they use to understand God's call on their life. As a Campus Pastor, much of my work is with female college-students, specifically those who are discerning a call to ministry. Many of these students imagine preaching to be fraught with fear and trembling. They cannot fathom the thought of doing it themselves, and most have never been exposed to a female preacher. What has struck me most powerfully within the last few years of study is the ways in which the majority of women who preach have not only had to endure theological debate to defend their position, but comments about their dress or hair, ridicule for the sound of their voice, and pressure to sound more like a man. They have withstood so many voices in the church saying, "No!" to them while clearly hearing God saying, "Yes."

Early on I resonated with the words of Joan Chittister:

Who are the women of the past and the present, then, whose gifts of intuition and flexibility, self-sacrifice and receptivity, support and feeling have made the kind of difference that we need now? Who are the women that God has raised up to show us what women can do, and where are the women who are giving, giving, giving—despite opposition and rejection and disdain—the saving gifts of women yet? And what do they say to us? From the revelation of Scripture to the reports on the daily news, their numbers and their names are legion, though they have been seldom recognized and rarely affirmed.¹⁴⁵

I began a search to uncover the treasures of these women, to examine their faithful sacrifice – lives given to Christ's service for the building up of God's church which too often does not allow them to preach. Many of the ministries of these outstanding preachers have gone unnoticed. Faced with countless hurdles and historical oppression from a church which has too often said, "No!" these women have overcome the obstacles. The stories I have compiled speak of the faithfulness of God, whose commitment to

¹⁴⁵ Chittister, 7.

raising up women preachers is evident throughout history and today. The common theme for each of these women is the unshakeable conviction to press on, regardless of the response of a church that would not honor them. They knew no other way but to follow the call of God to preach even in the face of resistance. Preaching is, in and of itself, a high, difficult calling and it takes considerable strength and courage for women to venture into this arena. Len Sweet wrote, “Preaching is the ‘groanings’ of those whose full redemption awaits the fulfillment of their calling. Paul believed he would fall under divine judgment if he did not carry out his call to preach: ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.’”¹⁴⁶ These stories give witness to a loving God who created these particular women with a groaning deep in their soul to preach. They preach as pastors who recognize the sacred calling that it is to be the mouthpiece of God, who for some unknown reason chooses to use broken human beings, male and female together, to share God’s story in the hopes that all voices will proclaim that Jesus Christ is King.

The Backstory

I grew up in the ministry world. I should say the *youth* ministry world. It included weekly Young Life clubs at my house. My dad was on Young Life staff for the majority of my upbringing in Southern California. Young Life was founded in the 1950s by a man named Jim Rayburn who coined the phrase, “you should never bore a kid with the gospel.” When clubs meet they consist of loud games, rowdy music, ridiculous skits, and always a message about Jesus at the end. My father was on Young Life staff when I was

¹⁴⁶ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 11.

growing up and he spent his days thinking about how to bring the gospel to people.

Young life staff were trained with the philosophy of mission-mindedness, which insisted that leaders go to where the students were: at the school, on the field, at practices, at their plays, or concerts, or games. Go and immerse yourself in their culture.

My dad lived his life this way. He poured himself into young students and up-and-coming Young Life staff who had a deep love for Jesus and who wanted to love kids for Christ. My dad was a gifted Bible teacher with a kind heart and a sensitive way of telling people – especially those who couldn't care less – about Jesus. Young Life wanted to connect with the kids who would never step into a church, those who may not be in the popular crowd, those who may not always get an invitation. So, when it was time for the club, I remember as a young girl, sitting in the midst of a crowd of high school students, listening to my dad do his best to catch the interest of an uninterested kid. He was a gifted storyteller. He knew how to embellish, how to describe moments, when to pause, and he had impeccable timing in his delivery. His listeners were always captivated by his rendition of certain events. He spoke about issues that were relevant to them, he named struggles they were dealing with, and then somehow, in his masterful way, connected the young person to Zacchaeus feeling like a loner, or the woman caught in adultery feeling ashamed, or the prodigal son wanting to be released from his parents who just didn't understand him. And I remember watching these groups of kids week after week get drawn into the story of Jesus as my father made it alive for them.

Since then, I have always been drawn to good stories. Reading them, telling them, hearing them, and now ten years into my own ministry, preaching them. Telling stories, I think, was the reason I got into ministry in the first place. I thought telling the story of

Jesus was the most powerful thing I could offer to the world. Plus, I had the gift of impersonation so I knew that if I could do it like my dad did I would be just fine. Like many other young women I knew growing up, men were the only ones we saw preaching up front. As a result, many of us learned to preach like men, because they were the only ones doing it.

When I began college I volunteered to serve in a Young Life club close to campus. I was given opportunities to speak in my club every so often and it was the beginning of my journey in preaching. After I graduated from college I joined Young Life staff and spoke regularly, designed program for summer camps, and was invited often to speak. It was my second year on staff, while at summer camp, that I first was confronted about my gender being an “issue.” And would you believe that it was a woman who questioned my position? Sadly, I have found in my years of ministry it is not just men who are upset by women in authority. Many women are vocal about their belief that women should play a more subordinate role in ministry. I recall the day that the wife of a man I was working with, pushed her baby stroller up to me, and in a stern voice said, “It is inappropriate for you to be here in this position!” I stood there shocked. “Excuse me?” I asked, confused. “It is inappropriate for any *woman* to be in your position!” she yelled this time.

It hit me like a ton of bricks, and my twenty-five-year-old self, barked back at her and then went to my room and spiraled down into sadness, insecurity, and self-doubt. To my way of thinking I was just being faithful to the things God was calling me to do. I had felt invited, even affirmed by a community of Christians to serve in the positions which I found myself. But could I be wrong about all this? Why did my position offend her so

deeply? Were others offended as well? How could I graciously continue with such resistance coming at me? I remember asking the Lord all of these questions. In the days that followed encouragement ensued from those who knew me well. Yet I still wondered, “Will I be able to endure this type of sentiment if I continue on in professional ministry?” I wasn’t at all sure.

What I wish I would have been able to say to that woman that day was, “Do you know that if it wasn’t for a woman Young Life never would have even begun?” Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life, was raised in the faith by Henrietta Mears in her weekly Sunday school class at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. Henrietta Mears has been called the “grandmother of modern Evangelicalism.” She was widely known for leading thousands of individuals to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but in addition, helped disciple and train some of the major evangelical leaders of the 20th century including Bill Bright, Don Moomaw, and Billy Graham. More than four-hundred of her students went into vocational Christian ministry and founded over fifty influential ministries. During her time at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, she grew the college ministry from 400 to 4,000 students in two and a half years. Eventually, it became the largest Presbyterian Sunday School class in the world with over 6,000 members. Moreover, in 1933, she founded a publishing company committed to producing creative, age-appropriate, biblical Sunday school curriculum. And because of her strong influence and deep commitment to camping ministry, Henrietta Mears founded Forest Home Conference Center in Southern California in 1930. Jim Rayburn was taught evangelism, camping ministry, and loving students for Christ, by a woman. Because of this woman’s strong influence on his life, Jim Rayburn founded Young Life, an organization focused

on introducing high school students to Jesus Christ. Young Life grew rapidly throughout the country and around the world. For 75 years kids have heard the gospel message through faithful leaders who have intentionally walked with adolescents and pointed them to Jesus. Sadly, I hadn't yet heard Henrietta's story. Because I had not heard it, I was not able to tell it. Had that story been in my library, I don't think I would have melted at the words of the angry wife pushing her stroller into me. Imagine if *she* knew the story. I wonder if she would have thought differently about accusing me of being out of place. I think I could have listened and graciously explained my call because I would have known that I do not stand alone, but find myself in the company of women saints who have gone before me because of their deep love for Jesus Christ. This is why it is so crucial to tell the stories of women who serve God's ministry faithfully. Because somehow in God's unobtrusive way stories have the power to heal broken spirits. They are able to put us back together again, to get us out of bed, to set us on a new path. The story has the power to open our eyes to the truth that we are all broken.

Jesus rarely answered a direct question. He would either respond with a question, or he would tell a story. And in the story, there was often a man or a woman in a conflict, in need of resolution. Jesus knew that this was the most powerful form of communication he could use to bring meaning to people desperately searching for things to make sense. So that when the questions come, instead of becoming defensive or combative, we can remind our skeptical brothers and sisters of the influence of Henrietta Mears, and all the other women like her, and how their lives influenced the American church.

Go Anyway

When I think back on the season in my life when God asked me to begin to consider seminary, I remember the heavy feelings of dread. Everything about seminary felt to me like being drafted into an institution I did not want to be a part of because I honestly thought “they really don’t want me.” Although I had many supportive people in my life, the oppressive messages were speaking much more loudly in my head. God kept inviting me to consider, and in my spirit, I would turn my back and cross my arms in refusal. God would nudge me mostly through invitations from male pastors. “Have you ever thought about seminary?” they would ask. Internally I would pull back hard, but externally I would smile and sheepishly say, “Not really.” Yet, the question they asked always sent me reeling. “What young women go to seminary?” I couldn’t see it for myself. Again, I grew up in a Young Life world, and when we went to church there were only men leading in worship. I thought Sunday school was boring so I would go and sit with the adults and listen to my dad teach each week. I never saw any women up front. I had no vision of women in formal pastoral roles, and I resisted the idea for myself. I thought God had it all wrong.

I remember quite clearly a distinct moment in my discernment when I stopped pulling back and began to listen. I was seated in the balcony of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington. The church was known for its large sanctuary, formal choir, professional music, thoughtful liturgy, and incredible preaching. That morning I saw a young woman walk into the pulpit and I could not take my eyes off of her. She was only a few years older than me and stood confidently before the large congregation in a clergy robe. She was articulate, engaged with her listeners, and told great stories. She

could preach! Watching her that morning I felt released from my struggle, and I heard a voice inside me say, “Well I could do that.” It was as though what I had once perceived as impossible and burdensome, now had been transformed into a divine invitation and a beautiful opportunity. That morning I witnessed a young woman using her voice with authority and grace, and suddenly I could see a future previously hidden from me.

Soon after the service I went up to her and introduced myself and asked her to lunch. She energetically said, “Yes!” and we met the next week for Thai food. There over our chopsticks, I told her my whole story. All of my angst, worry, stress, and insecurities came pouring out. She smiled, nodded, and listened to me vent my fears around pursuing ordained ministry. She heard me. “I get it,” she said. “Go anyway,” she told me. I applied to seminary the following week and found myself in school the next fall. I felt the invitation, encouragement, and support to go and pursue my call simply by seeing another woman living out her vocation and hearing her story. My long struggle was resolved through the witness of a church culture affirming the woman's voice and a woman-affirming the divine call God had placed in my life.

As I moved from speaking at Young Life clubs in college to homiletics classes in seminary, I found that stories began to take a back seat in my training. Stories were seen as too casual, too emotional, and instead of relying on interesting illustrations I was taught to articulate sound theology, build a structure around three points, and yet be concise. It was always a nice touch and a grade boost to mention a dead German theologian somewhere in there as well. I remember listening to my peers preach in the classroom and feeling so bored. “Is this the future of the church,” I wondered. And where were all the women? There were a few of us, but we were all panicking about preaching

the “right-way” and just tried to go by the rules to get the passing grade we needed. We did what the professor asked us to do.

After I graduated seminary, I began my first call at Whitworth University and I remember that when I began preaching in chapel, my old Young Life friends were stunned. “What has happened to you?” they asked. I had become so formulaic in my delivery it was as if they didn't recognize me. I had learned to impersonate my professors at the seminary. I had become boring, stiff, and my three-points lacked any sort of charisma. “Seminary ruined you,” they said. “Where are the stories? What happened to your personality up there? You need to unlearn what you have learned,” a few of them said. I didn't know what to do. I was a young woman with a call to preach but had lost my voice. I didn't know how I was going to strengthen it or even recall the essence of what drew me to ministry in the first place.

Over the past ten years when I think about my preaching story, it centers around the particular experiences I have had listening to other women preach. Those incredibly gifted women preachers who held a room, who gave me goosebumps, who demonstrated the power of the female voice. As a young woman, I longed to hear strong female voices. In my own experience, whenever I preach, I will often have young women come up to me with a surprised and interested look on their faces. They ask me if we can meet, and usually, it is because they have never seen a woman preach before and they are curious to learn more about it. I have learned how crucial it is to have women up front so that more people can recognize that this is a valid role. It's a real thing. Women preach. God affirms it, and women are gifted at it.

I will be the first to admit that whenever a woman steps into a pulpit I get nervous, especially at conferences. At Christian pastor conferences, there is typically one woman for every ten men. This means the pressure upon her is ten-fold to communicate well because she, at that moment, is representing *all* women preachers. If she is mediocre the generalization becomes “women aren’t strong preachers.” And since the opportunities for women are so few and far between, that sentiment becomes the enduring message. In contradistinction, if you have ten men up there, and half of them deliver a mediocre message, the negative sentiment won’t define the whole of them simply because the chances of hearing a strong message from a man are greater. In other words, we still live in a church world where, when one woman steps into the pulpit, she represents the whole lot of us. Therefore, I get nervous because there is so much at stake. Women have to work hard at this. Women who stand up to preach in front of any large audience have to be excellent for the sake of the whole team.

I sometimes imagine, after I hear a nervous woman preach, what I would have liked to have said to her prior to her sermon. I would pull her aside in the back room and give her a two-minute pep talk before she started. It would go something like this, “When you stand up there please don’t begin with an apology. Please don’t tell everyone you are nervous. Don’t tell us how hard it is for you speak in front of people. Because if you do that we will all feel sorry for you, and any hopes that we had that you would be an authority on anything just flew out the window! Be yourself, be interesting, captivate the audience, and tell a story. Tell a good story. Tell a story that the majority sitting there listening might resonate with. Tell a story that captures the spirit of what we all struggle with: loneliness, control, and love. Preach for the love of God!”

When women preach something special happens. I believe a new voice is unleashed. A new style is set free and God's mouthpiece expands. The hearers listen differently, they pick up on unfamiliar details, find places of compassion, and are moved by her perspective. When women preach their hearts, the familiar stories of Jesus become somehow strange and interesting, and fresh. Women who stand up in the pulpit matter. It is an educational opportunity for all the skeptical men in the audience, and it makes a difference for all the young women sitting in the congregation. "Well, if she is up there then maybe I could too someday," they think to themselves. And quite frankly, we need more women in our churches speaking on behalf of a loving God who created us both, male and female, to work together, serve together, and preach together for God's glory.

Through my own journey of ministry, I have found that my voice is strengthened whenever I hear other women preach with conviction and authority. When I witness women who unapologetically use their gifts of preaching and have a passion for Jesus Christ, combined with a humble reliance on the Holy Spirit, I am moved to dig deeper into my own work as a preacher. Whenever I encounter women who describe their preaching experience as "I was made to do this," I am reminded of Paul's letter to Corinth. At a time of division within their church Paul writes this:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses (1Cor 12:4-11).

Paul teaches us about the variety of gifts God gives to equip *all* the members. I am convicted by the truth that both men and women are gifted to build up the body of Christ. Spiritual gifts are not gender-specific. Through intentionally growing in relationship with these faithful women who have strengthened the body of Christ for much of their lives, I have collected a library of stories, built a support system of cheerleaders, and my voice as a proclaimer has been solidified.

Regardless of gender, race, ethnic background, or tone of voice, preaching is a gift. It is a high and holy vocation that particular men and women have been called to pursue in their ministries around the world. My preaching professor in college, Dr. Ron Pyle, would always point to 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 as one of the most powerful texts on preaching. Paul says, “So let people consider us as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.” This is how Paul said we should think about Christ. Dr. Pyle said this: “The preacher exists to serve another, as a steward, a caretaker of the mysteries of God. That privilege is almost too great for me to even wrap my head around. *Mysterion* is something that was once hidden and is now revealed. It’s a mystery that a Holy God wants anything to do with sinful human beings. It’s a mystery that a man can die and lie in a tomb and three days later be alive. It’s a mystery that people who are so different from one another can find a common ground in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we get to be caretakers of those mysteries. The job of the preacher is to be a steward who tells secrets-- things that were once hidden and now God has revealed. Sometimes when I am preparing to preach, God whispers to me, a secret that God hopes to communicate to people that God loves so much. The dignity and the sense of privilege that it brings to possess the lips over which that message is delivered: that overwhelms me.”

Pastor Mary

I remember the first time I heard Mary Hulst preach. It wasn't a typical worship service set-up. We were in a large hotel ballroom, sitting around tables full of our breakfast dishes. It was a Campus Pastors' conference, and she was one of the keynote speakers, tasked with helping us to think about ministering to Millennials. I felt uncomfortable for her as I wondered how she was going to captivate an audience, as servers still moved about with plates full of hot eggs and bacon, the clanking of forks and whispers of "pass the cream" still happening. And she did not have a pulpit to preach from but a podium, with one of those bendable mics to try to maneuver. As she was being introduced, I shifted my expectations to prepare for a lecture. There would be no preaching happening here. But then she opened her mouth. She did not spend any time on congenial regards or thank-yous, but instead went right to it. "He was 39 years old. He had just celebrated his 10th wedding anniversary. He had a daughter who was three and a son who was just one. And the doctors were sure of one more thing: Todd had incurable cancer."

It was as if the servers suddenly vanished and the forks were laid to rest. The eggs could wait. Her voice was bold, articulate, and she had the room in the palm of her hand. I glanced around and every eye was on her. She began listing off the senseless things in our world we all have to face far too often. Cancer, suicide, depression, and broken relationships, just to name a few. The weight of it all was heavy in the room. She paused, and then Mary lifted her hands and clenched her fists as if she was shaking God by the collar and said, "Lament is when a person of faith, a person of the covenant, a person

who is part of the people of God, turns to that God, grabs him by the lapels, and says, often literally, ‘What the hell is going on?’” The room was silent. She had us. She had us because she said out loud what many in the room had felt but were too afraid to say verbally. The preacher asked a question that has no answer. And it was as if the whole room was stunned into solidarity.

“Preachers are important,” she told me later. “Preachers must have something to say.” It was then I realized how well she tended to her power. Because, in the midst of the passion and conviction of her question, “What the hell is going on?” she answered it. “Hell is what is going on,” she preached. “The enemies of life and light and beauty and goodness and truth and grace have broken down the gates and have stormed into a previously settled life. Cancer. Financial ruin. Betrayal. Death. Have you been there? Have you been in a place where you experienced blow after blow of discouragement, loss, heartbreak, defeat? A place in which it seems nothing you do goes well and at every moment where things could improve, they don’t?”

From there Mary preached about the necessity of lamentation. She urged us to teach our students to lament, to go to blows with God, to emote anger, frustration, and disappointment. Her message hit the bullseye of my life, resonating so deeply within me and my own work as a Campus Minister. Mary is the Dean of the Chapel at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She, like me, spends her days pastoring college students. Listening to her preach gave me strength to go back onto my campus and to be bold in the message of the gospel I was called to preach.

When I asked her to tell me her story of how she began to preach, she went to a vivid memory she had in the seventh grade. She told me about a pastor who approached

her after Catechism class one afternoon. “You are going to be a minister when you grow up!” he told her enthusiastically. Confused, she questioned his comment and he said it again with confidence. “Yep. You are going to be a minister,” he told her again. At the time, Mary’s denomination, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), was not even ordaining deacons let alone ordaining women to be elders or pastors. How strange his comment seemed to her at the time, but she was intrigued. He ended up leaving Mary’s church during her eighth grade year, but he would come back every summer to preach at their church. He would always shake her hand when she was leaving and he would say, “Are you getting ready? Because you are going to do this. You are going to preach one day.” His words took up residence in her mind. She just couldn’t shake them. Mary remembered in the midst of her adolescence pondering this call to ministry and wondering what the job even entailed. She began to pay attention to what her pastors did. What she knew of herself at that young age were three things: she loved people, she loved public speaking, and she loved the Bible. As Mary moved closer and closer to discerning professional ministry, she became more and more excited to learn. She began to study up on the topic.

In the mid-1980s the resources were sparse. In high school she began researching, and can remember only two books, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* by the Kroegers, and *Woman Be Free* by Patricia Gundry. That was it. Two books that were beginning to form a theological argument to support women in formal ministry roles. As she began considering this call on her life, envisioning her adult-self as a pastor, she felt empowered. She liked the idea. What struck her was, in light of her Reformed hermeneutic (i.e., an approach of interpretation

which suggests reading a text in light of its genre, and reading the text within its historical and social context), she found herself asking, “How can we *not* be ordaining women?” It made no sense to her that women were simply not allowed to be preachers. And since it made no sense to her she kept going.

She began her undergraduate study at Calvin College and became very involved in Campus Ministry, participating on the worship team in their chapel program. Often people would come up to her after leading a prayer or reading scripture in worship and say, “Are you sure you should be doing this?” It is the question I think every woman is asked along the way. It halts the experience. Suddenly, an outside voice is competing with the call of God and the doubt seeps in. “Are you sure you should be doing this?” In my not-so-gracious moments, this question makes me want to scream. “Am I sure? Do you think I would move into this work if I wasn’t sure? Don’t you think I would have happily found somewhere else to work if I hadn’t been profoundly moved by the Holy Spirit to be here in this *extremely* patriarchal profession that still somehow gets away with telling women their place? And by the way, do you ask women in other professions if they are sure? Are you sure you should be here Ms. Professor of biology? Are you sure you should be in charge, Madame Judge of the Court? Are you sure?”

As I have learned to humbly bite my tongue, and practiced breathing through these types of questions, I have had to answer the question: “Of course I am not sure of myself, I am sure of Christ who lives in me.” Women need to be sure, confident, clear in their call. Women need to believe they are preachers. Women need to articulate their assurance of faith that the God who used Mary at the tomb (Jn 21) and the woman at the

well (Jn 4) to proclaim the good news of Christ were not sure of themselves, but were simply sure of Christ the Messiah.

I had a student in my office just this week who is discerning a call to ordained ministry. She said she mentioned it to a few people back home at her Presbyterian (PCUSA) Church, which have women serving in ordained positions, and they asked her, “Are you sure?” She recounted the story to me and said, “Is this for real? Women can be doctors, lawyers, and firefighters but there is reluctance for them to be pastors? I would think the church should be the first place where we say yes to women, and instead it is the last place.” I smiled and told her, “The church still has a long way to go. But we have also come a long way because women have persisted. And because they were empowered to use their gifts of preaching and teaching, lives have been impacted by the work of the Holy Spirit through them.

Thankfully, Mary was able to combat the “Are you sure?” question because she was observant enough to notice that within 24 hours of any critical comment or question she would get a word of affirmation from someone else. A stranger would approach her saying, “Thank you for your leadership this morning. You are so gifted up front. I so appreciated your prayer today.” When the skeptical voice would emerge, another voice would rise up. She told herself to stay the course because even in those moments when she felt unsure, others were sure enough.

When Mary entered seminary she was enthusiastic to begin to learning how to preach. With her drama and music background she felt comfortable being upfront. What felt intimidating was the thought of organizing a sermon and attempting to make the Bible make sense to her listeners. During her time at seminary she felt welcomed as a

woman and free to practice the preaching craft, even though she wondered what the denominational outcome would be. Would the church in which she was raised, and the one she loved so dearly, welcome women into ordained leadership by the time she was ready? The CRC had been going back and forth on the vote, and her future in their church hung in the balance.

Mary Hulst graduated from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1995, but the governing body of the CRC had still not voted on the approval of women's ordination. During her time in seminary she needed to fulfill the requirements of one summer internship and one year-long internship in a church. There was only one church in the whole of the denomination in her area that would allow her to serve in those internships. The doors at the time were still closed to women, but she remained hopeful and stayed faithful to the course she had begun. Ordination requires many steps to go through, and she continued to go through each step, including interviews with elders at every denominational level, theological defenses, requirements to complete, and exams to pass. She completed each step of the process while remaining uncertain of the outcome.

Miraculously, the summer after she graduated, the CRC's governing body, after years of debate, voted to affirm women's ordination in 1993. Women could be ordained. This was good news for Mary, but she still had to fulfill the candidacy requirements in order to reach the "certified and ready" phase of ordination.

After graduation she accepted a one-year interim co-pastor at Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church. During that year she began to go through all of the candidacy requirements to reach ordination. She laughed when she described this season, because of all the ways that being the "first woman" put her in unlikely predicaments.

The list of requirements from each denomination differ, but Mary said that for her, at that time in the mid-90s, they required a physical exam. She remembers walking into the doctor's office for this particular exam, and when she was alone in the exam room she glanced at his tray of medical tools and quickly realized those were not tools for a woman's examination. The doctor had prepped the room for a male patient, expecting to do an exam for a pastor candidate. When the doctor walked in he was shocked to see a woman in his exam room. "Are you here for a candidate exam?" he asked. "Yep, I sure am!" Mary replied proudly. Awkwardly, he agreed to give her a basic physical, suggested that it would be best to send her to a woman's doctor for the other aspects of the exam that needed to be fulfilled. She agreed.

Remarkably, after many hoops, and numerous oral theological exams at every level of the church and seminary, in September of 1996 she became the second woman to ever be ordained in the CRC and the first in the United States. She felt tremendous support and encouragement and remembers other pastors joining her specific committee in order to witness the first woman to come through their denominational system. There was a defining moment after her board of trustees interviewed her for ordination when an older man came out and told her she had passed. Mary described the moment: "I had finished everything and they asked me to go stand in the hallway and wait for them. I began to pace back and forth aware of how close I was." A man who had been a champion for her throughout the process was the one to come out first. He took her hand to shake it and said, "What an honor it is for me to be here to witness this moment. It is a moment I have been praying and hoping for, for years, and I am so grateful to be here for

this day to know that you are the first woman to be ordained in our denomination.” In that moment, history changed. The Christian Reformed Church said *yes* to Mary.

She took a call at Eastern Avenue Reformed Church as the Senior Pastor, and because her church was on the frontlines of the women’s ordination issue, she felt well-received and welcomed. The majority of people were grateful she was there. And because she was the first, when she would make a mistake, or act too quickly, the feedback was not, “Well that’s because she is a woman,” but more often, “that’s because she is a rookie. She didn’t think it through. She just needs more time to grow into this.” Mary recalls the congregation and staff at Eastern Avenue as “incredibly nice and gracious.” She felt as safe and supported as any young pastor would, not because she was the first woman. Admittedly she didn’t know much at the beginning. Seminary did well to prepare her theologically and even pastorally, but not administratively. For example: running a meeting. There are no classes at seminary to teach the art of running a meeting.

Early on in her first call, she was told that every Tuesday there was a worship planning meeting. “Great!” she thought, and when she arrived at the meeting all eyes were on her to take the lead. When she asked, “What are we doing?” they questioned her back with, “What did you bring?” It was then she realized she was *actually* in charge. “It is now my job to have my texts selected in advance in order to set up the rest of the team. Those early days my church was incredibly gracious to me as so often I made mistakes,” Mary reflected.

Another time she thought it would be a good idea to change the service times. But she forgot to tell the childcare and Sunday school staff about it. When stopped in the hall and questioned about the decision, she learned by the look on the woman's face what a

big impact her decision would have on so many if she did not consider how their work would be affected. Had she considered all the others who would have to reorganize their schedules in order to accommodate her decision? She described it as if she threw a huge stone into a pond and saw the ripple effects that went on and on. Mary shook her head and admitted to me how many mistakes she made early on. She reminded me that pastoring, like any job, requires much experience and practice in order to learn the culture of a congregation, their particular needs, their language, and their history. What she did learn as a young woman preacher were two practices that she believes sustained her in her ministry for the long haul. It was at Eastern Avenue where she began to plan her sermon series far in advance. This practice allowed her to have some direction each week when a pastoral crisis would hit. Even though an interruption might come, she would still have some idea of what was planned for the following Sunday. The second thing she began to do was to keep a regular Sabbath on Mondays. This was crucial and formative for her during those early days of navigating a life of full-time professional ministry.

She began preaching two services every Sunday. One in the morning and one at night: two different sermons *every* Sunday. This is how she started her practice of preaching two sermons a week. Every week. It was common for her former professors from seminary to come and sit in the pews of her church and for her to think how “laughable” it was to be preaching to these astute academics who had taught her just a few years prior. How strange to find herself in a position of authority over the people who had literally taught her to be in the place she found herself. Yet, what she realized after a few weeks, was that they did not come to evaluate her, but to enter into worship. They were just like the other families who needed a word, who needed prayer, who

needed pastoral support. They, too, just needed to be fed. This realization helped her to settle into her role a bit more.

From her early days she also described the naive idea many preachers have that goes like this: “This would be a really good sermon for that one particular person.” And then after spending a week preparing to blow the mind of that one particular person who really needs to hear this particular word, that one particular person doesn’t show up for worship that Sunday. Too often young preachers get fixated on saying the exact right thing and making it too much about their performance. Mary says, “The preacher’s job is to preach faithfully, trusting someone will hear it. Don’t throw punches. Just be clear. Because as much as women need to work really hard at this, it is not about you. Because too often people will come up to you and say, “Remember that time you said, ‘Blah, blah blah?’ That *so* spoke to me.” And you think, “I never said, ‘blah, blah, blah. Check the transcript. Never said it. Never would.”” Yet somehow in this crazy work, listeners hear the words they need to hear in worship. This is where humility must come in. The preacher must recognize this work is about God, not about the preacher. Whether you walk to your car after a sermon feeling disappointed or elated, Mary listens for the Holy Spirit to ask her, “When did this become about you?”

At one moment in our conversation, I was struck by the way Mary’s reflections reminded me of my college preaching Professor Dr. Ron Pyle. He taught us how to craft a theology of homiletics. In order for anyone to begin with understanding a theology of anything, we must ask, “What does God have to do with this?” Dr. Pyle credits John Stott from his book, *Between Two Worlds*, with this idea. In that book he says, “The essential secret to proclamation is not mastering certain techniques, but being mastered by certain

convictions.” As Mary was speaking I was reminded of this quote, and how for many preachers in training, technique is considered to be the essential element. Technique is what preachers work to master. Mary is in the good company of those who have spent a lot of time learning technique, but my professor argued for all of his preaching students to think more substantively. “The essentials of preaching are not about technique, but the essentials that master us.” So what John Stott does is walk through the essential convictions he believes drive proclamation. And this begins with convictions about God, Jesus, The Holy Spirit, scripture, the listener, and the preacher. What are the foundational, biblical truths that master the preacher when it comes to how I think about proclamation? The first of all of these convictions, the one Mary knew in her soul, comes from the truth the scriptures tell us over and over, “This is not about me. It is about God.”

Psalm 115:3 says, “Our God is in the heavens and does whatever God wants.” So, the conviction that God is autonomous, and moves however God wants to, means that it is not about the preacher. It is about God’s movement in and through us. It’s not about the preacher, it’s not about a particular technique, and it’s not about the preacher’s rhetorical excellence. The preacher is at the mercy of God moving. My professor said it this way: “This is for me simultaneously comforting and frightening. The comforting part is that it is not about me. God can use whomever, however God wants to. God won’t be shackled by me in any form. So that is comforting to me. The part that is frightening to me is I don’t have control. Here’s an example. One night years ago, I was asked to preach at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle. I was walking there, on 25th, and as I passed a big car dealership, I saw my reflection in a window. And shamefully and oh so arrogantly, I saw my reflection and thought, ‘this sermon you are about to give tonight is

really fantastic! This is a winner! You have applied your rhetorical skill and your technique.’ And then I got there, and by all human account, I was just horrible. I was disfluent, disjointed, and thoroughly confused about why this would be because I thought I had applied all of my rhetorical technique to this. So I am walking back home and I get back to the very same spot, and I looked again in the window and saw my reflection. Except this time the reflection came with a message, which was this, ‘Unless I am in the middle of it, nothing of significance is going to happen.’ That changed my life. As a person that does proclamation, that changed my life. So now, before I preach, the prayer that I pray is, ‘Holy Spirit of God will you blow into this place, blow through my life, because unless you are in the middle of this nothing of significance is going to happen.’ So my theology of proclamation begins with who God is, and the incredible humility it brings, that God the creator of the universe, who loves his children so desperately, chooses to use me on occasion to do this, is staggering to me – that all comes out of God’s autonomy. That’s a highlight of how I think about who God is and how to understand preaching.”

I think Mary shares this belief about God as well. The principle provides a freedom for the preacher to work hard, but also requires the preacher to not get too focused on an ego-driven performance. It invites the preacher to take a posture of humility, eager to be used by God to proclaim God’s message for that congregation for the particular day. Early on in Mary’s career she confessed that her monumental failures were completely wrapped up in her ego. She had a deep longing to make an imprint on her congregation. But what she has learned is that if you are faithful to the text the people will be fed.

She invited me to recall all of the meals I have had in my lifetime. It is just too many to remember, right? But there are probably a handful which you can remember as significant. Those ones were meals which were connected to meaning, a special person was honored, a moment was marked, great joy or pain surrounded the time, but the significance of all was that the people were fed. In the same way, many of us have heard hundreds of sermons in our lifetime, but only a few are remembered as significant. Most often, just like a good meal, those moments are memorable because of what you bring to the table, as much as what you receive. “The preacher’s job is to feed the people. Some days all you might have to offer is some frozen vegetables and some expired Cheetos. Other days all you have is a big box of Hamburger Helper. But on some days, you will be able to deliver filet mignon. Regardless of the menu, the people will be fed if you are faithful to feed them. If the people are really hungry, anything will taste good, so bring to the table a meal to serve.”

For the ten years she served at Eastern Avenue Church she preached manuscript sermons. This was how she was taught at seminary and what worked for her within the church context. When she took her call at Calvin College to be the Campus Chaplain she switched to preaching without notes. This was a significant transition for her, but she believed it to be a necessary for one for the context into which she was moving. I asked her how she made the transition happen. “Did you move from manuscript to bullet points to headings to nothing?” “No,” she said. “You just have to go without one time. If ever there is any note in front of you, you will go back to it. The point is to internalize the message so that there isn’t a moment you will need the notes. And now, instead of

writing a manuscript and trying to memorize it, now I structure the sermon based on moves, gestures and space to help me internalize the points I want to make.”

In Mary’s experience, she believes preaching without the aid of notes allows for the preacher to be received by the congregations with much more ease. Is preaching without notes in and of itself a spiritual gift? Mary recently wrote a handbook on preaching, and highlighted the benefits of preaching without notes. “Those who preach without notes appreciate the immediate connections that are made with their hearers. Because those who preach without notes are always looking at their listeners, they can see if they need to slow down or repeat a point. They can observe when people laugh or are particularly quiet, and adjust their delivery in the moment.”¹⁴⁷ These preachers are creating a participatory experience with their listeners, where the sermon becomes less about the preacher and more about what the Holy Spirit is doing between in the preacher and the congregation. Most preachers would agree that to desert the manuscript typically takes years of experience and fine-tuning in areas of delivery, structure, and listening to and exegeting their congregations. When the notes are abandoned the preacher must then get the sermon inside themselves. Preachers must practice, must pray over, and must know the sermon so well that they feel confident to preach without notes. “The goal when preaching without notes is not to memorize a manuscript word for word, but to internalize the structure of the message so well that the message is coming as much from your heart as from your head.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Mary Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten practical ways to a better sermon by Sunday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 152.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Because of the context in which Mary now finds herself, working primarily with college students, she has found that saying the phrase perfectly via a manuscript is much less important than creating a relationship with the listener. “When I am focused on them, looking at them, engaging with them, instead of looking at a manuscript, it is a richer experience. Do I give up polish? Yes. Do I give up perfect presentation? Yes. But in this context it makes much more sense to preach this way.” Mary’s end goal is to be in relationship with her students who come to listen to her every week. Strong preachers who preach regularly to their congregations place high value on actually fostering deep relationships with the people who come regularly to listen. Dr. Ron Pyle once told me, “I think good preachers are good anthropologists. So, this is one aspect in which, what I teach the majority of the time, really is informative to me in my preaching. Because part of what I teach is what is the nature of human beings as communicative persons. William Schutz is a social psychologist, and he says, there are three fundamental interpersonal needs everybody has: inclusion, affection, and control. Inclusion: we have to feel like we belong. Affection: I have to be able to give and receive love. Control: I have to feel like I matter. I can influence but I can also be influenced. So when I come to a part of a passage which I am trying to exegete I always look for what does this say anthropologically? Is there something in this passage that gives me access to the nature of how human beings are? And if I can access something like that, which is in the passage, even if I don’t have individual relationships with all these people, everybody who sits in any congregation knows what it’s like to feel excluded. There is a universal need for belonging. So anytime if you can address those needs as a preacher, you know you will connect.”¹⁴⁹ Mary has

¹⁴⁹ Dr. Ron Pyle interview, Whitworth University, Fall 2016

learned, listened to, pastored, and walked with a culture of Millennials who are in desperate need of a pastor to shepherd them. They are all asking identity and belonging questions and it is crucial for her in her preaching to enlighten her students to the idea that God cares about those issues in their lives.

When I asked Mary about her actual preaching voice, she resonated with the challenges that come with the female voice. She mentioned early on in her ministry how the sound boards were much less sophisticated and they were designed to carry male voices. She described going to the church early on the days she would preach, to make sure to test the mics, to turn volume all the way up, knowing her range was different than the average male. She also mentioned the challenges of wardrobe and sound, “Where will I clip my microphone pack?” is a nagging question for the woman preacher. Women’s clothing doesn’t always hold those well as they are designed for a man. The elderly people would say to her, “When you get high or your voice gets soft, I cannot hear you.” She mentioned there are times in the sermon in which you want to raise or lower your voice for dramatic effect or to make a point. As a woman you learn to think through those moves more carefully. She suggested, “Try to offer ways for those who do have trouble hearing to invite them to move closer to the pulpit or to raise the volume on the soundboard.” How can we consider some of the differences which come with the woman’s voice and accommodate the room and the sound system in a way so that the preacher and the listener can have a fruitful experience? “The challenge,” Mary explained, “is to continue to be yourself and preach the way you want to, recognizing that there may be limits on what the female voice can do.” Her suggestion to women is to always warm up your voice and rest your voice. Mary is a singer as well and told me

when she is driving to go preach she will warm up her voice with vocal exercises, doing scales and breathing deeply to prepare.

I asked her, “How did you form your authentic preaching voice?” As she thought about this question she went back to the home in which she grew up. The voice she now uses to preach weekly to hundreds of college students she believes was formed through radio programs she listened to in her home when she was a little girl. Mary grew up in a home where her mom had Christian radio on in the house all the time. Regularly she would listen to James Dobson on his radio show “Focus on the Family” and Chuck Swindoll’s show “Insights for Living.” In the summers she recalls listening to a Chuck Swindoll sermon every day. The radio was always turned up for the entire household to hear. Whether they were folding laundry, having lunch, or doing the dishes, there was Chuck in the background, preaching. These voices, she believes, shaped her because of how often she listened to their sermons. Chuck Swindoll preached in a way that was warm and engaging, but also very pointed. He had a unique yet strong way of calling people to a higher standard. His style suggested and encouraged, “If you have stuff in your life let’s work together to clean it up.” He moved people to action. His words were important. And people were listening.

Beyond all of the Swindoll sermons during the week, Sunday mornings in Mary’s house were a marathon of sermons. Before church her family would listen to “The Back to God Hour” with Dr. Joel Netherhood who preached weekly via the CRC Radio Ministry. Then they would go to church and hear another minister preach and *then* when they came home, they would listen to either or both Jerry Falwell and Robert Schuller. Every Sunday, numerous, commanding, male, preacher voices were swirling around her.

“Nothing comes close to an authoritative voice like Jerry Falwell’s. He had no problem telling people how to live their life,” Mary told me. And Mary was listening. She knew she was not the only one either; she knew that these men had a large audience and many others, like her parents, tuned in faithfully to be fed by their messages.

In hearing all of these strong male preachers, one thing became clear to Mary: people listen to preachers. They must have something to say. “So the culture of my childhood was *preaching is important*.” As she began to think about full-time vocational ministry she thought of it primarily as preaching. She wasn’t thinking about being a chaplain in a hospital, she was thinking about the parish and specifically the pulpit. Mary was focused on preaching, performing marriages and funerals, baptizing people and speaking into the lives of the congregation. Mary did not feel any fear toward the pulpit because in her words, “God has called me to do this.” And she knew if it was not in the CRC then he would open the door somewhere for her to use her gifts. The voice within her was so clear that it was as if she knew, “I can’t *not* do this.” Mary has been asked to teach preaching courses, but when she has found herself in teaching roles she quickly discovered her own longing to be preaching. She missed the work of it and knew that preaching is her call and she must be true to it. “It is simply how I am wired. I have been made for this.”

She started preaching regularly, and it was fairly common to hear comments as she shook hands at the door after service such as, “That was a pretty good sermon ... for a female.” Or recently, at a commencement worship service, the grandmother of a student came up to her and said, “I normally don’t like women preachers ... but you did ok.” “Who says these things?” Mary asks, hoping for some help with this bizarre idea. “It

would be one thing if this happened in other arenas,” she added. “What if people said, ‘I typically don’t enjoy female bus drivers, but you are driving just fine! I tend to avoid female dentists ... but you ... you are just fine.’” She laughed at the thought. I was grateful for her humor as it seems if we do not laugh about these comments we would have to cry. Sadly, within church culture, women preachers are still a very new addition and many do not know how to respond. Mary graciously has learned to invite her parishioners into a positive experience of a woman that will be so powerful many won’t notice her gender as an issue.

I asked Mary to describe her preaching using a metaphor. She paused for a moment and raised both of her fists in the air and then joined them together. She said, “I see myself as a conduit. Think if there was an electrical current that was in need of a connector to keep the circuit going between God and God’s people. That is what my work is – to connect the two. It is exhausting and exhilarating. But you are the connecting point between these two communities. You have to do it.” I asked her why she thinks it is so exhausting compared to other professions. “Whenever you are proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ you are in the midst of spiritual warfare. The pressure to make the scripture relevant in the lives of the people is incredibly real and intense. And there is an awareness that some people will never be open to what you say because they don’t like you, or how you preach, or your earrings, or your shoes, or the car you bought is too expensive. There is more vulnerability in the pulpit than in any other aspect of my job. Preaching is hard work. You have to be good at this. Women need to be better than the guys. Women are scrutinized for things men never would be. It is the one thing you do that no one else can do. Take it seriously. Get good at it. Watch yourself on video even

though it is painful, do it anyway. Surround yourself with people who can critique and give you supportive feedback that will improve you. The preacher is important. The preacher must have something to say. Say something powerful.”

Pastor Amy

I walked into our president's private conference room, used only for special university guests, anxious to meet her. There she sat with her two teen-aged kids at a formally-set table for the meal we would have together, along with a few others students and faculty members. One of the faculty members had invited Amy Butler to our campus to preach, and had arranged for dinner prior with a few of us who work at the university. All I knew was that she had been written up in *Time* magazine, and she was the first woman to ever lead the staff at Riverside Church in New York City. Riverside Church was built by John Rockefeller himself, and is known for being the tallest church in the country. Amy often jokes that, in light of her very tall steeple, when she preaches in her pulpit she is “the preacher closest to God each Sunday.” Not only is the pulpit physically high, but it has been full of huge influences throughout American history. It is where Martin Luther King, Jr., first publicly voiced his opposition to the Vietnam War, and where Nelson Mandela addressed U.S. church leaders after his release from prison. From this pulpit, speakers as diverse as Cesar Chavez, Jesse Jackson, Desmond Tutu, Fidel Castro, and Reinhold Niebuhr lectured the church and nation about issues of the day. The greatest of American preachers have served as senior minister, including Harry Emerson Fosdick, Robert J. McCracken, Ernest T. Campbell, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., and James A. Forbes, Jr., and now Rev. Dr. Amy Butler. A woman, larger than life, a Baptist,

a mom, and the one now having dinner with me. I was somewhat star-struck because in my fairly small world of theology and pastoring and preaching, she was a known superhero. Somehow, she had broken the glass ceiling: the tallest glass ceiling in our country, by the way.

We listened to her stories over dinner and were enthralled by the thought of managing a staff of three-hundred, and what it is like to preach to Mariah Carey or Neil Patrick Harris on any given Sunday. Or what about the Sunday when Hillary Clinton showed up? But as we all conversed over dinner, I was struck by the modesty of this so-called superhero. She was so down to earth. She had a soft voice that put me at ease, and she made me feel like we could be instant friends. I somehow trusted her without even knowing her. I wanted to learn from her and wanted to know how she does it each week. How does she assert her authority so clearly in such an intimidating venue? I wondered if she was ever insecure, or if people in New York commented on her hair or her dress, or if anyone questioned whether or not she should be there. Even amid the questions coming to my mind, I found so much pride in recognizing how huge this was for all other women preachers. I knew that each Sunday she climbed the stairs of the largest pulpit and preached with eloquence and conviction. I was so grateful to listen to her that night.

As we finished dinner we moved into the room in which she would speak to the campus community. It has been two and a half years since I heard her sermon that night, but I can still recall key stories. I was so drawn into her message because of the ease with which she recounted situations, her self-deprecating humor, and her sincere love for Jesus. It reminded me of when I was young, watching ice-skating during the Olympics. Those professional skaters made it look so easy. They just glided around the ice with

ease, perfectly in sync with the music. Yet, whenever I got on the ice there was no gliding. There was hesitation, insecurity, loss of balance, and intense longing for it to be over – soon. Listening to Amy was like watching a professional ice skater. She was gliding through the sermon with what looked like little effort at all. As an amateur preacher, I knew how hard it was to preach so naturally, but it was so clear she was a professional.

That evening when she preached, she told a story about a faithful longtime member of her church. When Amy began serving at Calvary Baptist in Washington DC, she recognized a population of Hispanic congregants coming to worship. She suggested that they begin serving communion in English and Spanish as a way to welcome their Hispanic brothers and sister to the communion table. The longtime member felt very distraught by the change. And as a way of silent protest, she would come to worship each Sunday, but instead of sitting in the pews, she would go upstairs in the attic and read old sermons that were in the archives of the church's library. Amy, in that moment, gave us an image to ponder. She asked us to consider the elderly woman in the attic clinging to the past as a way for us to see the current church in America. A church which is dying because its oldest members are holding on so tightly to "the way it has always been." The fear of change is deeply rooted in a familiar faith and tradition where change feels like a threat. Amy had to spend many hours with this woman listening to her grieve the loss of the church she has held so close for so long. It was as if a piece of her was dying. "The job of the pastor in this day in age is to help guide the traditional group into places where the church needs to reform," she preached to us.

When I began interviewing Amy, I was curious to understand how she operates. Amy described herself as “Type-A, overachieving, crazy maniac.” For her whole life, she has had a deep sense that she wanted to be in ordained ministry, but she never saw women in that position in the conservative Baptist churches in which she grew up. As the oldest of five, she had no problem with authority, and her father always told her she could do anything she wanted. Amy began her journey by attending Baylor, a Baptist university in Texas. She found herself sitting in a church history class at Baylor and was floored listening to the Baptist theology which taught her that the Spirit of God shows up wherever she wants to show up and uses whatever means she chooses to use. “It was all so liberating to me. And then I saw so many men in my classes who were just crappy students. I looked around and thought to myself, ‘This is the future of the church?’ Certainly, I can do better than that. Good thing Baptist theology confirms The Spirit can show up wherever she wants to! I will just be a pastor then!”

Her journey through seminary was unique in that she never took a preaching course. She attended a Baptist seminary in Switzerland and the school focused on biblical languages, church history, and theology taught by German men. Preaching courses were not offered. And because she was Baptist she couldn't get a job after she graduated. Instead, Amy took a job as a director of a homeless shelter in New Orleans for eight years where she believes, “I learned how to be a pastor there.” It was in that position that she found every opportunity she could to teach the scriptures to anyone who would welcome her. She taught women's Bibles studies and children's lessons primarily.

When she did take her first job, as Associate Pastor of Membership and Mission at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in the city of New Orleans, she served with a man

who was very protective of the pulpit. In the three years that she was the associate there, she preached four times. She tells the story of the first time she did preach; she labored over her sermon for weeks and weeks. She poured her whole heart and soul into this first shot and gave it everything she had. After it was over, she stood at the door, and an older man shook her hand and said, “That was actually pretty good, but seeing a woman in the pulpit is like watching a dog walk on its hind legs.” Little did she know at the time, the man who made the comment was actually quoting the great Samuel Johnson, an author, poet, and writer of the 18th century, who was remembered for his strong opposition to women in any level of authority. “It wasn't just that he was opposed to women having jobs. He thought it was a bit off for them even to paint or draw. ‘Public practice of any art, and staring in men’s faces, is very indelicate in a female,’ he said; and as for a woman preaching, it ‘was like a dog walking on its hind legs.’ It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.” Samuel Johnson made this comment when he had heard of a Quaker gathering where women felt led to preach. Over two-hundred years later, standing at the door of her church, the sentiment came to her from a man who simply could not understand it.

Amy heard the comment, took it, and was gracious to the confused man. But, like all women preachers in that moment when the comment comes like a kick in the stomach, they have to find the reserve to maintain their pastoral role. Women pastors have to respond with grace, with the ability to assert themselves when needed, but in a way that is helpful, not harmful. How easy would it be for many of us to bark back or rudely question any comment that would make our holy calling into one that compares us to an animal circus performer? As Michelle Obama once said, “When they go low, we go

high.” This is the slow, hard work of moving a church culture where people are still learning to worship with women’s voices heard from new places. The comments are still very much alive today as too many people in the church are struggling to understand women who preach. Instead of wishing the criticisms away, the work lies in how we will respond when they come. How do pastors hold themselves with dignity in the midst of ridicule? Amy, almost twenty years later, still remembers the comment and the way it made her feel. But she also remembers smiling at him at the door and thanking him for coming.

It was in 2003 that she was called to be the Senior Minister at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington D.C. She took the job having preached formally only four times in the church she previously served. She thought to herself, “Well, I’ll figure it out.” Quickly, she realized what a huge learning curve it was. Without any formal training, preaching every week was very difficult for Amy to learn. She struggled to figure out how to do it, was self-taught, and even though she had read every book, she had not had the chance to practice. In her agony one day, a dear friend told her, “Amy, all you need to do is preach the text.” That was so freeing for Amy and is the reason she explains why she is, and always will be, a lectionary preacher. “I want the text to be my invitation to proclamation.” To allow the text to guide each Sunday works very well in her context at Riverside Church where a political rally could break out every week if she let it. For her the text keeps the congregation grounded and keeps her focused. The message is not centered upon what Amy is thinking about this week, or what Amy may want to say to the congregation, but what the text is saying to her congregation each Sunday. She intentionally puts herself underneath the text and allows it to guide the message. Once the

passage is chosen she is free to discern with the Holy Spirit to find meaning in her context on that particular day. Dr. Len Sweet captures the essence of what Amy is working to do in his book *Giving Blood*. He writes, “To be human is to engage in the creative process within the world under the supervision of a loving and merciful God. To read and speak the scriptures is to see them as a creative and interwoven series of narraphors, a garden of meaning and identity waiting to be seeded, dug into, turned over, cultivated, played in, reaped, and reseeded.”¹⁵⁰

After taking her first Senior Minister position in Washington DC, she met another man who was a minister at a sister Baptist church and twenty years her senior. His name was Jim, and he asked her if she would join him every Monday morning to debrief the sermons they had preached the morning before. It was a humble and collegial gesture from a veteran preacher, and she happily agreed. Now, she realizes, Jim took her under his wing and came alongside her to help her learn how to preach. He is the one, she believes, who helped her form her voice. He taught her to be a narrative preacher, like him and allowed her room to receive and give feedback. Jim taught Amy to think hard about the ways in which she proclaims.

This deep friendship between Jim and Amy also stimulated a gathering of preachers each year to plan and pray together as they put their sermon series together. One Monday, at the Starbucks where they met weekly, they decided to each make a list of the smartest and best preachers they knew. Together they invited every person on their combined list to gather for a week in August, with their families, to plan out their sermons for the upcoming year. For the past 15 years, the six of them have come together

¹⁵⁰ Sweet, 149.

at what they call “Preacher Camp.” They gather each morning at 9 am and work until noon. With each person being assigned a different portion of the lectionary year, they offer up three or four preaching paths for that particular section of the text. The rest listen, study, and take notes, and think about how those texts could be preached in their congregations. The result is that after Amy leaves Preacher Camp she has an entire year planned out. She and her kids have a week carved out every August to go and be with dear friends, some of whom have become pastors to her kids: as she says, “My kids don’t have a pastor, they have a mom.” Pastor’s kids do need to seek out other loving adults who will teach them the ways of the faith. Women who preach, who shepherd congregations, who are raising children, need for their children to be cared for by the larger community of faith. Because the role of pastor requires so much emotional energy it is important for children to have a team of adults pouring into their lives. This practice for the last 15 years has become Amy’s preaching preparation that becomes her map each year to guide her congregation through the lectionary.

Amy finally did take a preaching course when she began her doctoral work in homiletics at Wesley Seminary. It was then she fell in love with the art, and diligently began to hone her craft. Amy believes that “Preaching is the most powerful leadership tool that a pastor has, I take it very seriously because we have the opportunity to voice things that need to be voiced that cannot be said in any other setting. Especially in this moment.”

What Amy currently wrestles with is the question, “How do preachers develop in a way in which every part of your being is developed to proclaim what you want to proclaim? For women, in particular, this is critical. How I say things, what I choose to

say, what I choose to reveal about who I am – all of these things are crafting a persona. People are going to be listening to you and forming some image in their head so why not take advantage of this and use it in a way to make your proclamation more effective?”

For example, at Riverside Church, Amy asked everyone to call her “Pastor Amy.” This was an intentional move on her part and was certainly new to this formal congregation where previous pastors were celebrities and went by their formal title. Amy wanted to create a more personal connection with her congregation through this very strategic move to develop her persona. She used a lot of personal stories in her first year of preaching because she wanted them to get to know her. That was her job in the first year. Who am I? What is my concept of what the church can be? This church needed her to preach Jesus and was longing for a Christocentric message each week. After the first year, they were able as a church to claim that they knew her. Amy did that on purpose.

When I asked her about her wardrobe she had much to say, and resonated with the challenges women preachers have around this issue as well. “If I need to look powerful or say something with strength one Sunday I will wear black stiletto boots. I do these things on purpose. My hair was short when I came into my position because I needed to be seen as an authority, and it is longer now because I am in the midst of making some really hard changes and I need them to see me as warm and caring.” Amy recognizes that all of these things do matter. The congregation will notice shoes, hair, and outfit so instead of wishing that they wouldn’t Amy works to use those things in a way that will help develop the message she is trying to deliver.

Amy is passionate about identifying the next generations of church leaders and is very intentional with the women she mentors, in having them consider how they dress.

One young woman on her staff, who she described as very slight yet the smartest person in the room, was asked to make her first presentation to the church council. Amy advised her to wear a black turtleneck, a pencil skirt, and high heels to exude power, professionalism, and authority. The young woman was infuriated at Amy by this suggestion. She claimed it was unfair. Amy agreed, but also reminded her of the power she has as an ordained minister and the importance of using it. The young woman did not end up wearing a turtleneck but did arrive at the meeting dressed appropriately to accomplish what she needed to do.

Wardrobe is an issue that every woman preacher has to confront. It does not take much time after women clergy get together, before the subject of wardrobe comes up. I interviewed nearly a hundred women through my research, and appearance and wardrobe came up in the majority of the conversations. Women preachers describe the common experience of greeting people after worship and instead of making any remark about the sermon, they comment on their wardrobe or latest hairstyle. This is a challenge for many women who are still very much breaking into a man's domain. Dress is a large factor in how women are identified, respected, and accepted. One woman preacher said, "Even two years into my first call, I still receive comments regularly about what I am wearing rather than what I have just said, so at times I find myself wishing I could hide the physical things that make me a woman preacher." I have heard some women praise the clergy robe because it eliminates any stress over what to wear and helps to minimize superfluous comments from the congregation. Another preacher said it this way: "Wardrobe has been a challenge. It was a surprise to me that what I wear as a preacher affects the audience. At my first church as an associate pastor, I received a letter stating

that it was upsetting that I didn't wear pantyhose with my dresses and skirts. My bare legs were offensive to an elderly woman. I NEVER wore a short skirt and there wasn't much leg to notice, but it was distracting from her worship.

A few women surveyed made clear connections between demeaning comments by men and the struggle to be seen as an authority. "One of the challenges I face is being seen as an authority by men. I am fine to stand up there and talk as long as another man isn't saying something different. Also, it gets irritating how much people talk about my fingernails, shoes, haircut, weight, etc., something my male colleagues don't seem to have to deal with." Yet, it seems the most powerful thing a woman can do in this position is to confront it and teach the congregation how she is to be treated. Too often women complain, yet do nothing to address the condescending behavior others can communicate. Another woman said it this way: "As a woman in a patriarchal society, I have feared being patronized by congregants, or not taken seriously. Though they may mean well, when someone comments on my hair, my legs, and my shoes on Sunday morning, I believe this is some form of what I mean. This reality provides me with opportunities to grow in grace and to speak truth in love, for which I am grateful. I did ask one male congregant for a meeting, after one too many comments he made on my body. It was empowering-- he heard me, acknowledged his part, and apologized, and our relationship is a good one still.

Women preachers are often hard-pressed to respond in gracious yet assertive ways when comments are made that are directed at their outward appearance. Amy taught me to consider the power that one's wardrobe and hair can have if we are thoughtful

about it. Think through the message you have to convey, how you would like to be seen, and dress accordingly.

Amy is convinced that preaching is a God-given gift which some have and some do not. The challenge with preaching, Amy believes, is that as much as seminaries and congregations are committed to pouring in and developing good preachers, the great preachers are just naturally good at it. They just know what to do. She would compare this to naturally gifted musicians. A young piano prodigy can sit at the piano and know what to do, while others pound at the keys for years, read music, and get the notes right, but never sound like the naturally-gifted pianist. There are preachers who can pound out a sermon, but it will never sound the same way as someone with a natural gift. Some just have the gift. When a text is before her to preach, Amy now knows just what to do. She was unable to describe the experience but simply said, "I just know what to do." Like a good musician or artist she still must practice and hone her craft, but when a sermon is before her, she knows what to do. She just knows.

Amy believes that preaching is a conversation. It is a dialogue between the congregation and herself. So she works at deliberately developing it in that way. We want our people to participate in the formation of the sermon and to feel as if they are actively participating in its delivery. The spirit of the preaching event has to be one in which hard feelings are left at the feet of Jesus and are not brought into the pulpit. Amy explained that if she is angry or frustrated with the church one Sunday morning and is unable to preach the gospel with a spirit of peace, she knows to tell herself, "I better not get up there." This requires some keen self-awareness on the part of the preacher to do the needed spiritual work in order to humbly stand before a congregation and deliver good

news to everyone, even those who may be causing stress or pain or extra work. In her sermons, Amy will ask people to respond, in some way, to turn to a neighbor, or to email her their thoughts about a certain issue. To invite the congregation to participate in the message is seen as a central and important part of her own spiritual work because the preacher is always preaching to themselves as much as to the congregation. What does the preacher need to hear this week as well? The spiritual and relational work needed for the preacher to proclaim effectively is a daily practice of checking in with herself and with God. How are we to worship with those who may have betrayed us, but who have come searching for good news? It is there, in those moments, that the preacher must dig deep within herself and recognize how many times she has betrayed another, where she has sinned, or spoken too quickly, or slandered another. The movement preachers make must be toward mercy. Preachers must practice asking Christ to forgive them when they do not deserve it. Then and only then can the preacher have any good news to proclaim because only when the preacher has experienced mercy can she show others the blessings of grace. This posture takes a team of helpers. Amy has a great doctor, a trainer, a team of supportive colleagues, and a spiritual director she meets with every other week. Spiritual work is a discipline, and much like physical exercise, it needs to be integrated into the pattern of life.

Amy's metaphor for her work as a preacher is that of the Captain of the Ship. She sees herself responsible to lead her congregation ahead and wants to continue to foster a relationship in which they trust where she is leading them. For her to view herself as a captain reveals a perception of tremendous authority. She credits her sense of authority through years of preaching and leading through conflict and division in her early church

positions. There she learned of the powerful tool of proclamation to bring a congregation through the storms. But, simply through her life circumstances, she has been handed authority into which she was forced to live. Thankfully, as a self-described authoritarian leader, her current position at Riverside Church is, as she says, “a good match.”

When I asked Amy what advice she would give to young women discerning a call to preaching, she told me she always encourages the women who work with her to look at a video of themselves. As miserable as the experience can feel, it makes a huge impact on how the woman sees herself. And this is hard work. “Keep challenging yourself as a preacher,” she told me. “Never stop growing as a preacher. Never. I feel nervous every Sunday. I know I am nervous because I believe it is a sacred path that I am on and I take that very seriously. I have people around me who have taken a solemn promise to tell me when it is time to stop. I don’t want to be the one to keep going after I have passed my time.”

Pastor Brenda

It was a warm July evening in the summer of 2015, and our week-long pastors’ conference at Whitworth was just beginning. I had never met Brenda Salter McNeill before but had heard of her through our mutual networks. She too serves at a Christian liberal arts institution, as the Director and Associate Professor of Reconciliation Studies at Seattle Pacific University. I, as always, was nervous as she walked up to the podium, not in an anxious sort of way, but it was if I knew something incredible was about to happen. She brought a sweat towel with her, adjusted her Britney Spears mic, and smiled big to a room full of Presbyterian pastors. She took a long, deep breath and was quiet for

a moment before she started to sing. Her deep, smooth voice began, “I love the Lord, and I lift my voice, to worship him, o my soul rejoice,” and she lifted her hand for everyone to join her. “Take joy, my king, in what you hear, may it be a sweet, sweet sound, in your ear.” The room was quiet and all eyes were on her. “Amen,” she said. “Amen? I need you, people, to talk back to me. Amen?” “Amen!” the shy Presbyterians responded. As we all sang together with Brenda that night I was reminded of the words of my preaching professor Len Sweet. “Our songs are never solos. Paul is a reminder that preaching is never a game of solitaire but a multiplayer game—or better yet, a song around the campfire. We may begin the song, but it the voices of the many who give it beauty, power, and harmony. Like Jesus parable of the mustard seed, a good song will spread like vines, enlivening everyone who accepts its invitation to join the chorus. I thank a long line of unheralded, unnamed camp-meeting preachers who have taught me over the years that loving God means most importantly sharing the indwelling Christ, the life source that energizes you, with others until everyone around you is singing their combined songs of praise.”¹⁵¹ Together a symphony of voices sang praises to the living God that night, and the preacher conducted the congregation to participate in the chorus. And once she did we were all a part of the conversation God intended for us to have together. And then she began to preach.

It was like watching an artist take oils to a blank canvas. With each stroke she brought us in closer, moving us into the details of the story of Esther, making her come alive to all of us in the room. Brenda articulated what it must have been like for a teenage

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

girl to be chosen by the king. The fear and trembling. And then she walked us through what Mordecai must have felt when she left. The agony of the distance when any parent is separated from their children. She would add another stroke to this story she was painting, and then like any trained artist, Brenda would step back and pause and connect back with all of us. As if to check in to see if we were following her, to see if we could keep up with her. Because I think she knew she was just getting started. She spoke to us as friends, pastors, parents, and asked the question out loud which many of us were wondering. “Anyone here ever worry about your kids? Ever worry if your church is doing enough?” You could see the heads nodding, and then she would go back to her canvas. She would dive back into the text and unpack it, highlight details, describe the people as if we might know them. Vashti and Mordecai and the young Jewish girl who was chosen by the king to be the Queen. A story we had all heard many times now was being painted for us in a new way. And what was so new about it was that Brenda related it back to our context so we were forced to wrestle with the same issues as Mordecai and Esther. The living word of God was moving through the room in a way that each person listening had to wrestle with what it means for the church today to stand up for those who are being oppressed. “Are you walking around your palace, church? Like Esther? Or are you beating your chest in sackcloth and ashes, begging for justice like Mordecai?” Brenda did not just tell the story; she prophetically painted the story in a way that the image she created shook the room. It stayed with us.

When I asked her about how she began preaching she said, “They told me when I was young, ‘you can preach!’ And it was as if I knew, at an early age that, I was born to do this. You know like when young children get up on stage and just know how to sing?”

They can astonish a crowd with their incredible voice? That child just knows they have to sing. They have too. That's how I felt about preaching. It was in my DNA. I was born to do this. And I have always had a longing to please God." Although she grew up in a Pentecostal church, it wasn't until she was 19 that she made a commitment to Christ at Rutgers University and there it started small. She started going to small groups, then the weekly college groups, then the opportunities kept coming her way. She began pouring herself into ministry. If there was an opportunity that came her way she took it. While in school she was majoring in speech pathology, and in her studies she was learning the art of articulation and persuasion. God was using this science to build her capacity and to prepare her to communicate in the pulpit one day.

When Brenda found herself at a predominantly white, evangelical seminary she told me "No one there knew what to do with African-American preachers. They were still teaching preaching in a three-point style. There are no three points with Pentecostals! You preach out of convictions! You are a vessel out of which God speaks!" The rigor of academics became so formulaic and ordered that Brenda realized, "I lost my voice in seminary. I focused too much on academics and it became a performance to get the good grade. My goal was based on a standard of evaluation. I preached in their style in order to pass." She felt somehow that in her time at seminary she lost her voice. She described it as becoming "DE-formed." She had become afraid to preach because although she had perfected it technically, the soul of the sermon she preached was lost. Her voice did not begin to reform until her encounter with Psalm 27 began to penetrate her spirit.

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
 The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
 When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—
 they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
 though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.
 One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:
 to live in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life,
 to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.
 For he will hide me in his shelter, in the day of trouble;
 he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.
 Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,
 and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy,
 I will sing and make melody to the Lord.
 Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!
 “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
 Your face, Lord, do I seek.
 Do not hide your face from me.
 Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.
 Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!
 If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.
 Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.
 Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
 for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.
 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
 Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

Psalm 27 assured her to not be afraid, but to preach the word the Spirit guides her to proclaim. She felt the freedom to break the rules, unlearn what she had learned, and allow her gift to be unleashed with wild abandon. And of course, she had a professor that encouraged her: Dr. Ian Pitt-Watson, Scottish preacher from Fuller Seminary, whom she “loved, loved, loved!” He saw Brenda’s gift and affirmed it. He walked alongside her through seminary. He saw her as a diamond in the rough, and he knew his job was simply to add polish to her gift and set her up to shine.

Brenda remembers feeling validated soon after her struggle of preacher-formation was being worked out. She was asked to be on a panel of women in ministry but had little time to prepare. A few minutes before the discussion was about to begin, she went into the bathroom and jotted down a few notes on a paper towel. She had a few ideas going in, but nothing was organized in her head. She remembers sitting up on the panel and

mentioning a few ideas from the scribbles on the paper towel, but the conversation turned quickly when she began sharing about the Women at the Well in John 4. Without a note in sight, she began to preach on that text. It flowed out of her passion and conviction about a God who would move in close to the marginalized. Jesus Christ affirmed the thirsty woman's truth, recognized her rejection, empathized with her isolation, yet somehow, through a brief conversation on that hot day, the woman ran home redeemed. She was thirsty no more. Brenda laughed telling me the number of people after the presentation who came up to her so grateful for her "hermeneutic," and asked if she would send them her notes from the talk. Little did they know that the words had just flowed out of her. She credits the Holy Spirit for the word given to her that day to preach in that moment. The basis of her talk that day became her book, "A Credible Witness," based on the story in John's Gospel about the woman at the well.

I was so impressed by Brenda's conviction about the Holy Spirit. Too often in my Presbyterian corner of the world, the Holy Spirit gets ignored. As preachers, it is essential that we all have a conviction about the Holy Spirit regardless of what tribe you come from. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, "For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:11). This conviction should drive a preacher to their knees. Dr. Ron Pyle taught me about my posture before I begin to prepare a sermon: "As preachers begin to prepare for proclamation the prayer should be, 'Holy Spirit of God, I need you to reveal the thoughts of God. Because I don't want to preach my own thoughts and ideas, I need you to reveal to me God's mind and God's thought. And then I will do my best to communicate it. And I confess that I do not have within myself, apart

from your Spirit, I do not have it within myself an ability to know the thoughts of God.’ So then as the scripture opens to me, God’s Spirit reveals because God’s Spirit knows the thoughts of God.” Brenda’s reliance upon the Holy Spirit is what moves her message within each particular context she finds herself. As she approaches any speaking engagement her spirit is one that calls out to God, “not my will but yours, O Lord.”

I asked her about her actual voice and how or if she intentionally cares for it. “I am sure that I do. I used to get hoarse. When I would get hoarse I knew it was because I was trying too hard. And it was a signal to me. I do not want to get caught in my own human flesh. I must trust something supernatural will happen. I tell myself to calm down. I don’t want to feel like I need to make people get it. In order to hold the attention of the people for 30 minutes or so I need to change my register and my pace must modulate. These days it is so hard to stay focused on speakers. So I try to change things up. I will move to being more conversational. I will tell a story. I will get softer or louder when I really get going. Voice needs color to it. What makes me good is my authenticity. It is your personal transformation that goes along with information. Information is not transformation. We cannot lead people where they have not been. We have to tell the truth; even kids can sense it when we tell the truth. ‘Lord let me be a bucket of living water.’ We are all broken vessels with a lot of cracks; including me! I have gotta watch my cracks. My junk or cracks contribute to how much water stays in the bucket; the less cracks the more living water gets to be dumped on the congregation.” I was struck by Brenda’s vulnerability and humble spirit. She sees herself as God’s vessel and has a deep conviction that in order for God’s people to hear the word preached, she the preacher, must check herself. Spiritually if she cannot hold the living water then there will not be

anything for her to pour out. These “cracks in the bucket” are areas in life that need to be tended to and mended in order for the bucket to continue to be filled and dumped out again and again.

“What would you tell a young woman discerning a call to preaching?” I asked her. “I will tell them that seminary deformed me, but seminary is essential to know your stuff. Read your Greek and Hebrew and know why you can defend your conviction; those two things combined make me powerful. If it is emotionally rooted without being biblically rooted they will question us. I am passionate, but I also know what I am talking about.” She warned me about the pitfalls many women fall into of showing too much vulnerability. That can put a weight on the congregation that can distract the listeners. She went on, “if you are too emotional without any basis you will have no authority. Be yourself. Ask for what you need.” I asked her for an example and she told me, “I say no to particular microphones. Microphones were built for men. Like David in Saul's armor. Tell them what you need. A clip-on mic won't work. Be a grown-up and decide to assert yourself if you are called.”

“I thought the fight for women in ministry is over ... it's not. There is a weird double-standard, what we wear, how feminine or not feminine, how attractive or unattractive. All these things affect how we are heard. I'm a role model and I may be the first woman they've ever seen. This is so important to understand. There is a weight to this thing. Women must take this very seriously. I've had a whole group of women walk out on me and male pastors hit on me. Women must find other women and collegial groups and ask questions, tell their stories to support each other. This preaching identity

is an embodiment. It is a sacred call that demands it be taken seriously and held in high regard.”

Brenda told me when she would be on the road speaking or guest preaching how often she has been asked, “Who’s got your kids?” As if anyone would ever ask a man that question. Yet the question somehow conveys the message: “You shouldn’t be here. You should be somewhere else. You are not prioritizing your life in the right order.” Brenda explained this as a constant tug-of-war and to “Fight your guilties!” The guilt of working-motherhood seeps into the spirit of many women who preach and are raising a family. Brenda suggested the best way to combat the guilt is for more and more women to share their stories of motherhood and work-life balance together. For there we will find encouragement.

At the conference where I spent a week with Brenda listening to her preach, I asked all the women preachers to join us for a mid-week lunch. I invited them to come and share about their ministries and the joys and challenges of. When I stood up to make the announcement I said, “Please ladies come, grab your lunch, we will be upstairs in the dining hall and feel free to bring your kids.” While it felt like nothing intentional on my part, Brenda stopped me to acknowledge it afterward. She affirmed my invitation. “Thank you for telling them they can bring their kids. That is a signal that you recognize they are juggling two worlds at the same time. This is how we live. This is what makes women unique.” Brenda taught me that instead of feeling guilty about work-family balance, do creative things to intertwine them.

After many hours of research, listening to women preachers tell their formation stories, I have a greater understanding of their challenges, insecurities, and fears. Yet, it

has also enhanced my faith in the call of the Holy Spirit, seeing the strength God has given certain women to empower the church with their voice. The exemplary women preachers are not halted by talk of dress or appearance. Instead, they move past it with confidence, determined to keep educating the church in the hopes that one day the comments will cease and they will be seen as equal members. They persist because the call is so clear that they cannot ignore it. They persist because they know their identity as preachers. They trust that God has called them and affirmed them. They know they have a message to proclaim. They have done their own spiritual work. They have dug deep into their own closets full of baggage and unpacked them before the Lord. They, like Moses, stammer before him and ask, “Who am I that I should do this?” And God so clearly confirms and affirms them. “I will be with you. Now go” (Ex 3:12).

Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

Author Joan Chittister described the message Moses received as dramatic: “Just at what would seem to be the moment of Moses’ total immersion in the presence of God, God stops Moses where Moses is to teach him that holiness depends on finding holiness where he stands and then by taking that energy to other people for their liberation. Moses learns that holiness is made of virtues, not of visions; Moses learns that holiness depends on

being for the other; Moses learns that holiness depends on being about something greater than self; Moses learns that holiness is being present to the presence everywhere it is and even where it seems it isn't.¹⁵²

For women to receive the divine message, they must be like Moses and believe God is with them. Once Moses trusted he would not be alone he was able to move into uncharted territory. He began to lead despite his own fear, insecurity, and the doubt of the community. He moved into his call because he could not ignore it, and he trusted God was in it, creating it, and leading it. He moved because Moses knew God was inviting him to move the community into a deeper level of trust and relationship with God. The movement toward God is then a step into holiness. Holiness is being set apart for great things in company with the sacred. When women preachers are able to heed the call, and recognize the direction in which God is leading, and take their whole selves into following the direction, they deepen their sense of who they are. They are no longer just women or just preachers, they are with God. They are for the other. They are for Christ. They are for the church.

¹⁵² Chittister, 64.

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