

“Your Daughters Shall Prophesy”

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Acts 2:1-21

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May my words be a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

And so the church was born. It was a promising start, a fresh wind that blew away the old, restricted ways of the Hebrew faith. A new age when the language of one person was clear to the speakers of many other languages. A world where all of God’s creation were equal. It was such a heady day that onlookers thought the disciples were intoxicated with new wine. Peter, of course, took exception and responded to that jibe, quoting the prophet Joel:

*I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. . . .
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

Your daughters shall prophesy.

Powerful words indeed for a culture that had placed women close to the bottom of the pile, just a little above lepers. A culture that had ignored the words of Genesis:

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)*

It was a heady day. And the euphoria lasted for a little while. Women were deacons, and sometimes presbyters, in the early church. The wealth of some women was crucial to the financial support of the early disciples. In his letter to the Galatians (3:28), Paul wrote that *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*. But within a few years it was business as usual: men made the decisions, women stayed quietly in their places, serving the church as good daughters, handmaidens to those in authority.

My elementary and secondary teachers—nuns of three different orders—modeled for me a different world, one where women could do whatever they wanted to do. Well, not quite everything! They went to school every summer to increase their learning and their skill as teachers, showing me that it was all right for a woman to be intelligent and accomplished. At the same time, Monsignor Melican, who was the pastor of my parish all through those years, clearly disliked women. The story was that he had been jilted at the altar. He was impatient with girls, pulling their bangs back roughly before placing the communion wafer on their tongues. And he was unkind to the nuns.

My father reinforced those mixed signals. He encouraged me to go to college, to think about a master's degree, and yet he insisted that I had to respect authority—almost always male—even when it was undeserved. When I spoke vehemently about an issue I cared about, or when I emphasized my point with my hands, my father would tell me not to be “so dramatic.” And so I learned to “dilute my fierce purpose for the sake of others,” as novelist and essayist May Sarton says. In Sue Monk Kidd's words, I learned to suppress the “rambunctious girl child” that existed deep inside me.

The interfaith women's gathering we call The Red Tent, after Anita Diamant's novel of the same name, has caused me to meditate deeply on the role of women in the church and in the world. This past winter, we read and studied Sue Monk Kidd and Ann Kidd Taylor's *Traveling with Pomegranates*, a journey of mother and daughter into the feminine divine. Since then I've been reading with care *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Sue Monk Kidd's account of her painful journey from the repressive culture of the Southern Baptist Church to a spirituality that honors the divine in every woman.

My journey was not as rough as hers. I was fortunate, in my early twenties, to land in the Episcopal Church, which opened various offices of lay and ordained ministry to women in the 60's and 70's. I can do something I never would have dreamed possible—never would have imagined—when I was a girl: I can stand in this pulpit, offering to you a view of our faith that challenges the church fathers, who slammed the door on the unruly wind of the Spirit so many centuries ago.

And yet we have a long way to go:

- Many of our assumptions in the church are still founded on the belief that God is a man.
- Many of our prayers, especially the Eucharistic Prayer and the Nicene Creed, are patriarchal, presenting us an image of God as Father. And not always a loving father, but one who exacted a terrible sacrifice from his son on our behalf .
- We give women power, and yet we still expect them to model that power in the same ways that men have always done.

I became so uncomfortable with this realization a few years ago that I stopped wearing a clerical collar. I wanted to dress in a way that spoke of my femininity. I wanted to understand what it really meant to be a woman in the church and in the world. I wanted to see what it would be like to view God as female as well as male, and to speak and write about what I learned.

I believe that, deep down, we all want to worship a god who looks like us, who acts in ways that echo who we are, who understands our emotions, both male and female. We want to hear the message of God's love in our own language. And yet, embarking on a journey to know this God is frightening, because it can turn our world upside down. It can be threatening to men, who have accepted as their birthright the power vested in them. It can also be threatening to women, who have found ways to buy into that power, even at the expense of their wholeness.

But this journey is not an attempt to diminish men, nor to be in conflict with them. As May Sarton says, *Women have to come to understand ourselves as central, not peripheral, before anything real can happen. We have to depend on ourselves This cannot be done **against** men, and that's the real problem. . . . It cannot be women **against** men. It has to be woman finding her true self with or without man, but not against man.*

I think this can be done, but it will require that women look hard at themselves, at their beliefs about God, at their role in the church. And it will require that men do the same.

Your sons and daughters shall prophesy.

On that first Pentecost, a great wind blew through the new church. A wind that promised something unimaginable: a way of believing that honored all of God's creation, that held up the possibility of true equality for men and women. An equality that does not insist that men and women be alike—for we are not, which I think was our creator's intention—but that honors the unique attributes and gifts of both. An equality that opens us to new ways of speaking of God, new ways of worshipping God, new ways of seeing God in ourselves—and of seeing ourselves in God. An equality that frees us to take risks, to challenge the status quo, to welcome the movement of the Spirit into our bodies and souls.

For the growth of the kingdom: yes. But, more important, I think, for the richness of life that God—our mother and our father—wants for every one of us.