

Mark 14:3-9
I Corinthians 12:1-11
February 13, 2011

The Power of Gifts

Narcissa Prentiss Whitman wrote to her brothers and sisters in 1836 that they had been using dried buffalo dung to cook their meals out west on the way to Washington. Surprisingly, it does not smell much different than burning grass and grains, which are what Buffalo eat. She knew her sister Harriet would “make up a face at this,” but it was better than cold food.¹ You may or may not know that we have a classroom in our church named after Narcissa Prentiss Whitman. She was a Presbyterian missionary and one of two Anglo American women who were the first to cross the Rocky Mountains.

Narcissa Prentiss, born in Prattsburg New York in 1807, was a driven young woman who had a passionate faith who knew at age 16 that she wanted to be a missionary. There were a series of revivals in upstate New York in the 1800's that really inspired many people to go deeper in faith. To be a missionary in 1823 meant that you wanted to go west to convert Native Americans. It also likely meant that like most people of that time, you were not very appreciative of Native

¹ <http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/html/nwhitman.html> “Platte River just above the Forks June 3rd 1836.”

American culture and beliefs, nonetheless Narcissa Prentiss knew with all heart that she wanted to serve the church. She completed her education and taught primary school and waited and waited. She waited for years. The Presbyterian Mission Board would not send her out as a missionary unless she was married. So not only was it impossible for Ms. Prentiss to be ordained as a woman, neither could she answer her call to be a missionary without a husband. She had strong faith. She had passion and gifts but the church would not extend an official call and that really stunk.

She did marry; a Marcus Whitman who was a doctor and they left in 1836 for Washington State. He too was called to mission. Some eleven years into their ministry in Washington, they were killed by Native Americans. A case of measles broke out and Dr. Whitman treated Native American and European American Children. The Native American Children had no inborn immunity whatsoever and they died at a much higher rate than the European American children. Suspicion among the Cayuse Indians turned to rage and the Whitmans and their seven adopted children were killed.

The Presbyterian Church USA suggests February as the month to celebrate the gifts of women and the point I am making is that

Naricssa Prentiss could not be ordained and she could not use her gifts in ministry until she was married and became Narcissa Prentiss Whitman. Thankfully for Ark and Dove the times and church have changed.

The scent of the nard ointment filled the room as a woman with an alabaster Jar of ointment poured it out over the head of Jesus. The House of Simon the leper was all a buzz. The nard was powerfully fragrant. The bouquet filled the room, but certain men were snorting in anger. The nard was too costly. It should have been sold to take care of the poor. And they scolded her for lavishing this gift upon Jesus. Her gift was not accepted. Her act of beauty was criticized. It was as if she had no right to serve God in this way. Her service was rejected, for it smelled of waste.

Have you ever bought flowers for a sick person and had them delivered to the hospital? Isn't it a waste of money? The flowers are cut. They won't last. The person is sick; how can they appreciate it? Have you ever sent flowers for a funeral? Another waste, huh? After all, the person is dead and they won't know about the flowers. Irrational acts of illogic and tomorrow is the chief holiday of such ridiculous motions of exuberance. And yet flowers we give and

perfume we buy and acts of kindness we extend out of love and compassion, because we all need a concrete way to express our devotion. The scent of carnation and rose are distinct and delightful.

The scent of nard filled the house of Simon the Leper because this unnamed woman wanted to share her gift with Jesus; how impractical and how wonderful and inspiring. We actually have a Flower Team here at Ark and Dove. Jean Powers is always searching for more team members, she will even teach you how to arrange. If you would like to dedicate flowers for a worship service, you can make a donation. It's impractical but it is a gift that can help inspire and shape worship.

This unnamed daughter of faith was anointing Jesus for death. The scent of nard filled the room, but before long Jesus would smell his own blood. This nameless woman is a witness not by what she says but what she does. How many nameless women have served the church for centuries, changing the course of history but unrecognized by the Chroniclers? She does not speak but she lavishes her gift upon Jesus and she makes a powerful statement. Not everything we do is utilitarian and efficient; faith often inspires random acts of beauty and kindness. Faith often arouses arbitrary

acts of love. Men engage in random acts of kindness. Men have for centuries lead, loved and inspired the church. Men have been faithful leaders. Faithful men surrounded Jesus, yet to none of them did it occur to anoint Jesus for death. And one wonders if it had occurred to Peter or James or John to anoint their rabbi, whether it would have been a sanitary dab on the forehead. There is something so powerful about the gift of this woman that the story is told in all four gospels in some form or fashion. She conferred a gift that no man was likely to offer. This woman alone, with an alabaster jar of nard, had the charity and the gumption to act in faith. Something in her inward journey led to this outward act of dedication.

The point is, as it is made in I Corinthians 12 that each person is given a gift for the good of the church. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Everyone has something to offer. Everyone has something unique. Each of us has something that no one else can bring to the party or to the table. Why would the church choose to restrain and constrain the gifts of women? If Jesus would break with tradition and encourage women disciples, if the Apostle Paul would appoint and recognize female pastors, elders and deacons in the first century; why would there be

churches today who don't ordain women? I wonder what progress has been halted and what miles of ministry have been squelched because the church is or was blind to the darkness of sexism.

So at this end of the building we have the Narcissa Prentiss Whitman Room named after a Missionary who served from 1836 to 1847; but at the other end of the church we have the Marshall Room which many of you no doubt will remember was named after the Rev. Cherry Marshall who was the first woman ordained in the Presbytery of Baltimore. We dedicated that room just a few years back. Its hard to believe, but Rev. Marshall was ordained in 1973. Ok folks that was only 38 years ago. Even though Jesus welcomed women into his inner circle some 2000 years ago, even though the women in his circle were the first to realize Jesus was the messiah, even though Prisca ran a house church with her husband Aquilla according to the Apostle Paul in the year 50, and they both are referred to as ministers by Paul; the Presbyterian Church did not ordain its first woman deacon until 1906, the first woman elder in 1930 and the first female pastor until 1956. We have seen some amazing changes and for many of us, amazing changes in our own lifetime.

Jesus recognized the gifts of woman some 1900 years before our denomination; the disappointing thing, the frightening thing is we are in the minority. We are one of a small group of denominations that ordain women. Its one of the reasons they call us Liberal Protestant. Interesting spin isn't it? Sarah Palin can run for Vice President of the most powerful nation in the world and no one calls her Liberal; Michelle Bachman is the spokeswoman of the Tea Party and she is definitely no liberal; but because we ordain women we are liberal. The vast majority of Christian denominations refuse to recognize the gifts of women. The vast Majority of Islamic Sects do not even entertain the thought of female Imams. Most Jewish Denominations do not ordain women. Fully ordained Buddhist nuns are not the norm. Brahmin female priests although common in the 14th and 15th centuries, not so much now. Religion even in the 21st century is clouded by a spirituality of sexism and the world is the poorer for it.

We don't have everything figured out. We don't have everything right; but as far as woman's ordination goes – we Presbyterians and we Liberal Protestants are way ahead of the crowd. Like Jesus and like Paul we recognize the leadership and the

gifts of women. Frankly I just don't understand why so many intelligent women, so many powerfully gifted women align themselves with denominations that degrade and depreciate the gifts of women. It is a glaring stain, an affront to faith a waste of powerful gifts.

When Jesus quoted Deuteronomy about the poor Chapter 15 vs 11 he wasn't saying ignore the poor; read the verse folks. What he was saying is that the gifts of this unnamed woman were powerful and appreciated. I hope that when our girls and young women leave home and leave Ark and Dove and the Presbyterian church that they never attend a church where the gifts of women go unappreciated, unnamed and unrecognized through ordination. We must raise our sons and daughters with an appreciation and a passion for the gifts and ordination of both men and women. To do otherwise would leave Jesus denied and Jesus un-anointed. There is power in the gifts of women.