

Can You Hear Me Now?

Luke 5: 1-11

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In 1871, one of the topics for discussion at the annual meeting of the General Association of New Hampshire (the precursor to our current conference) was the question of whether female church members should be allowed to speak out loud in church prayer meetings. At the time, the women outnumbered the men in churches sometimes by three to one. They were raising the bulk of the money for benevolent giving, and the model the New Hampshire women had come up with was one that was so effective, it was replicated nationally. The women were the teachers in the Sabbath Schools, and when it came to raising money for building projects, let's just say that the men knew where to turn.

In our own NH history in the Congregational tradition, we can trace the footprints of many who quietly labored in God's vineyard whose names we do not know. The history of woman's leadership over the 206 years of our Conference's history is a story that remains largely uncollected, yet deep within the lists of the names of male ministers, embedded in detailed minutes of endless meetings, tucked away in local church archives, are the wonderful stories of women's work in our NH churches. Reading between the lines in the primary sources, we find a picture of robust female participation, showing creativity, determination, financial savvy, generosity, and compassion. The fact is that the hard work of hundreds of unnamed women kept our denomination alive through the century and a quarter in which they were largely denied official leadership roles.

Because this week is designated "Women's Week" in the United Church of Christ, we are invited to remember this history. Indeed, we are invited to recall all the stories of all the voices in our human experience that have been lost and forgotten. Musicians will tell us that the silences in music are just as important as the places where voices and instruments make sound, and so it is with history. Though many voices have been silenced or forgotten over the years, they have also written our story. To forget them would be to not fully know ourselves.

Which brings us to Peter's wife.

Her husband, Simon Peter, had been out fishing all night with his partners, James and John. She must have wondered what was taking him so long to get home. Perhaps the first light of morning was beginning to dawn, and she had prepared some food for him. She might have been thinking that surely, by then, the boats had been anchored and the nets washed and put away. Maybe she had some inkling that it had something to do with a man named Jesus, because he had been in the area, astounding people with his teaching and casting out demons. She herself was forever grateful to this powerful teacher, because he had recently healed her own mother of a high fever—just by standing over her and telling the fever to leave. Still, she could hardly have imagined the scene that was unfolding at the water's edge, and the profound impact it would have on her life. The surprise of her life would come later that day when she learned that her beloved husband would be leaving everything to follow this Jesus. Within that call would also be contained her call. The same was true for all the other women, children, and aging parents left behind by the twelve men who followed Jesus.

The debate about the role of women in the churches was an active one in our Conference through the late 1800's and into the first quarter of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, as the women kept the churches alive, male ministers and delegates would gather at associational meetings and lament the shortage of suitable male candidates for ministry. In 1900, they would even discuss whether the church was sufficiently "manly" to attract enough male church members. The great works of women were always noted and appreciated, and yet somehow it took a very long time for the dawn to break on one of the obvious solutions to the problem of insufficient numbers of male candidates for the ministry. It almost seems comical to us now that in 1874, the male ministers and delegates at the General Association meeting discussed this topic: "What is the proper work of women in the cause of Christ?". We chuckle when we read an 1873 report from the Meredith church in which the male minister wrote: "Our women have been encouraged to break silence, and it has been of incalculable advantage!" Chuckle we may, but we are also called to remember that we aren't out of the woods on this issue yet. Many, many churches in our tradition will not say it out loud, but they would never call a woman pastor. The world over, most of the illiteracy that exists is among women. Women and children are far more likely to live in poverty than are men. We have a ways to go before we are done silencing all the female voices in our world.

If only we knew her name, we might be able to picture her more clearly. Still, that morning, she may have put on her sandals and gone out to look for her husband. If she did, she would have gone down to the lakeshore and found the curious sight of her husband's boat heading out to deep water, long after he would normally be done working. She would have stood with the crowd who had listened to the remarkable teachings of the rabbi Jesus, who always seemed to beckon his listeners to remember the poor, the lost, and the oppressed. Breathing a sigh of relief that her husband was indeed OK, she might have gasped as she watched the nets brought up out of the water with more fish in them than they had ever held before. From a distance, she could see the men struggling to bring the nets up. Then there was the curious sight of her husband falling to his knees for a few moments. Days before, after Jesus had healed her mother and she and her mother served Peter and Jesus some supper, she had listened intently to the remarkable conversation that had taken place. She had seen the effect that Jesus had had on her loving, stubborn, impulsive, passionate husband. She herself felt touched by his words, his manner, and his deeply compassionate presence. What was going on out there in the boat?

Elida Gertrude Frost was the first woman ordained to ministry in the Congregational tradition in New Hampshire. The year was 1924, and she served in Alstead. By this time, women were more and more frequently serving as delegates, and since 1912 some had been serving as lay pastors. From here, the involvement of women in official leadership roles in the church steadily increased. This is not only a triumph for women; it gives all of us hope, because it is emblematic of the great good that can come of giving voice to groups that have unjustly been left on the sidelines.

Though we don't know the name of Peter's wife, we do know that there were women who were among the followers of Jesus. It is remarkable that traces of their involvement were recorded at all, because at that time and place in history the stature, safety, and survival of women and children were largely dependent on their association with men. And though undoubtedly many of the unnamed loved ones of the male disciples helped write the story of Jesus by all that they gave up in seeing their men follow him, we do know that some of the wives of the apostles went along. There is a wonderful, all-too-quick (but at least it's there!) reference to this in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He writes approvingly of the believing wives of the apostles, of the brothers of Jesus, and he specifically refers to the wife of Peter, mentioning that these women were traveling about with their husbands. Clearly, the rabbi from Nazareth touched the hearts of these women, too. We rejoice to know that Peter's wife, and others, also followed. We can imagine that they, too, gave the best of themselves to Jesus. Today, we remember them with gratitude. We thank them for reminding us of all of the forgotten ones who have lived and died and given much, without our even knowing about it.

When Jesus made the preposterous request that the exhausted fishermen get their already washed nets back out and lower them into the water again, Peter and James and John must have wondered what on earth was going on! Jesus must have already made a great impression on Peter, though, because headstrong Peter quickly obeyed him, and called him "Master." When the remarkable catch of fish overflowed the nets, Peter was overcome with a sense of his own unworthiness. He almost missed the call. His first impulse was to ask Jesus to leave, because he felt that he did not deserve to be in his presence. But Jesus knew better. Come, he said. Follow me. From now on, you will be fishing for people.

This day, Jesus sends us all, men and women together, on that same fishing expedition. Are we hearing his call? Can we hear him now? Who are those ones in our community and our world who are left out and forgotten? Who are the invisible ones that Jesus calls us to see and include? Do we hear God calling us to reach out in new ways? Can we include all of God's people in our story?

Together, let us open our hearts to these questions. Let us be fishers of people—all the people.

Amen.

Endnote: Information about the history of women's leadership in the Congregational tradition comes from an article called *Pioneer Sisters: Women's Leadership in New Hampshire, 1812-1927*, written by Elizabeth C. Nordbeck and Mary A. James, found in the collection *Granite and Grace: Essays Celebrating the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the NH Conference, United Church of Christ*, published in 2001 by the Conference.