

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

September 15, 2019

Remember the Ladies

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On March 31st, 1776 Abigail Adams penned a letter to her husband, John; they were America's first power couple and the first future First Lady said, I long to hear that you have declared independency. And by the way, in the new code of laws, which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would remember the ladies. We are in a six part series celebrating unsung heroes who may not make headlines, but they make history by the risk they take, the sacrifices they make, and sometimes the rules they break. They take a giant leaps of faith, small acts of courage that change the trajectory of history, and there are some lessons to be learned from their lives.

What I want to do this weekend is remember the ladies. In required reading for social studies public schools cover 737 historical figures; only 178 of them are women. Of the a hundred sculptures in Statuary Hall, only nine are women. This is hard to believe, but it took 150 years for Abigail Adams request to finally be fulfilled. It wasn't until the 66th congress that women were given the right to vote all that to say this, I think in the grand scheme of history, women are overlooked and underappreciated. All too often they are the unsung heroes. But there is a long line of women in scripture who overcome the odds who put prejudice in its place, who break through the glass ceiling.

In the book of Genesis, God establishes his covenant with a man named Abraham that's how it worked in the Patriarchal Society. But it was Sarah who gave birth to the promise at 90, no less. It was Moses who led the nation of Israel out of Egypt, but it was his sister Miriam who saved his life. According to the Midrash, Miriam led the women of Israel and taught them Torah the same way that Moses led the men. She was a poet and a prophet and a pop singer. It was her song that topped the charts after God split the Red Sea.

Now Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, but it was a woman named Rahab who risked her life to aid and abet Jewish spies. She is one of five women listed in the genealogy of Jesus. Oh, and it was her great, great grandson named David who killed the giant named Goliath and would become king of Israel.

Then there is Esther who stopped a Jewish genocide and Huldah who led a Jewish revival. There's Phoebe who financed the Apostle Paul's ministry and then went pony express and delivered the letter, Paul's letter to the Romans. Lydia first converts to Christ on the continent of Europe and a commodities trader. Fun fact the color purple derives from the inky secretion of a sea snail called the Hexaplex trunculus. It took about 10,000 snails to produce one gram of purple dye. At one point in history, an ounce of purple was worth more than an ounce of gold and Lydia was a trader of purple textiles.

Now, lest we forget, there was a teenage girl named Mary who had the courage to marry Joseph and carry Jesus, and it was her cousin Elizabeth, who was the first person to recognize Jesus as

Messiah. Mary isn't even showing, she's in her first trimester and Elizabeth says, why am I so honored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? She intuitively identifies the identity of Mary's baby in utero.

In Paul's letter to Timothy, he says, I am reminded of your sincere faith, the faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. And we read right pass references like this one. I mean, Timothy Paul's aid to camp on a second and third missionary journey becomes the bishop of Ephesus. But come on, he stood on the shoulders of his mother and grandmother {inaudible}, as many of us do. We are the offspring of their love and nurture. We are the answer to their unceasing prayer.

So this weekend we remember the ladies. If you have a Bible, you can turn to the book of Judges, let me set the scene. I want to go all the way back to the 13th century BC. There's a vicious cycle that repeats itself during the days of the judges. The people do what is right in their own eyes; I think that's called anarchy. They do what is wrong in the eyes of God. They lose their spiritual moorings, but God graciously raises up judges, 12 of them who help the people find their way back to God, who helped them rediscover their identity and destiny as the people of God.

The fourth judge is a woman named Deborah. Now, I'm not sure who plays Deborah in the biopic. She's a little bit Beyonce. She's a little bit RBG. She is Joan of Arc. She is Oprah Winfrey. She leads the nation of Israel for 60 years. She is judge and jury. She is a poet prophet. According to Jewish tradition, one of seven women prophetesses and last but certainly not least, she's a mother.

Judges five verse seven here we go.

⁶ *"In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned; travelers took to winding paths.*

⁷ *Life in the villages ceased;*

The Nation of Israel is experiencing an economic recession, a military oppression. This is not a pretty picture, but there is a plot twist in verse seven. The NIV says ⁷ *Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose.*

Now look, she goes third person and then doubles down there arose a mother in Israel. In the words of Martin Lawrence, you go, girl. Now the Urban Bible says there woke a mother in Israel. There's not an urban bible, but if there was, if there was, that's what it would say.

An entire nation is in the fetal position. They've lost their will to fight. They're cowering in the corner. But one woman has the courage to step out in faith when everybody else is stepping back in fear. You know what, at some point enough is enough. You gotta stop bowing to the powers that be. Stop maintaining the status quo. And I think this is that moment for Debra.

Let me put this in historical context and then I'll put it in biblical context. In 1950 a senator from Wisconsin, Joe McCarthy, used fear, tactics and smear tactics to incite public paranoia. His name became synonymous with reckless demagoguery, it's called McCarthyism. It was a senator from the same political party who had the courage to stand up and call a spade a spade. Now they actually shared a subway ride, a Senate subway ride that morning, and Joe McCarthy noticed her demeanor. He said, Margaret, you look very serious. Are you going to make a speech today? She said, yes, and you aren't going to like it. Margaret Chase Smith said, I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States senator. I speak as an American. I don't want to see my party ride to political victory on the four horsemen of fear, ignorance, bigotry, and smear. Well, thank God a woman arose.

In 1872 Susan B. Anthony was arrested; her crime, casting a vote. Two weeks later, she was arrested, fined \$100. She said, I shall never pay \$1 of your unjust penalty. And she never did. Susan B. Anthony celebrated her 86 birthday here in Washington DC. This is rather ironic to me, but at Church of the Fathers. She said her final public words, she said, there have been others also just as true and devoted to the cause. I wish I could name everyone in the cause of course was women's suffrage. Then she said this, with such women, consecrating their lives failure is impossible. Well, thank God a woman arose.

In 1852, a woman named Harriet Beecher Stowe had a vision during a church service. She went home and wrote a book that would prick the conscience of this nation. Uncle Tom's Cabin would be the second bestselling book of the 19th century behind the Bible. And Harriet Beecher Stowe said this, "the time has come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak. I hope every woman who can write will not be silent." Well, thank God a woman arose.

Edmund Burke said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing". He's right, but he left women out of the equation, didn't he?

I want to share three habits of unsung heroes this weekend, but before I do, I do not want to sweep this under the carpet. I want to take a few minutes, talk about a few things that church doesn't talk about nearly enough. I said something a couple of weeks ago, and I'm going to say it again. The church made a mistake 400 years ago. An Italian astronomer named Galileo proposed a heliocentric solar system and the the church called it heresy. It created this schism between science and religion and it's a false dichotomy. All truth is God's truth. Now wish I could say that was the only mistake on our resume. It is not. It's the words of scripture that inspired so many abolitionists like Benjamin Lay, like Sojourner Truth to call slavery what it was sin and to call for freedom and justice for all. But the sad truth is that there are many who misinterpreted the Bible. They used it and abused it to actually defend the institution of slavery. And I wish I could say that that was a thing of the past, but you and I both know it is not. Some people still use the good book to justify bad behavior.

On the same vein, I think the church's track record when it comes to women gets mixed reviews. Historically speaking, most societies are patriarchal and Judaism fits that bill. But if you read scripture contextually, I think it pushes the envelope in ways that celebrate and elevate women. Now, I know that the Apostle Paul said that I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority

over a man. I know that. I also know the cultural context. And I also know that in Romans 16, Paul calls out 10 women and commends them as leaders and deacons and pastors. Now, I don't think we're going to bridge the gender gap in one weekend. I don't think we're going to resolve the age-old egalitarian versus complimentary debate.

But here's where we land as a church. We believe that men and women are equally gifted, equally called, and equally anointed. We would not be half the church without the women on our staff, without women who lead small groups without women who lead ministries at this church. And I would say the very same thing about our men, but it's not men who have gotten the short end of the stick.

Now, I think here's the mistake we sometimes make. Men and women are equally gifted, equally called, equally anointed but come on, we are as different as night and day. Now you have to be really careful here not to pigeonhole people based on gender stereotypes. And there are spectrums, and we know this, but the last time I checked, I think diversity meant celebrating our differences, not ignoring them or pretending that we're all the same. I think our differences are not just a good thing. Our differences are a God thing. So can we have a little bit of fun?

Are we having fun yet? Okay. There are about 300 million nerve fibers called the corpus callosum that connect the right hemisphere, left hemisphere of the brain. And women have 40% more connected tissue than men. Men, can we give it up for the women? Can we give it up for the women? And men I want you to know you have 20% more bone density. Women, can we give it up for the men, tremendous bone density. Now men, you are on average 7% taller. By the way, those abolitionists I referenced, Benjamin Lay was a four foot seven inch giant and Sojourner Truth was six feet tall. Now, men generally 7% taller than women, but women see better in the dark and see more colors. This is why we do not see eye to eye, literally. Now, I find this funny, women are six times as likely to sing in tune. And men, we make a joyful noise unto the Lord, right.

Now, Genesis 1:27 says, in the image of God, he created them, male and female, he created them. And so God reveals his image through maleness and through femaleness. And if you're taking notes good luck spelling this. God is androgynous. In other words, God exhibits male and female characteristics. Now, Jesus was born as a baby boy. We pray to a Heavenly Father, but if we think that God has gender, the way that we have gender, then we're creating God in our image because God likens himself to a mother bear, a mother, Eagle, and a mother hen.

Now stick with me. Genesis 2:18 God says, it is not good for man to be alone. No, it is not. So God comes up with a solution. I will make a helper suitable for him. Now this is one of those verses that gets misinterpreted and misapplied. Helper sounds subordinate, helper sounds subservient. The problem with that is this. It's the very same Hebrew word that's used to describe God's 16 times in the Old Testament, okay? He is our helper; in fact, he's an ever present help in time of need. The word does not connote inferiority or superiority. It's about complementarity. It's almost like two pieces of the puzzle, God says, look, watch this. They're going to fit together in a way that's so beautiful. In the words of Jerry McGuire, you complete me.

Now, this certainly does not mean that you are not complete if you are single. Jesus was single. Now, that's another sermon for another day, but duly noted. Okay. I think what is so beautiful about this, and I think it's the whole point, is that it's our differences that paint this picture of who God is, and I think that's something that we should celebrate as a church.

Alright, how are we doing? Guys how are we doing? Girls how are we doing? Great. Okay. Let me double back to Deborah. There's some lessons to learn real quick. Three things, three habits of unsung heroes, and I'll give you these up front. One; live according to your convictions. Two; choose your battles wisely. Three; don't let what you cannot do keep you from doing what you can. I think Deborah's life screams these three things.

So live according to your convictions. Is that not what Susan B. Anthony was doing when she cast that vote? Isn't that what Rosa Parks was doing when she took a stand by sitting down? She refused to give up her seat on that bus. Not because she was physically tired. Rosa said the only tired I was tired of giving in. Now, I think Esther said it this way. If I perish, I perish, enough is enough. This is my moment to live according to my convictions. Now, those convictions need to be in alignment with God's plans and God's purposes. It needs to be God's will God's way.

When I was in grad school, I had a professor who asked the question, what makes you cry or pound your fist on the table? In other words, what makes you sad and what makes you mad? He said, you've got to pay close attention to those emotions because they're clues because they are cues. They reveal God-ordained passions, God-ordained convictions. And if we are in right relationship with God, our hearts break for the things that break the heart of God. He gives us the desires of our heart. Psalm 37 in other words, he begins to download these things and even our emotions then become sanctified as something that God uses. Now I may get mad or sad when my football team loses. And listen, studies have shown that fans of losing teams experience a 20% drop in testosterone over the next 24 hours. That is not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about in justice; I'm talking about pain and suffering. I'm talking about trauma.

This past week, Lora and I had the opportunity to see a screening of Just Mercy. It's a movie that'll release on Christmas Day. I cried when I read that book multiple times in public. I cried when I saw the movie. It's about Brian Stevenson, a Harvard lawyer, who I'm sure could have made more money at a high profile law firm. But instead he chose to fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. Those who are falsely accused felons on death row. Now, why would he do that? For the very same reason Deborah did with she did. It made him mad, made him sad and he had to live according to those convictions. Here's the deal. You can't just get mad. You need to go to Harvard and get that law degree so that you can actually do something about it, right? And so living according to your convictions is not just some emotional reaction to what is happening around you. But what I've found is that there are things that get me up early in the morning and keep me up late at night those God-ordained convictions that somehow fuel me to keep doing what I'm doing. Because I believe somehow some way God is going to use it to make a difference. So what makes you cry? What makes you pound your fist on the table? And what are you going to do about it? Live according to your convictions.

Two, choose your battles wisely. When our kids were real little we wrote those four words on a post it note and put in on our bathroom mirror. Cause you need lots of reminders to choose your

battles wisely. Why? Because there are some battles that they aren't your battle to fight. It's not even worth fighting over and then come on; there are things that are worth dying for. There are battlefields that are worth you... I will die on this battlefield for this thing. And you have to discern the difference. Now I will say this, the battle belongs to the Lord. It's not by might nor by power, but by my spirit saith the Lord. Prayer is the difference between you fighting for God and God fighting for you. So this is very good news, but you still have to figure out what is that thing.

I love what Deborah said to Barak. She said, "*Up! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Is not the LORD gone out before you?*" Sometimes you read stuff and just do songs ever just then like get in your head? Like I'm like, I read this, I'm like, [get up, stand up, stand up for your rights] - {singing}. Women would have a six times better chance of singing that in tune, so I apologize, okay. Sisera was King Jabin's general. The Talmud says that his voice was so powerful that it made walls shake and wild animals stop in their tracks. Now, I don't know about all that that sounds like a little bit of a stretch but you know what else it says? It says that Deborah was not shaken by his voice, was not going to be intimidated by that voice.

It kind of reminds me of Foth, right. When he first moved to DC and feels like God's called him to love and serve and hang out with people in Congress and he felt so intimidated. I mean, he was a college president so I'm thinking like I'll know that some street cred right there. But he had a hard time feeling like he was up to the task and I remember him saying there was this one moment, I think it might've been in the Rayburn Building, where he kind of heard that still small voice of this spirit. It said Dick if you talk to the creator of the universe in the morning, you'll have no problem talking to senators in the afternoon. Who is the loudest voice in your life? It's got to be the still small voice of the spirit. This is where conviction comes from. Yes, the spirit convicts us when something is wrong, yes? But you have to flip that coin. The spirit also convicts us when something is right and steels those convictions and helps us pursue them.

Now, I wish added time to tell a dozen stories about Sojourner Truth I think I have time for one. October 29, 1864 she has a most remarkable meeting with President Abraham Lincoln, eight o'clock on a Saturday morning. And I love what she said about the president. She said, I am proud to say that I never was treated with more kindness and cordiality than I was by the great and good man, Abraham Lincoln. That said, Sojourner Truth was shocked by the conditions in the nation's capitol. Slaves had been emancipated, but there were still 122 pages of what were called black codes. Those codes imposed a curfew on people of color, disallowed black businesses. Black children were not allowed to swim in the Anacostia River. They weren't allowed to sit on benches at center market. They weren't allowed to fly kites, 122 pages. Those codes were eventually abolished, but it is much easier to change laws than it is to change hearts.

Long after streetcars in DC had been desegregated, white conductors would not stop for black passengers. It was common practice, maybe I should say malpractice. In one such incident, a white woman boarded a streetcar and Sojourner tried to get on that street car right after her, didn't make it. That street car dragged her through the streets causing injury, but you mess with the wrong woman, cause she took note of the conductor's badge number. She called the president of that street car company and that conductor was dismissed for misconduct.

Now you know we own 128 year old building that once was the Navy Yard Car Barn, part of the street, car history in this city. And so when we bought that building, I started scouring every photographic archive you can imagine for pictures of the building and pictures of street cars. I just became fascinated with the history. And I love this one. I'm gonna show it to you. It's so human. It's a photograph of a little black boy riding a DC street car in 1943. Take a good look at it. I want to tell you what I see. I see Sojourner Truth sitting next to that little boy because she paved the way. She made it possible. Remember Susan B Anthony fought for suffrage for 50 years, never cast a vote. She walks into the voting booth with every woman who cast; I dare say no one has cast more votes than Susan B. Anthony.

Unsung heroes are the people who make a difference for other people. You know how it happens? You live according to your convictions. You choose your battles wisely and three don't let what you cannot do keep you from doing what you can. Hear me, if you're looking for an excuse, you will find one. If you are looking for an opportunity, you will find one. James 4:17 says, *"If anyone, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, to them it is sin."*

Now, more specifically, it's what is called a sin of omission. Now, sin of commission is doing something you should not have done. You made a mistake. A sin of omission is not doing something that you should have done. It's missing a God-ordained opportunity. Deborah did not have to do what she did. It was not expected. In fact, it was unexpected, right? It didn't even fit the cultural stereotype, but here's the deal. Delayed obedience is disobedience. Inaction is an action. Listen, the priests and the Levites who walked by the man who was on the side of the road, hurting and dying did nothing wrong but goodness is not the absence of badness. You can do nothing wrong and still do nothing, right? This is what Mordecai warned Esther about, he said, if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

Dr. King said it this way. I've seen many white people who sincerely opposed segregation, but they never took a stand against it because of fear of standing alone. It is not enough to be colorblind. You've gotta be color brave. And that means sometimes standing all by yourself.

The problem is this, most of us would rather be right than righteous and there's a difference. If all we want to be is right, and we just argue our point with somehow think that faith is intellectual ascent to some kind of litmus test and sort of ignore this idea that faith without works is dead. It's not about being right, it's about being righteous. And here's the amazing news. It's not about what we can do for God. It's about what God has done for us in Christ. It's about what Christ accomplished on the cross. And when you find your righteousness in the person of Jesus Christ, all the pressure is off. I don't have to prove myself to you anymore. I don't even have to be right. I want to be right, I like to be right. But at the end of the day my righteousness is right relationship with Jesus Christ.

Let me close. The turn of the 20th century, stop and think about this, at the turn of the 20th century, just a little over a hundred years ago, there were only 208 women lawyers In America, 22 women architects, 337 dentists, 1,235 women clergy, 885 women journalists, and only 4,555 women doctors. We've come a long way. And would you agree with me we have a long way to

go? May this be a church, that honor's unsung heroes. May this be a church that celebrates and elevates women. May this be a church that steps into, stands in the gap. May this be a church that celebrates our differences. May this be a church that lives according to its biblical convictions. In Jesus' name, Amen.