

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Alive in a Global Uprising: The Women Who Made It Possible  
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Isaiah 42:5-9; Acts 16:11-15

They were excited. It was their first trip to Europe and they wanted it to be a success. They had done well in Asia but it was time to expand the ministry. So, off to Europe they went; Paul, Silas and their posse. Their first stop was Philippi. They knew that this would not be an easy city in which to work. First, they were not from “around here” and were Jewish outsiders. Second, it was not going to be easy because it was a city designed and built for retired Roman soldiers; the same kind of Roman soldiers who had crucified Jesus. Finally, it was filled with Romans, for whom the whole concept of resurrection was a non-starter. It was not going to be easy, but all they had to do was to find the local synagogue or a place where Jews gathered, tell them about Jesus and they would have the beachhead they needed to create a church and make converts. Unfortunately for them, what they quickly discovered was that there was no synagogue and no male Jews meeting at a place of prayer; which meant that there weren’t even ten Jewish men in the entire city. We can only imagine what they must have been thinking when they realized they had no ready-made friends in Philippi. It was over, before it had even begun. But then, in that discouraging moment, God did what God always does, God sent the right woman, to the right place, at the right time.

Evidently the only people down by the river, and Paul and his posse had gone to the river because Jews needed water for ritual bathing before worship, was a woman and her family. The woman was Lydia and Lydia was a God-fearer. What this means is that she worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob even though she was not Jewish. In other words, she was open to hearing about what this amazing God had done in and through Jesus of Nazareth. She was open to hearing about his death and resurrection. She was open to knowing more about what it meant to follow him. Granted, even with all of that having been said, she did not appear to be a likely convert. After all she was wealthy and well connected. She was a small business owner with a boutique business selling purple fabric to the elites of the city and the empire. Surely Paul, as a good Jewish Christian, he would not spend time with her. Yet he does. And not only does Lydia come to believe in Jesus, she and her household are baptized and she convinces the Apostle Paul and his friends to come and stay at her home. Lydia was the right woman, in the right place, at the right time.

This concept of the God putting the right woman, in the right place, at the right time should not surprise us. This is, in some ways, the entire story of the New Testament. First there is Mary. God desired that God’s only son be born fully human. What this meant was that God needed a woman who was willing to risk everything; her family, her friends and her reputation to be the messiah’s mother. Mary agreed. She was the right woman, in the right place, at the right time, who stuck by Jesus from birth, to death and beyond. Then, during Jesus’ ministry, he was financially supported by women. Women, such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna who had been touched by his love and power, became not only his disciples, but they were the financial backers of his ministry. Without them the disciples would have had to have begged for alms to keep going. Instead God provided the right women, in the right place, at the right time. This trend continued at the end of Jesus’ ministry. When he was arrested, tried and crucified, it was the women who were there at the cross. It was the women who attested to his death. And then it was the women

who come to the tomb. The men were afraid, hiding out, but the women went to anoint his body. On hearing the news of his resurrection, they rushed to tell the disciples, who didn't believe them. It was women who were the first witnesses to his resurrection; the first Apostles to tell others about it; the first to believe. This trend continued for Paul. If we read his letters carefully we will discover that there were women deacons, church leaders and Apostles. God put the right women, in the right place, at the right time.

I suppose it would be easy to assume that this work of God ended with the closing of the New Testament, but that is not how God works. I say that because when things needed to be done, God calls upon women to do them. In the late 1800s, the Northern Presbyterian Church was not engaged in either local or global missions. It was, if you will, a foreign concept. Yet there were women who believed that there were needs both locally and globally. Thus in 1875, Sarah Foster Hanna, "a missionary enthusiast" became the first woman to speak at a General Assembly. She recommended that Women's Missionary Societies be formed. Within a year seventy societies were created. Within ten years the women were raising enough funds for national organizers and fifty-six women missionaries. In 1912, women in the Southern Presbyterian church, joined them...which is remarkable because the two denominations would not come together until 1983. It was the women who paved the way. God put the right women, in the right place, at the right time.

The same has been true for First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. In 1906, God called women in this church to begin raising money to support missions. They initiated the rummage sale. In the beginning the financial results were not spectacular, but they were significant. And in a time when women were not allowed in leadership in any way in the denomination, they took charge and expanded the mission of the church. When one pastor would not allow them to hold their rummage sales at the church, they found empty store fronts, as far away as Highland Park, from which they would operate. And as Diane Bert reminded them, they were noted in the papers, for fitting men's suits. Over the years this tradition of raising money for missions has continued. And this past week, we celebrated this great tradition with the last of the sales...as we know all good things must come to an end. But along the way the Presbyterian Women, and their male assistants (guys you know who you are) have raised more than \$2.2 million for missions.

Though the official Presbyterian Women's' Organization will cease to be at the end of this month, the role of women in this church will certainly not. We can see this in that God put the right women, Kathy Nyberg and Stephanie Kummer, in the right place at the right time to create our Alcott ministry. We can see this in that God put the right woman, Rev. Kate Thoresen, in the right place at the right time to create the Faith Community Coalition on Foster Care Ministry. We can see this in that God put the right women, Cindy Merten and the Rev. Joanne Blair, in the right place at the right time to create one of the nation's best Inclusion programs. We can see this in that God put the right woman in the right place when Elizabeth Gumbis started the Shop and Drop program to feed Alcott families on weekends. This list could go on and on, with our female pastors, elders, deacons, mission leaders, singers, ushers, teachers, prayers, listeners, givers and everything else that is needed to accomplish the work of God's Kingdom here on earth.

I want to ask, how many of you had the right woman, in the right place, at the right time make an impact in your life as a mother, a teacher, a mentor or a friend? Good, so here is my challenge to you this morning. I challenge you to make it a point to thank that woman, or women during this week. And if that woman is no longer with us, to give thanks to God for placing that woman in your life. Let us pray....