

“What’ll It Take?”

April 15, 2007

Psalm 16

John 20:19-29

I’ve been thinking a lot about men lately.

Now, before you start getting any wild ideas, let me assure you that this doesn’t mean something weird is going on between Chey and me, and it doesn’t mean that this leopard is changing her spots.

But I have been thinking a lot about men lately. This phenomenon seems to have come about from an accumulation of experiences. One afternoon several months ago, I looked through the mail that had just been delivered to the church and noticed that there were at least 4 or 5 copies of the same magazine. Curious, I looked at them and found that they were the publication of the Reform Judaism movement in the U.S. On the cover of these magazines was a single question, in very large print: “Where Are All The Men?” in the synagogues. Then, several weeks ago, the mailman brought one of my magazines, *The Christian Century*, and its cover was asking the same question about men and churches.

But even before reading those magazine articles and especially *after* reading them, I’d also been noticing that many of the church gatherings I attend have at least twice as many women as men, and I’ve been pondering the causes and effects of that ratio. And then to top all this off, several days after I knew that I’d start today’s sermon with the subject of men, yesterday’s *Press-Democrat* publishes an article about men and church and men not being in church. Freaky.

So ... what’s going on here? Certainly, in Sonoma, demographics play an important role. In addition to being many other things, Sonoma is home to a significant number of retirement communities, and because, statistically speaking, women outlive men, there simply are more women. But some people suggest other, more substantive reasons for the gender imbalance in many pews. Yesterday’s *Press-Democrat* reported that some men complain that regular church doesn’t address issues that “mess men up” – and they named lust as one of those issues – and the article also noted that other men argue the emphasis in church on communication skills and public displays of affection make many men uncomfortable.

Well, I can certainly envision preaching about lust someday, but I’m going to leave it up to God and the lectionary to let me know when that “someday” has arrived! As for other theories about men’s absence from church, I have my doubts that communication skills and men are mutually exclusive or alienating. And I don’t want us to ban displays of affection, because men *and* women need to learn to be appropriately, respectfully, and lovingly affectionate. Just as infants fail to thrive if they are deprived of human touch, so do we adults.

As I’ve wondered about men and women and church over the last few months, something kept coming to mind, and that is what I remember two somewhat famous men said about Christianity within the last 10 years or so. The men are the former pro wrestler and Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura and the media mogul Ted Turner. I can’t

remember which of them made which statement, but I do remember that, between the two of them, they declared Christianity to be a religion for wimps and sissies.

“Wimp” and “sissy.” This culture, *our* culture, considers those two of the most insulting, non-obscene epithets you can hurl at a man, so if that’s what it means to be Christian and to come to church, it’s no wonder there are fewer men than women in the pews.

But, as I hope you know, that is *not* what it means to follow Jesus. It is not what it means to follow the way of the cross and the resurrection, because that way is not an easy way. It is not a path for the faint of heart. It is a path, a faith, that calls us, in the words of the book of Joshua, to be strong and very courageous. Yes, it is a faith that calls us to seek that strength and courage from God and not simply from our own resources, but it is a faith that most definitely calls us to embrace and trust the strength and courage God provides.

After so recently living through the stories of Holy Week, it’s hard for me to imagine any real connection between the epithets “wimp” and “sissy” and the life of following Jesus, of following the way of the cross. No, the stories of Holy Week are stories of strength and courage, as well as anguish and despair. During that week, Jesus knows he is in danger; he knows he is risking death if he continues doing what he’s doing. But, knowing the risk, he places his trust in God, and he has the strength and the courage to stay in Jerusalem. He doesn’t run away. He doesn’t flee Jerusalem to avoid his death any more than Martin Luther King fled Memphis on April 4<sup>th</sup> thirty nine years ago, even though he, too, knew he would die there if he stayed. Dr. King knew – listen to his speech the night before he was assassinated if you doubt it – but he had the strength and the courage and the trust in God to follow in Jesus’ footsteps and to stay in Memphis.

This morning’s reading from the Gospel of John gives us another story of strength and courage, but it’s a different kind of strength and courage. And, for better or for worse, it’s the kind that our culture identifies more with men than women. It’s the kind of in-your-face strength and courage that demands proof, that says, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” If Missouri is the stereotypical “Show Me” state, men are the stereotypical “Show Me” gender. And in this morning’s story from John, Thomas has the supposedly “manly” strength and courage to demand proof before he will continue to trust the God he had encountered in Jesus.

After the other disciples tell him they have seen the risen Christ, Thomas responds, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” The other disciples’ experience isn’t good enough for Thomas. He’s wary; he’s a skeptic. He’s something of a pain in the neck. He won’t believe, he won’t trust what others tell him, and he lays it right on the line with what it will take for him to join the other disciples in their faith and joy.

I love this story. Even though, as I’ve already mentioned this morning, I struggle with many aspects of the Gospel of John, I appreciate its gift of this story. And I love this story for what it doesn’t say, as well as for what it does say. One thing it doesn’t say is that when Thomas announces his skepticism and the prerequisites for his belief, the other disciples don’t throw him out of the house. He’s being contrary, doubtful, and maybe downright abrasive, but no one throws him out. No one tells him that his doubts make him unacceptable to the community.

This is good news for us, here in this community, and it's also a challenge for us, here in this community. When any of us – and I do mean *any* of us – is skeptical, doubtful, or simply contrary, the story of Doubting Thomas urges us to be honest about our doubts *and* to be patient with one another's doubts. Our doubts and questions and resistance do not render us unfit to be in community with one another.

A related thing this story doesn't include is that God doesn't strike Thomas dead for having doubts. Despite our very human inclination to wish that God might remove someone who questions, doubts, prods, pokes, and otherwise disturbs our community identity, one message of this story is that God is not in the removing or striking dead business. This, too, is good news, here, in this community, because even though there is much here that ties us together in faith, hope, and love, there are also many things, many differences, that can loosen and even break those ties. Thomas and the disciples – and the Holy Spirit speaking through their story – urge us to care for and nurture those ties.

So those are two things this story doesn't say – it doesn't tell us that the disciples tossed Thomas out on his ear or that God struck him dead for having doubts and being honest about them. But as important as those messages are, for me the most valuable gift in this story comes in what it *does* say. And what I think it says this morning is that being a person of faith, being a disciple of Jesus, being a Christian includes having doubts, being honest about our doubts, and then having the strength and courage to place those doubts and questions before God. Embracing the Christian tradition as one's way of walking with God means being willing to name our doubts and, then, being willing to answer the question, “What'll it take to *answer* those doubts?”

Thomas had dared to follow Jesus, and he had dared to open himself to the presence of God in Jesus. But the events of Good Friday had made a mockery of his courage to believe and follow Jesus as God's anointed one. Thomas wasn't going to take that risk again without some reassurance. He wasn't going to allow himself to hope and trust in God's love and presence again without some sort of convincing proof. And, so, in this morning's reading, he demands the proof he needs.

I think most of us here this morning are very much Thomas' brothers and sisters. If we haven't dared to open ourselves to the redeeming, forgiving, loving presence of God as Thomas did ... if we haven't dared to believe that creating, healing love lies at the heart of our lives and the cosmos ... we wouldn't have much reason to be here.

But then, over and over again, we all have our own Good Fridays. When we trust people we love – parents, spouses, and friends – and they betray that trust with abuse, infidelity, or dishonesty, our tenderest selves are nailed to a cross, and we join Thomas in his doubts. When we try to live our lives trusting a God of mercy and justice, but what we see in our families, towns, nations, and world is cruelty, injustice, and violence, our hope is nailed to a cross, and it seems to die. When we try to trust the power of God's peace, the peace that Jesus spoke to his disciples after his death and resurrection, and the powers of the world dismiss the pervert the word “peace” by claiming that it can be achieved only through war, our trust is nailed to a cross, and it withers.

And when that happens, when the light of love, hope, and trust fades, we are called to have the strength and the courage to join Thomas in wanting and demanding something that will rekindle that fading light. Whether we consider them manly, womanly, or human characteristics, we are called to have the strength and the courage to tell God what it will take for us to be able to renew our passion and trust in God.

Let us all, men and women, children and adults, the joyous and the heartbroken, dare to name what it will take for us to risk our lives and our very selves in walking the sacred path of life that the psalmist describes in this morning's first reading. Let us be as bold and even as abrasive as Thomas, who announced to his friends and his God, "I will not believe. I will not put my trust in you, O God, until you show me that you are indeed present here, with me and with all of your creation." Tell God what it will take, for you to be able to take the next risky, even painful step in letting God be God in your life ... and in letting God claim all of your life.

And then, my beloved friends, be willing to receive what you need. It may not come in the shape, size, way, or form that you expect. It may not come through the people or experience you expect. It may, instead, come through some means you haven't even been able to imagine. It may come to you, as it did to Thomas, through a wounded human being. However God's answers your need, let yourself recognize the presence of the Holy One in what you receive. Let yourself have the courage to receive the gift of God's grace, and let yourself trust and then walk the path it calls you to take.

Traveling that path will require courage and compassion, strength and softness, boldness and prudence. Traveling that path will require both stereotypical male and female qualities. May we walk that path and meet all of God's people, male and female, on the way. Amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC