

SERMON 16TH OCTOBER 2022, HONOURING WOMEN.

After all the rigmarole of not getting a confirmed visa and having changed my flights to Korea, I eventually managed to get there I travelled a day later than planned but was only 1 hour late to the start of the conference. So well done me.

The conference was made up of women from Africa, Caribbean, United States, Europe, Pacific, India, Asia, Cuba, Palestine, Israel, Turkey. It had one woman Bishop, 3 Presidents and moderators, biblical scholars, theologians, young people and Ph. D students.

Part of the reflection I'm going to share with you was prepared by Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia A. Thompson. Her bible study was brilliant and I would like to give you a glimpse into my time and experience at this Roundtable gathering.

Women do not fare well in the Bible. The Bible itself has been used as a tool to define and even subjugate women over the years. When we set out with intention to study the lives and roles of women in the Bible from our contexts, we are faced with the stark truth of women's lives then and now. Carol Newsome and Sharon Ringe write: "Because of its religious and cultural authority, the Bible has been one of the most important means by which women's place in society has been defined. Throughout the centuries, of course, the Bible has been invoked to justify women's subordination to men. But it has also played a role, sometimes in surprising ways, in empowering women."1

Overall, women are not treated well or framed in the best light. Mothers as a subset receive the same regardless of the value place on childbearing and the woman's role in the home. Powerful women fare even worse. They are evil as seen in the presence of Potiphar's wife and Queen Athaliah (2 Kings 8:26). They are portrayed as prostitutes, adulteresses and tricksters manipulating men to get the outcomes they want with no accountabilities held for the men in these stories. They are also survivors of rape, gender-based violence, and patriarchy on their way to motherhood.

In the Bible, the word wife appears 407 times in 370 verses³ and seems to be the primary role and definition of what a woman should be. While wife appears a significant number of times, husband is there a mere 145 times⁴. The word father appears 979 times⁵. That is not surprising, given the references to God as father.

The word "mother" shows up 321 times in 293 verses. One source accounts for 328 instances - 232 in the Hebrew scriptures and 96 in the New Testament.

There are 1,426 total names in the Hebrew Bible - or the Old Testament. 1,315 of those names belong to men. Only 111 women's names appear in the Bible, about 9% of the total. Newsome and Ringe note: The enormous gap between the number of women's and men's names signals the male centered concerns of Biblical literature. 84 mothers are mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible.⁹ The Mothers of the Bible are an interesting group. They are the wives of kings, farmers, carpenters and prophets. They are women who were raped, tricked and even manipulated their way to motherhood. In Genesis 3, the story

unfolds in the Garden of Eden with the created man and woman, Adam and Eve. Eve as original woman in the creation narratives is the progenitor of sin, the one who convinces the man to disobey God's directive to not eat of the fruit of the tree. She was tricked by the snake. This choice on the part of all three actors in the story metes punishment from God. To the woman God says: "I will make your pangs in childbirth exceedingly great; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Genesis 3:16)

The pain of childbirth is the punishment for sin in the garden. While childbirth itself is important in the communities of the Bible. "The woman herself comes to have the most divine of roles, conceiving, containing, and nurturing new life."¹⁰ The punishment of childbirth pain is weighed in the magnitude of all that happens in the garden. The knowledge of good and evil, expulsion from the garden and the knowledge of their nakedness are choices to be contented with in the post-Eden reality of their lives.

Where there are children, there are mothers. The decision to exclude the names of women from the family tree is itself an injustice. Today we acknowledge the few in the family tree and the many who go unnamed and unacknowledged for their part in giving birth, raising their children and stand in the long shadows of men. For many, bearing children is a survival strategy for the community and for the women in a society where stigma was connected to barrenness or the lack of ability to bear children, i.e., no husband.

Childbearing is where the importance is placed with women who are unable to bear children grieving about their inability to produce children. The communal idea of mothering is not seen in the Bible, nor is adoption - with one exception - or other definitions of mother. Attached to the importance of childbearing was the stigma of being unable to bear children. In their commentary on Genesis, Newsome and Ringe ask: "Why are the important mothers barren?"¹⁸

There are six barren women in the Bible: three of the four matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel) in Genesis; Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1-2); the anonymous wife of Manoah, mother of Samson (Judges 13); and the "great woman of Shunem," also called the Shunammite, an acolyte of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-44). The paradigm of the Barren Woman in the Hebrew Bible supports the Rabbinic adage that God holds the keys to birth and death (M. Taanit 3:8)—what God gives, God may take back.¹⁹

Barrenness is the woman's fault and the woman's problem to fix. Attached to the inability to conceive is the guilt and shame, the inability to produce what is desired. How does one fix an empty household?

The complexities and competitiveness of barrenness are evident in these texts and in the relationship between the barren Hannah and Peninnah who had children. Hannah was not satisfied being the favorite wife, having the love of her husband or getting more from her husband (1 Samuel 1:5). Like Rachel and Sarah, Hannah too is treated mercilessly by the rival and co-wife in the text. The motif of barrenness highlights the unique destiny of the promised son. As Susan Ackerman has pointed out, in each of these stories the life of the life of the son is somehow threatened and/or dedicated to God. These narratives

suggest that God, who opens the womb, has the right to demand the life that emerges from it.²⁰ And what of the mother who struggles to receive, then releases the child back to God?

There are many stories of mothers, named and unnamed. The widows in the stories with Elijah, most of the children in the genealogies of the Bible have unnamed mothers. There are harsher realities too like the two unnamed daughters of Lot who get their father drunk and are impregnated by him. These are the same two daughters Lot attempted to give to the mob that came to his door to get his two male visitors (Genesis 19). They are desperate to become mothers after their mother is turned into a pillar of salt on the way from Sodom and Gomorrah.

These Mothers are nameless in the genealogies of the Bible. They are nameless in story after story, their sons accounted for, their daughters unnamed too. And yet, even in their nameless state and invisibility is the care they gave their children evidenced in the presence and even greatness of their sons.

This morning we choose to honor these women as we honor the women in our lives. Women of courage and valor. Women who were bold and determined to be seen and, in some cases, went outside of social norms to become mothers for their survival and that of the community.

To honor is to show high respect, great esteem. To honor is to regard with great respect. Honoring is not always as visible as we would like or even present in any way. One of the ways we honor people is to recognize them and call them by their names.

Given the importance of naming and the absence of those for some, we must find ways to remember and rituals to embrace as we choose to honor our mothers, whether those are ancestors or contemporaries.

Telling their stories is a point of honor. The absence of stories connected with the mothers in our sacred texts is dishonoring. How can we bring value and fill the gaps by reading more deeply into their stories and naming the obvious and what is not being said?

The same can be said for us gathered here this morning both men and women how can we continue to uphold and respect the stories of our mothers and our own women here. For many of you your children have long left the nest and you are enjoying grand children and great grandchildren. Do you want them to know your story? What legacy do you think you will leave them? I know for me there are many unanswered questions and stories that my mother took to the grave with her and I'll never know the answers, but it was her sacred story to hold and her choice to share it or not. I encourage you to celebrate who you are whilst you still can. Amen.

1 Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe, Editors. *Women's Bible Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press. 1992. p.xix.

2 <https://www.yourdictionary.com/mother>

3 https://www.answers.com/Q/How_many_times_is_wife_mentioned_in_the_bible

<https://connect.usfund.org/30-best-bible-scriptures-on-finding-a-husband>

5 https://qa.answers.com/Q/How_many_times_is_the_word_father_in_the_Bible

6 https://www.answers.com/Q/How_many_times_is_Mother_or_Mom_mentioned_in_the_Bible

7 https://rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pub_content/pdf/Motherhood_in_the_Old_Testament.pdf

8 Newsome and Ringe, 252.

9 <https://rsc.byu.edu/gospel-jesus-christ-old-testament/motherhood-old-testament>

10 Newsome and Ringe