

## Sermon for May 8, 2018 – “Wonder Women”

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B – Text(s) John 13:1, 3-5, 12-17

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As some of you may know, in May of last year the movie “Wonder Woman” opened in theaters everywhere. It was, of course, based on the well-known comic book heroine who made her debut in the summer of 1942. Princess Diana, as she’s known, is one of only three characters; Superman and Batman being the other two, who have been in continuous publication since their inception. Now why, you might ask, do I bring this up? Well, when psychologist William Moulton Marston (who also invented the lie-detector) created Wonder Woman he created the character as an idealized woman, but he did so with a specific purpose in mind. Wonder Woman was his rebuke of what he considered the “bloodcurdling masculinity” in many comic books. He worried that the brute force used by male heroes, even in pursuit of good, might harm impressionable young readers. “Suppose your child’s ideal becomes a superman who uses his extraordinary power to help the weak,” Marston argued. “The most important ingredient in the human happiness recipe still is missing, love. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus, all the allure of a good and beautiful woman.” The recent movie contains the subplot about whether mankind “deserves” the help of “demi-gods” like Diana. Determined to continue fighting for humanity, Wonder Woman declares, “It’s not about deserve, it’s about what you believe. And I believe in love. Only love will truly save the world.”

We know this to be absolutely true. We know too, that Easter is about the greatest act of love, one that truly saved the world. This is what we celebrate. It seems appropriate then, that on this final Sunday of Easter we celebrate what we know as Presbyterian Women Sunday. Its official name is “Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday.” This year’s theme is “Women Called to Lead with Love.” Here at Westwood First Presbyterian Church our “wonder women” do just that. But while it might be easy for some to take the honored role of women leaders in the church for granted, such was not always the case. For that reason, as it is still Easter and as we honor the leadership role of women in our church, it is important that we say something about the leading role that women played in the Easter story and that the testimony of the **women** to Jesus’ resurrection was no small detail.

As it happens, in the first century, women weren’t eligible to testify in a Jewish court of law. Historian Josephus said that even the witness of multiple women was not acceptable “...because of the levity and boldness of their sex.” Celsus, the second-century critic of Christianity mocked the idea of women as alleged resurrection witnesses referring to Mary Magdalene, in particular, as a “hysterical female deluded by sorcery.” This background matters because it points to two crucial truths. First, it’s a theological reminder that the kingdom of the Messiah turns the system of the world on its head. In doing so, Jesus radically affirmed the full dignity of women and the vital value of their witness. Second, it’s a powerful apologetic reminder of the historical accuracy of the resurrection accounts. Think of it this way, if these were “cleverly devised myths” women would never have been presented as the first eyewitnesses of the risen Christ. But, while there remain those who would silence the voices of women in ministry, many more affirm the deep importance of the ministry of women.

In writing about the testimony of the women on that first Easter prominent New Testament scholar N.T. Wright said that “The first person to be commissioned to take the news of the resurrection of Jesus to others is Mary Magdalene. Now, that is so counter-intuitive in the ancient world, in the ancient Jewish world, in the ancient pagan world! And this is God choosing what is weak to shame the strong. It seems to me that in the resurrection there is a radical re-evaluation of the role of women.” Author Rachel Held Evans concludes: “That Christ ushered in this new era of life and liberation in the presence of women and that He sent them out as the first witnesses of the complete gospel story is perhaps the boldest, most overt affirmation of their equality in His kingdom that Jesus ever delivered. It would seem then that within Christianity, probably more than in any other religion, women have had a special place. There’s evidence of this throughout scripture, in both Old and New Testaments, of the divine intention to call for the specific involvement of women in the work of redemption. Besides the women at the tomb we have the examples of Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Ruth, Priscilla, Phoebe and Lydia and more besides. Women have always played an important role in the lives of God’s people, a fact that the church has not always acknowledged despite its dependence on the contributions of women; financial, spiritual and physical. It’s a fact that God continues to call women into pastoral and other forms of ministry in the church. And regardless of where one stands on the ordination of women or of leadership roles of women, their sheer numbers have placed them in a de facto leadership role in the church. What this means is that women have a unique position in the life of the church and that the church has a responsibility toward them. The Church’s task is to create a place where women can listen for God’s call as well as the means for them to discover their gifts for ministry. Once called and equipped, the task is then for us to encourage and support these ministries. Jesus understood this and He brought respect and appreciation for women to a new level while in His time on earth. The fact that He welcomed and respected them and that they accepted leadership roles in the early church makes it clear that women’s contributions are a big part of God’s plan.

Men and women are different in many ways but both are created in God’s image and the collective power that praying, faithful women; mothers, wives, single women, young women, older women and so on, bring to the table has changed our church. That’s what I love so much about Presbyterian Women. It’s unique in that it’s a place where women can realize spiritual maturity and fellowship, develop their leadership skills and minister in the local church, their community, and the world. You may not realize it. You may not see it. But the Presbyterian Women here at Westwood First are making a significant difference. They have for quite some time now. They’ve done, and continue to do so, by leading with love and by their commitment to devote their time, talents and treasure toward being a part of the church’s mission and ministry. I’ve been impressed by your ministry here especially by the hospitality of which I’ve been a frequent recipient. But as it is with the Church as a whole, so it is with women’s ministries. In fact, the same challenges that churches face are faced by the ministries and small groups within the church. Chief among them being an aging population and declining membership. They’re unable to offer the kind of resources that draw or hold new and younger people. Women may be a majority of those sitting in a pew on Sunday but those women may not necessarily connect with the church as they have in the past.

And so many groups wrestle with a variety of challenges and wonder if anything can impact church culture. We wonder if new growth and resurgence is possible whether that be in the churches or the groups that they love, like Presbyterian Women. It's said that with God all things are possible. So, I like to think that growth and resurgence ARE possible. At the same time, we have work to do. The re-organization of our leadership and committees are just the tip of the iceberg, which we've begun, but this is something that we hope will encourage others to become more involved. A new paradigm is needed in many aspects of church life. I suspect the same is true of Presbyterian Women as well.

Still, I'm certain that a big part of the answer lies in simply continuing to do what you do best...being wonder women. Finding others with a similar calling and energy, providing food and opportunities to worship, studying the Bible, praying for one another, caring for one another, and building/maintaining ties with other local churches. This is how we help bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. As your pastor, I want you to know that I'm honored and proud to work alongside you in the ministry of our church and that I will continue to do so. I also want you to know that if I can be a resource for you and a source of support and encouragement, I will.

Here's the thing...Continue to be salt and light to rest of the congregation. Continue to be guided by your PW purpose, committing yourselves

- to nurture our faith through prayer and Bible study,
- to support the mission of the church worldwide,
- to work for justice and peace, and
- to build an inclusive, caring community of women that strengthens the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and witnesses to the promise of God's kingdom.

Continue to live into your purpose in our own, unique ways. Continue to work with other church leaders as we work together toward becoming the church that God is calling us to be. Continue to have a clear vision. Continue to cast that vision as often and as widely as possible. Be aware of, and sensitive to, the needs of those around you. Continue to be welcoming and inviting with open hearts, minds and hands. Do so in ways that people cannot help but notice and that will compel them to want to take part. Encourage your brothers in Christ...fathers, husbands, brothers, nephews and grandnephews, sons and grandsons...to join in our church's worship and ministry. At the same time, I offer the reminder that it's the Holy Spirit brings the renewal, not the leader or participants and that we must remain faithful to our calling and discover what our part in opening the door to the Holy Spirit needs to be.

I'd like to close with Paul's words to the church in Galatia, words that are as appropriate as they are poignant. Paul wrote that: **"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek...there is no longer slave or free...there is no longer male and female...for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."**

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.