

Coming 'Round to Ourselves

Texts: 2 Kings 22:14-20, Psalm 5Matthew 26:6-13

April 30, 2006 – General Council Executive

“A SERVICE OF APOLOGY TO WOMEN IN MINISTRY AFFECTED BY THE DISJOINING RULE”

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----- pouring of water into the bowl-----

*We remember water ...
Over which the spirit moved at Creation;
Which upheld an ark, as the sacred story bears witness,
delivering its saving remnant to safe harbour;
Water that parted to save a fleeing people from injustice;
Water that sprang from a rock to renew and refresh
a thirsty people in the wilderness;
Water that flushed our infant lives into the world;
Water in which our mothers and our fathers bathed us
when we could not look after ourselves;
Water in which we were baptized
and which marks our membership in the company
of the faithful ...*

*May this same water, be among us today in this sacred time and place,
bringing new life and new commitment to this blessed community.
For we believe in God who has created and IS creating;
Who has come in Jesus the Word made Flesh to reconcile and make new;
And who works in us AND in others by the Spirit.
Thanks be to God.*

I have just included you in a ritual and shared with you a bowl that I've used many times over my thirty two years in ministry in this United Church of ours.

Through the wave of feminism and special women's decades that have marked this time, like the World Council of Churches "Decade to end Violence" in which we are now engaged, this bowl has been present celebrating women's community with arms linked around the edge of an ancient receptacle, a womb of creative endeavor, a holding place, a shared place, a receptacle of the Spirit.

It speaks of cooperative endeavors and deep mutual caring. It is reminiscent to me of women down through the ages who have gathered 'round in circles, mending nets, creating quilts, sharing the hopes and cares of their families, delivering life, and holding their communities together before God.

It recalls the silent cloud of witnesses, whose members rarely get mentioned in scripture, .. women like the prophet Huldah, who understood the injustice of King Josiah and delivered truth to power .. or Tabitha, God's faithful servant in Joppa, who was raised from death by Peter and the grateful 'prayers' of all the believers

who cherished her ministry among them .. or the faithful one who bathed Jesus for burial in a precious ointment.

It acknowledges 'Wisdom', part of the logos tradition, named in scripture as "Sophia", *Wisest One, Radiant One (VU#893)*, who was present as architect at Creation, and who with God formed humanity in their image, male and female.

This bowl has been a focal point at many women's studies, retreats and gender justice events, amidst women whose stories it still holds, .. women who have shared their faith together, .. women who have nurtured and encouraged each other's gifts and who have empowered one another to answer God's call to ministry in the church and in the world.

It holds the story of its' designer and maker, an artist named Sarai Marais, raised in Holland amidst a strict Christian community. Her "artist's way" of engaging in the faith was too unorthodox to be appreciated or celebrated by her people. Coming to Canada was Sarai's way of dealing with experience that felt to her like "ex-communication" from her church. Yet United Church women, who saw her creations and recognized their spiritual nature, kept flocking to her former gallery in Elora, with expressions of appreciation for the witness of her work. How wonderful it was to affirm Sarai's gifts in a formal way back in 1993, when we used her creations as the "centerpiece" of a Hamilton Conference retreat we called "Walk Sister, Walk", held at Five Oaks Lay Training Centre to celebrate the mid-point of the World Council of Churches "Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women". Today we are engaged in a similar event of turning and affirmation. Like the circle of the bowl, we are finally coming 'round to ourselves and to each other.

As we enjoy the presence of this bowl and its water this morning amidst our worship, let it stand for all the women, who were asked to officially disjoin themselves from the ministries to which they had been called, commissioned and ordained:

- women who were left unemployed, in poverty, and shut out from the courts of the church;
- women who were limited by a cultural belief that they could not combine a role as a wife and a worker at the same time;
- women held hostage by an ethic that put marriage and child bearing ahead of God's call to service and made them mutually exclusive;
- women who became victims of a policy of discrimination that was conveniently used whenever there was an over-supply of clergy after Church Union or during the Depression;
- women silenced by a policy that continued to be implemented because of a 'call system' that, in the words of Mary Anne MacFarlane(in her background research for the events of this day,) "equated faithfulness in professional church work with a willingness to be sent anywhere in the country". In a time when a husband would rarely consider relocating

himself in favour of a job location for his wife, this system of “call” continued as a vanguard for the attitudes and norms of patriarchy so comfortably at home in our church.

Not until 1957, long after this policy had been disbanded in the fields of nursing and teaching, and after decades of significant challenge and countless debates, was this ecclesiastical policy of disjoining finally removed. At that time, I was 12 years of age and being raised in a family which was clearly giving me the message that I could be anything in the world to which I aspired, as long as I was prepared to do the work and the training. Such a disconnect between the nurturing and calling of our families and our God, and the systems that run the world we seek to serve!

Three years ago, at an annual meeting of Hamilton Conference, Callie Archer, an active leader in the work of our Conference against ‘Racism’, found her way to my table on the floor of the meeting. She had been deeply moved by a friend and the injustice of her story of disjoining as a deaconess in our church. Not being an official delegate to Conference that year, Callie was looking for someone who could help to draft a petition that addressed this issue and present it to the court. I became that person for Callie and former missionary, Betty Bridgeman, seconded our motion. It is the same petition that finally made it to the 38th General Council in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and has now brought us to this point.

It is great to have Callie here today and to be able to thank her publicly for the inspiration that ignited this petition. I am also grateful to her for the opportunity she made available to me on Friday to meet 85 year old Joan MacDonald, former United Church diaconal minister, in a telephone interview from the home she now shares with her youngest daughter in Haliburton. It was so very special for me.

As Joan’s story is now a part of the history of this bowl and representative of so many similar stories being held before us in this service, I would like to share with you some of Joan’s experience of what she and others referred to as becoming “defrocked deaconesses”.

Joan came to Canada from Manchester, England in 1927 with her mother and an older sibling, .. after they had been deserted by a father who was deeply scared emotionally from his experiences in the first World War. As you can imagine, this struggling family knew the conditions of poverty up close. Yet during an emergency situation at CGIT camp, then National Secretary of CGIT, Muriel Jacobson recognized the leadership skills of young Joan that came to the fore. Hoping to affirm in her “the girl that God would have her be”, Muriel asked Joan what she planned to do with her life. “Big Jake”, was the name the CGIT girls had for Muriel Jacobson, truly another prophet at work among our people in the history of our church.

Muriel made it possible for Joan to leave her current work for the YWCA with street children and to come to Toronto to complete her Grade 13 at Jarvis Collegiate. Muriel assured Joan that she would always have food, a place to stay and \$100 to cover her immediate needs .. a \$100 that she could eventually pass on to others when she was secure .. a kind of “pay it forward” scheme of another era. Joan studied hard while working at the switchboard at the Y.

Then in 1945 Joan entered the United Church Training School. Its then president, Gertrude Rutherford, said, “Joan, you need to go to University”, a luxury that Joan had not felt possible in her ongoing efforts to help support her mother and sister. Once again assured by a female prophet that “we’ll find a way,” Joan entered Victoria College. Gertrude had spoken with Dr. Woodside, the registrar at Vic, who told Joan that she would have a bursary for a year to help get her started and that if she could stay all three years as long as she maintained a ‘B’ average.

Joan had to have a job while studying. So, during this time, she worked as an assistant deaconess with Ruby Brown and Peter Bryce at Metropolitan United Church. Joan started a teenage group for young people who became her friends. Recognizing her gifts, Ernie Howse, minister at Metropolitan, asked Joan to come with him when he moved to Bloor Street United, to work there as his secretary and to be given the freedom to develop whatever programmes she wished.

Joan worked at Bloor Street United Church for five wonderful years. She began by knocking on doors in the neighbourhood to determine needs among the many new Canadians there and soon found that people were asking for a good nursery school. The programme Joan developed and implemented was still going at Bloor Street, the last time Joan checked. This was just part of a bigger programme that Joan began at Bloor Street for new Canadians and their families that included “English as a second language”, special neighbourhood Christmas dinners, and so many other initiatives that made real the ‘kingdom’ of God in that time and place.

“I never would have made it had people not helped me,” Joan testified and went on to name her saints like Jean Hutchinson and Harriet Christie, who supported her in the manner of One who said, “I will make you friends.”

During that time a young couple came to Bloor Street who became friends with Joan. “Can you help my husband, Dick, get more involved in the church,” asked Katherine, who was becoming a fast friend of Joan’s. Bloor Street needed a boys’ worker at the time and at this work with some direction by Joan. Katherine was tragically killed in an accident in 1953, and in time Joan and Dick’s working relationship took on the new dimensions of marriage.

In the words of Tina Campion, in charge of deaconesses at the time, Joan was told “You can no longer work for the church anymore.” And though for the immediate time, Joan was taken up with the responsibilities of helping to raise Katherine and Dick’s two children in addition to birthing children of their own, Joan was determined to eventually return to her official church work, and like many others .. refused to relinquish her pin.

As we know from our history, or in this case, our ‘herstory’ ... Joan was never able to return to her professional work for the church. Instead, she became a teacher, an active lay woman for forty years at Appleby United Church, and an ongoing social activist working with refugees, prisoners, heading up a study on poverty in Burlington that led to additional programmes like a second food bank with a number of churches in the city’s east end and an Interfaith Development Education Association, known as “IDEA”, which has continued to work hard for the past 20 years on the issues of poverty in that district. It was here, as Callie Archer was getting involved in her community, that she became so aware of Joan’s legacy of social activism. “Oh, you can help take over from Joan,” was a comment that Callie heard on more than one occasion.

Joan told me that from the perspective she has in these ‘latter days’ she recognizes that two of the most wonderful gifts that have held her in good stead, came from her mother. As a young child being tucked into bed at night, Joan’s mother used to say ‘remember this’: “God is Spirit and God is Love. That’s all you really need to know.” The other gift came when she was sharing an early report card with her mother. Her sister had as usual come home with a perfect report. But Joan was having a harder go at school. After expressing joy at her sister’s accomplishments, Joan’s mother turned to her and asked if she thought she had done her best. “Yes, mother,” Joan replied, “I tried my hardest.” “Then it’s a wonderful report,” her mother exclaimed with a hug and a kiss!

In the great scheme of God’s reconciling love, we know that the work and witness of Joan MacDonald and so many like her have not been lost. “Nothing is lost in truth,” my own amazing mother used to proclaim with assurance. Today, as a church we are recognizing this on behalf of so many disjoined women who moved on in the church or out of the church during the course of their active lives. But there was another thing that I remember my mother saying on the rare occasions when her wisdom and insight proved insufficient to see beyond the restrictive limits of culture and norm. “I stand corrected,” she would say with conviction when the winds of the Spirit showed her another way or a greater truth.

This United Church of ours has had on a number of significant occasions come to this same juncture of consciousness, when we recognize our complicity with or our promotion of the cultural norms that have so unjustly dismissed the precious talents and gifts of the human family and denied individuals and groups the right to become “the people God intended them to be”. These are the times we have had to say with courage, “we stand corrected” in relation to Japanese Canadians,

to Dr, James Endicott, to our native people, to the people of faith in the Jewish community, and now to sisters in ministry.

But lest we become known only as the church of the next apology, let us also remind ourselves of the temptations of a cheap grace, which reveals in drama and false pride, much like Anne of Green Gables did with her apology to Diana's mother, after unwittingly getting her friend drunk on Marilla's raspberry cordial.

Years ago, Lois Wilson told Joan MacDonald that she should press us for an apology. Three years ago Callie Archer felt the urge to initiate just such an action, and was able to convince me of the same need to act. Today in this Executive context of General Council, we are inaugurating a service of apology which will get repeated at Conference annual meetings this year in various forms across the breadth of this great church. "This acknowledgement must get into the books of the church," Joan told me on Friday morning, "but then we must get on with it. There are so many more important things to accomplish."

Joan speaks for all the ministers and ministries both named and unnamed that this bowl and this water represent, women who understand the need of the church to be corrected, yet whose wisdom, vision and energy continue to issue in deeds of kindness, discernment, encouragement, reconciliation, practical help, teaching, healing, challenging, naming, proclaiming, speaking truth to power, and raising up new life from death.

In a moment, I will pass the bowl among you so that you may add your stone to its waters and symbolically hold the women and the ministries that have inspired you, women and ministries God has called and honoured, even in the absence of our official endorsement and support.

But let us not end with this symbolic act. After we have made our apologies and said our prayers, let us take the 20/20 vision of our reflection, our analysis and our hindsight .. and with open eyes and hearts return to the present and together face the future. Let us continue to be both as wise as serpents and gentle as doves as we lead this church, and this church leads others into the dangerous ministries of our world where Christ is present. And as we go, may we give thanks for the brave women who have led us and still go before us.

Amen.