

*“Use the VOTE Intelligently,
Conscientiously, and Prayerfully”*

Genesis 45: 1-15, Matthew 15:21-28

Part IV of VII in the sermon series:

“For Such a Time as This:

Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times”

Based on Esther 4:14

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 16, 2020, 11th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15, dedicated to Rep. Dr. Mary Lightbody, Rep. Dr. Beth Liston, Senator Charleta Tavares, Judge Yvette McGee Brown, Councilwoman Priscilla Tyson, Judge Jennifer Brunner and all women who have been elected to serve our city, state and nation through the ages, to all the Suffragists who battled for over 70 years to gain the right to vote in the 19th Amendment 100 years ago this week, to all women of color who had to battle even longer to secure their right to vote in the USA, and to all women everywhere who strive in office and through dedicating their lives to the elective process to make this nation and this world a better place and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The first woman to speak in the Christian Scriptures is an outsider with no name. She is given the title “Canaanite woman” as a title of disregard. Then, in the course of fighting for her daughter’s life, saving her daughter from the onslaught of demon possession, she is told to get lost by the disciples of Jesus – the future founders of our Christian church. Wait it gets worse. Then she is completely ignored and referred to as a “dog” by none other than our Savior - Jesus Christ. Our beloved Lord treats this woman as a displaced person. He chooses to ignore her and then when he does speak to her, he distains to even address her in order to dismiss her. All of these rituals of cross-gender, cross-cultural, cross-religious, cross-economic conversation are painful to behold. This woman has no voice, and represents no human presence to the disciples and Jesus. All these men treat her like she is less than dirt. This scene is disgraceful.

The saving grace of this horrible story is the woman herself. Her persistence, her determination, her toughness and her true faithfulness prevails. When told to leave, she remains unmoved. When treated with silence, she kneels before Jesus and cries out, “*Lord, HELP ME!*” When called a dog who deserves nothing at all, she says, “*even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.*” It is this witty and unrelenting reply that FINALLY grabs Jesus’ attention. She awakens him from his cruel trance, and he remembers he is Mary’s

son. He all the sudden remembers he is human too. He remembers he is capable of saving both the woman and her daughter. He remembers he is the embodiment of God's grace – and then acts like it.

He finally hears her. He sees her. He responds to her impassioned cry for help. He heals her daughter as he says, "*O Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!*" O, this woman, has challenged all of the ethnic, gender, religious, and economic barriers that stand between them and her persistence prevails over Jesus' obstructions.

Let me be bolder. Her faith prevails over his lack of regard, lack of acknowledgment and lack of compassion. Her faith wakes him up to realize she is human, she is equal and she is the fullness of his healing power – just as much as any man, anywhere.

The first time a woman speaks in the Christian scriptures, we encounter full blown misogyny. Misogyny is quite simply - the hatred of, contempt for, or prejudice against women and girls. Misogyny enforces sexism by punishing those who reject an inferior status for women and rewarding those who accept it. Misogyny manifests itself in numerous ways, including social exclusion, sex discrimination, hostility, androcentrism, patriarchy, male privilege, belittling of women, disenfranchisement of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification. Misogyny is full blown in this text today. It can be found in many other texts of scripture and in Western and Eastern philosophy as well. It is everywhere to be seen and experienced by women. For men to see it, we need take off our blinders – much the same way Jesus and his disciples had to finally do. We have to be awakened – a process which should not be the responsibility of women to force or establish for us – as men. Too often, we carry

on unaware of what is right in front of us and that in which we are actively (or passively) participating.

Harry T. Burn was a man who needed awakening. It took his mother to awaken Harry. I am sure by now you know who Harry was. He was the man responsible for casting the final vote in the 36th state of the Union to ratify the 19th Amendment. Harry was the 24-year-old Republican Representative from Mouse Creek, Tennessee (now known as Niota). He was the youngest member of the Tennessee House of Representatives having been elected at 22 years old.

Rep. Burn had originally intended to vote for the 19th amendment. After being pressured by party leaders and receiving misleading telegrams from his constituents telling him his district was overwhelmingly opposed to woman suffrage, he began to side with the Anti Suffragists. However, a letter from his mother asking him to vote in favor of the amendment changed his mind. Febb Ensminger Burn had written a long letter to her son, which he held in his coat pocket during the voting session on August 18, 1920.

The letter contained the following sentences which changed Harry's vote:

Dear Son:

... Hurrah and vote for Suffrage and don't keep them in doubt. I noticed Chandlers' speech; it was very bitter. I've been watching to see how you stood but have not seen anything yet ... Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. 'Thomas Catt' with her "Rats." Is she the one that put rat in ratification, Ha! No more from mama this time...

With lots of love, Mama.

Of course, Mrs. Thomas Catt, was Carrie Chapman Catt, one of our nation's leading Suffragists, the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the founder of the League of Women Voters (1920).

After much debating and argument, the result of the vote was 48-48. After Harry Burn voted twice to "table" the amendment, the house speaker called for a vote on the "merits." Burns followed his mother's advice and voted "aye." His vote broke the tie in favor of ratifying the amendment.

He responded to attacks on his integrity and honor by inserting a personal statement into the Tennessee House Journal, explaining his decision to cast the vote in part because *"I knew that a mother's advice is always safest for a boy to follow and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification."* Thanks be to God for Febb Burn and her oldest son Harry!

And truly and forever, Thanks be to God for Carrie Chapman Catt, Alice Paul, Lucy Stone, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and the founding mothers of the movement (which grew out of the Abolitionist Movement) - Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth and the generations of Suffragists who fought for over 70 years – from Seneca Falls, NY to Nashville, TN and beyond – to see that women established the right to vote.

(I need to add an important note this morning – the movement for Women's Suffrage suffered from racial bias against Black women and other women of color – a sad reflection of the racial bias in our nation. Even when the 19th Amendment was ratified, not all African-American women gained the right to vote in August 1920 because of the Jim Crow laws in the south which crushed Black men and

women's voter rights until 1965. Beyond Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, there were many women of color who fought for women's rights to vote - including Zitkála-Šá, Yankton, a Sioux writer and advocate; Mary Church Terrell, who cofounded the National Association of Colored Women (NACW); and Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, who, at 16 years old, helped the New York City women's movement lead one of the biggest suffrage parades in United States history.)

Days after the 19th Amendment was set into law in August 1920, Carrie Chapman Catt wrote a "*Memo to the women of America.*" She wrote:

The vote is the emblem of your equality, Women of America, the guarantee of your liberty. That vote of yours has cost millions of dollars and the lives of thousands of women. Women have suffered agony of soul which you never can comprehend, that you and your daughters might inherit political freedom. That vote has been costly. Prize it. The vote is a power, a weapon of offense and defense. It is a prayer. Use it intelligently, conscientiously, prayerfully. Progress is calling to you to make no pause. Act!

All her words resonate with me. But, the echo of these phrases moves continuously through my heart and mind: ***“THAT VOTE of yours has been costly. It is a prayer. Use it intelligently, conscientiously, prayerfully.”***

In these weeks in which we celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the Tennessee ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution and the final acceptance of the 36 states votes to ratify the Amendment on August 26th we are reminded – once again – that women have had to fight for rights, for equality under the law seemingly forever. Gaining the right to Vote is only one example of how hard and how long this battle has truly been.

In an article published June 12, 2020 in The Cincinnati Enquirer entitled “100 years later, Ohio’s track record of electing female leaders remains abysmal,” Jessie Balmert and Jackie Borchardt, wrote:

“Ohio was one of the first states to ratify women’s right to vote. But ever since, the state has trailed the nation in notching important firsts for female elected leaders. June 16 marks the 100-year anniversary of Ohio lawmakers ratifying the 19th Amendment, which states the right to vote shall not be denied on account of sex. Suffragists who fought for that amendment imagined a future where Ohio women would participate in politics on the same level as their male counterparts.

But a century later, Ohio is one of 20 states that has never elected a female governor and one of 18 states that has never elected a female U.S. senator. In fact, Ohio is one of just six states that has never seen a major party nominate a woman for governor... After a century, only nine women have held statewide, non-judicial elected office in the state’s history...”

Here at First Church, we are blessed by Rep. Dr. Mary Lightbody who currently serves in the Ohio House of Representatives. As well, one of our former members, Judge Jennifer Brunner was Secretary of State (one of the 9 women to hold a statewide office). Thank you, Mary, and Jennifer, for running – and winning and serving!

The article points out the multiple challenges that women face in running for elected offices. There are many challenges that pose hurdles that many don’t try to go over. But I would like to point out the tremendous advantages of having women leaders in critical positions of leadership in such a time as this.

During the Coronavirus Pandemic, the leadership of three amazing women stands out in my mind: Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, since 2017, Angela Merkel Chancellor of Germany

since 2005, and Gina Raimondo, Governor of Rhode Island since 2015 have been exceptional. All three women have crushed the curve of COVID-19 by calling their nations and state to work together and then putting in place strict guidelines that made it happen.

As Governor Raimondo said recently, *“all the key leaders in Rhode Island who are addressing COVID-19 are women. We are all moms. We think like moms and act like moms. We serve and protect our citizens like they are our family.”* While you don’t have to be a mom to be a great woman leader, the image of leaders who are compassionate Mothers and genuinely concerned about the health and well-being of all citizens is what is needed at such a time as this.

In the case of Prime Minister Ardern, she called her nation to act like ONE TEAM and move forward together. New Zealand did it! They flattened COVID-19 – TOGETHER!

In the case of Chancellor Merkel, a scientist by training, she broke down the steps to crush COVID-19 like she was talking in a science class of third graders. Merkel rarely speaks to the nation, so when she did - everyone was listening – as she gave her short, clear, concise, and united directives. Then, both countries implemented their plans and crushed the bug! In the process they saved lives and got their economies back to functioning and producing in 6-8 weeks.

Amazing! Working together as one team, following simple scientific evidence and proven steps, and moms delivering effective plans can crush the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Women make a way while too many men flounder and evocate.

In this week when we are recognizing and celebrating Women’s Right to Vote, when the third woman in American history will become a

Vice Presidential Candidate for a major political party, we need to see that Voting really matters in Pandemic Times.

Voting can save lives. So, we need to pay attention and participate actively in the voting process in this region, this state and this nation.

In the words of the Canaanite woman to Jesus, *“Lord, help me.”* I pray that we see her and hear her cries. Her cries are the cries of women down through the ages. Her faith turned Jesus around. She made a believer out of Jesus!

Carrie Chapman Catt was right. *“The Vote is a prayer.”* We need “Pray” this November. We need to “Act” through our vote. May we do everything in our power to treat the Vote as Sacred. As John Lewis said in his final letter to the nation published on the day of his funeral July 30th:

“Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key. The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.”

Lesson #4 – “Use the VOTE Intelligently, Conscientiously, and Prayerfully.” Amen.