

SERMON FOR WOMEN AND THE WORD - March 19, 1992

TEXT: Luke 7: 36-8:3

TITLE: "Friendly Fire: Horizontal Violence Among Women" or
"What Happened to Suzanna?"

"What is the true impact of women in church and society today?" read the Women and the Word Brochure when it arrived on my desk this winter. "How are women transforming these areas of common life toward greater justice for all? What are the continuing risks of speaking the truth in our time? How deep is our sense of solidarity? What more must be done?" With these questions ringing in my ears, I picked up the letter from the committee inviting me to preach again this year and began to skim the suggested scriptures to see if anything moved me. As I was scanning the Luke pericope which we just read, a funny thing happened to me. I do not even remember reading this powerful story of the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment. What jumped out at me were the last two verses where Luke tells us who was traveling with Jesus as he made his rounds through the cities and villages of Galilee. The twelve were there - of course - but what interested me more was the greater detail with which Luke described "some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources." The first thought that ran through my mind about these women was I wonder how they got along with each other. How deep was their sense of solidarity with one another? What

were the dynamics of their relationships? What power struggles went on in that group of women? This is a major issue for us women as we seek to impact the church and society today. I dare to speak out about it in your presence this afternoon.

"Friendly Fire" is what the army euphemistically names the phenomenon of soldiers shooting their own. Alice Walker in one of her novels described a Southern black man who felt so powerless in relation to his white landlord that he lashed out physically at his own wife, his own children, other black men, and himself. In the women's movement we have labeled it "horizontal violence". In my experience it is the worst part of being a woman in a powerful position. One can usually duck when you see your "brothers" coming at you, but you are totally vulnerable to the "sisters" that get you from behind.

Has there been much literature written on the subject of horizontal violence? When I posed that question to Lynn Scott, the staff person on women's issues at the national level of my denomination, she could come up with only one book for me, Between Women: Love, Envy, and competition in women's friendships by Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach first published in America in 1988. Hopefully, you are familiar with many other writings on the subject and can share them with us during the discussion time.

Eichenbaum and Orbach were students in New York in the early 70's where they first formed their friendship. Each trained as a psychotherapist and together they opened women's

centers both in England and America. Their book is a fascinating study of women's friendships - its strengths and foibles. There are a few chapters that shed some light, I believe, on the issue of horizontal violence.

But first let us go back to that group of women who were Jesus' finance committee. Mary of Magdala was a woman who had seven demons Luke tells us. Sharon Neuffer Emswiler in her book The Ongoing Journey: Women and the Bible reminds us that "demons" in the Bible meant things like epilepsy, deafness, dumbness, blindness and insanity. Whether Luke the Physician was precisely telling us that Mary Magdalene suffered from all of these ailments and a couple of others or that seven demons meant that she had a severe case of one of them, we do not know. We do know that Mary was very sick and she was healed. Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, also had been healed of evil spirits or infirmities. Then there was Susanna and Luke adds "many others." Matthew tells us of two more that were part of the group: Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the unnamed mother of the sons of Zebedee. Mark adds Salome. So there we have it - Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, the other Mary, Mrs. Zebedee, since we do not know her name unless she was Susanna?, Salome and many others gathered around Jesus, gathered with the twelve men who had been named disciples. Luke tells us these women were the sponsors of Jesus' Holy Land tour. They were the ones who came up with the capital for the venture. Three years later by the time they got to Jerusalem for that emotion-packed last week, Mary Magdalene was still there and the other Mary, and

Joanna. But where was Susanna? It also appears from all four gospels that Mary Magdalene, the one who had been the sickest originally, had emerged as the leader of the group.

What had happened in those three years to those women and their relationships with one another? Needless to say, anything we suggest is mere conjecture since the tradition tells us nothing. But according to Eichenbaum and Orbach we can imagine that several things might have happened. First, because of their common bond of healing and desire to follow Jesus, they probably developed "merged attachments". They shared everything together; their personalities sort of merged into the movement. They lived, breathed, slept thinking and acting to support the Way. Jesus said, "Let's go to Capernaum," they arranged it. Jesus said, "I need a boat to cross the sea of Galilee."- they found the vessel and outfitted it for his journey. Jesus said, "I'm bringing 5000 people home for dinner, " They took care of it (forgive my poetic license).

Then perhaps the other women began to notice that Jesus more often approached Mary Magdalene with his requests or concerns. His disciples seemed to be consulting with her more than the other women. Envy reared its ugly head. Eichenbaum and Orbach write, "Envy is among the most painful feelings women experience toward other women. It occurs once and causes discomfort. It occurs a second time and the woman tries to avoid or suppress it. The third time, the woman feels persecuted by this unbearable feeling."(p. 92)

Sharon and I were classmates in seminary. I did not like her when I first met her. She towered over me in height and seemed to be looking down her nose at me. She was too quiet and awkward. By the third year we were close friends. She had overcome her shyness enough to communicate and I had finally realized that she was so tall and I was so short that she did have to look at me like a gargoyle eying passersby from a cathedral roof. When I got married a year later, Sharon was the only friend I invited to be a bridesmaid in my wedding. The next few years while I was following my Air Force husband around, she made the switch from Christian education to ordained ministry. It was several years later before I did the same thing. By the time I got my first pastorate in a very small church, she was in her second appointment in a middle-sized church in a city suburb. When we would visit one another, I would come away feeling such great envy and such incredible inadequacy. I had been the more promising student in seminary, I thought. Then when she preached at one of the early clergywomen consultations and became a district superintendent, I found myself feeling so left behind. Because of my envy, when we would visit I felt again like I had felt when we first met - she was way up there and I was way down here. My envy came between us.

The next thing that might have developed in that group of women followers of Jesus was competition. Maybe Suzanna would position herself so Jesus could whisper to her his plans. Eichenbaum and Orbach remind us that "competition among women has historically centered on getting men's attention." But

they suggest that perhaps the real target is not the men but other women. Perhaps we women through the centuries have dressed and powdered and acted to win the approval of other women from our mothers to our friends to the women in our churches. We compete not only to prove who is the best but who is the worst. Any of you who have ever attended a clergy-women's gathering will remember how women seem to compete to put down their churches and to complain about their situations. Much of the pain is real; some of it, however, may be to make oneself appear the more martyred.

As I prepared for this sermon, I found the area of competition as the one most painful for me to deal with. Eichenbaum and Orbach helped me understand that "Where as women search for self through connection with others, men search for self through distinguishing themselves from others." The reason the horizontal violence that I have experienced in the area of competition hurts me so is because it separates me from other women.

The third thing that must have emerged among those women around Jesus since they were real women is anger. Anger at the system - the establishment that Jesus was confronting - anger at the silly jealousies of the disciples, anger at one another because the longer they lived and worked together the more they realized that they were different from one another. Some would keep that anger deep inside and appear unflappable. Others would be like the nagging shrew, always jabbing at that which hurt them so. Culture has made saints out of the

former and ridiculed the latter. Eichenbaum and Orbach remind us that anger plays a role in both the denial of differences and in the assertion of difference. That anger can cause us to lash out at our sisters in ways that are extraordinarily painful to the one being violated. I served on the Design Team for the World Gathering of United Methodist Clergywomen last year. Our design team represented the whole church. It took a stand on policy for the consultation which I personally disagreed with and spoke strongly against in design team meetings. But my side lost. At the consultation this policy statement rightly so became the lightening rod for women's anger. And once that anger was unleashed there seemed no end to it. Every way that the 1200 women there were different from one another became another reason for outrage. I watched Bishop Judy Craig in tears declaring that in all her 7plus years of episcopacy she had never received such abuse as she received there from her clergy sisters. I tried to keep a sense of humor about the whole thing but the last straw for me came on the way home in the shuttle to the airport when several women discovered that I was on the Design Team and lashed out, whacking away again and again. I felt pulverized by the time I got to O'Hare. Friendly fire not only hurts, it kills.

Where was Suzanna on Good Friday? Where was she on Easter morning? Maybe she had gone home to her husband and children, to the safety of her home to get out of the conflict among the women. Maybe she had lost faith and was the one who spread the gossip that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute rather than someone with an infirmity that Jesus had healed. Or

maybe, just maybe, Susanna was the one who heard Mary Magdalene's good news "I have seen the Lord." And maybe she had believed when the disciples did not. Maybe she was the one who rejoiced with Mary in her good news and gave her the courage to keep on telling it until the men believed. Eichenbaum and Orbach call it "separated attachments/connected autonomy" They describe it as "Two women, separate yet connected: each woman feels whole within herself. Each woman is able to see the other for who she is, in a distinct and differentiated way. Each woman feels that she is seen in this way by her friend. Each woman feels secure in her attachment to her friend. Each woman acknowledges the interdependency between them." (pp. 204-5)

Just this past week I visited with two women who have achieved that goal of "separated attachments/connected autonomy." Trudy is a 70-year-old woman whom I met about ten years ago when I performed the wedding for her son and daughter-in-law. Sometime after the wedding she sold her home and built an apartment on the first floor of Jim and Debbie's house. A few weeks ago Debbie awoke to a strange sound that turned out to be a smoke alarm. She had just enough time to awake her husband and to go down and wake up Trudy before the fire swept through the house killing the pets and destroying the home. Trudy who is still active in her Lutheran church in the town where she lived before happens to work with one of my parishioners and came to church with her after the fire. I immediately saw that she suffered from much distress and arranged to

visit with her during the week. She told me she was living with Debbie's mother. When I got there for the visit, Mrs. Mandel had just arrived and promptly made tea for Trudy and me. Trudy invited her to join us in our conversation. Trudy had been reading me Psalms and asking "Why?" although she said she knew that question was unanswerable. She told me she would have an apartment downstairs in Mrs. Mandel's home. I commented on how nice that was and Mrs. Mandel responded, "We used not to get along. When Trudy first moved in with my daughter and son-in-law I felt I needed to include her in every invitation I gave them. So I invited her even when I did not want to." Trudy did not wish to be included - she had her own group of friends and would refuse the invitations. Mrs. Mandel felt badly. But somehow over the years they got beyond that tiff and became good friends. Now when Trudy so much needs friendship for she has been terrified of being alone since the fire, Mrs. Mandel is there to provide a home and a listening ear for her. Each woman is her own person, different from the other - one Lutheran, one Jewish - each is able to give or receive as is needed by the other. - good examples of Eichenbaum's and Orbach's separated attachments/connected autonomy.

Now back to those women followers of Jesus. What do you think happened to Suzanna? Amen.

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Emswiler, Sharon Neuffer, The Ongoing Journey: Women and the Bible, Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1977.

"Helping Those In Need"

by The Rev. Rosemarie C. Smurzynski

Preached at the Unitarian Universalist
Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn
on November 17, 1991 and again, at "Women
and the Word 1992."

Reading from Rebecca Parker, "Your Gifts"

These are the words of The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, President of the Starr King School for the Ministry. Parker reminds us that each of us has gifts. And she names those gifts: speaking, listening, imagining seeing and *waiting*.

Parker tells us that we have the choice of how to use our gifts: whether these gifts will be used to do the work of justice and to offer love, or used for injustice and to withhold love.

And then she tells us boldly: with your gifts, choose to bless the world.
And we are about that. Simply by choosing to affiliate with religious community, we have chosen to use our gifts to bless the world.

Yes, we could have chosen to bless the world in solitude. Our spiritual ancestor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, did just that. He retired to his study to search for the sources of power and grace, wisdom, healing and liberation. But we have chosen more. The more brings us together, in companionship, in company, in chorus. And we have come together as Parker knows and because we know:

None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility,
waiting.

And what is the world we want to save.
It is a world of great beauty and great pain.

The beauty is evident and as wonderful to feel as a sunshiny day in Autumn, Summer, Spring or Winter.
The beauty is evident in the reaching grasp of a new born child circling its tiny fingers around our one. A small act of great connection.
The beauty is evident in a handshake that says hello, a hug that says I support you, and a glance that says, "yes."

And the pain. We know it. We see it. We read of it. We feel it, and in protection, we cringe before it. The pain is in homelessness and poverty, in oppression and repression.

It is in physical harm and emotional hurt and in abandonment.

And I'm thinking of the poor. And I'm thinking we must use the gift of imagining that Parker names as ours, to see the pain of being poor. And we would see to be poor:

It is to have few clothes.
It is to scramble to find a meal.
It is to be resourceful in knowing where each day I can find a meal and a safe place to sleep. And maybe the place can be clean, too.
It is to have no job, no mail, no address, no home, no forms to fill out.
It is to be totally dependent on the good will of religious organizations who see it has somehow come to them to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked.
It is to put aside feelings of shame to stretch your hand out and ask for help.
It is to have others look away, overwhelmed by your need.

A person I shall call Jay is one of those extremely poor. I saw Jay in a Soup Kitchen in which I was helping out. Except, I had met Jay first, years before. You see, I buried his grandmother one fine spring day many years before our re-encounter. And he attended her grave side service as a youth. His family was comfortable enough. But Jay was homeless. His family would have helped him. But Jay preferred his independence, even when independence meant the streets of Boston. And he was proud of his ability to survive. He was proud that he could keep warm in the winter and that he knew where he could get three square meals a day. And he was attractive. Long brown hair. Deep blue eyes. Gentle. Beaten up sandals shorn his bare feet in summer. He looked like what I imagined Jesus looked like 2000 years ago. For all I know, he might have been.

But what I learned from Jay was about beauty, not about being poor, there is nothing beautiful about that, but the beauty in him. For--

To be poor, he showed me, is to be human and to have dignity and to know you are still somebody. It is to have feelings of sadness and joy and fear and hope. It is to scramble and use all of your mind and your heart to survive.

In the work this church does at Salvation Army Dinners, we see many Jays:

male and female, we see them.
young and old, we see them.
black and white, we see them.

And we help--as a church we help, some serving, some cooking, some organizing.

And we help because we know we ourselves are part of that world we are trying to save.

And there are so many ways that this church helps: Let me count only a few:

In the "Good As New Shop" which Wednesday after Wednesday, except for holidays and the night before Thanksgiving, is open for all to bring clothes to as a donation or on consignment and for all to purchase. Good clothes at reasonable prices in an unreasonable age.

And what the shop doesn't sell, at the end of a season it gives away to organizations that help people like Jay. For thirty years now the "Good As New Shop" has been doing its outreach work. Quietly and with stability the shop makes a difference in people's lives, in the lives of those who serve and who are served.

And we participate in denominational projects. Each year we collect money for a "Guest At Your Table," a Unitarian Universalist Service Committee Project. And the quarters we contribute go to buy medicines and the dollars to build houses. All go so that others around the world might have a sense of their own dignity and worth.

And the work of the UUSC has made major differences in the lives of people who otherwise might have little hope.

And then there is the UU Urban Ministry in Boston. This is a denominational ministry to the poor in Boston which began in 1826, one year after our Unitarian denomination began when the Rev. Joseph Tuckerman supported by the area churches devoted his time to helping the poor of Boston. Today the Urban Ministry helps people through giving them safety and a chance to do things that might never have been possible without their help.

And then we are involved in community projects like Salvation Army Dinners, I just mentioned, or the Spoons Project which benefits Project Bread in Boston. And today we heard an inspiring presentation by Betsy Kraft who outlined a need at "A Place To Turn," a food pantry and clothing drop-off center. We supported "A Place To Turn" last year. Today we are being asked as a church to recommit to them and in deeper and more intentional ways. And in December we will have the Mitten Tree and as you see in our bulletin, we will participate again in Adopt-A-Family. The work we have done reaches out. Our time and gifts are much needed.

As I counted up the ways we help I was at first a bit puzzled when person after person, almost from the first day I came to church, approached me with concerns about the church fine

tuning its outreach. But as the days unfolded I think I understood the desire. From our feeling of abundance, we want to address the scarcity, because our gifts of knowing and seeing, tell us they are there.

Sunday after Sunday we come to one of the most beautiful New England church buildings I have ever seen. And in 1985 many of you who were here then committed yourself to raising funds for a Tercentenary Fund, because you knew that something had to be done to repair the leaks in the sanctuary and to build better space for religious education. And you gave generously to make improvements happen. That task is completed and we will soon celebrate its completion.

And the last five years have been difficult in stability. And though you have had wonderful ministering in those years with Ray Baughan, Phyllis O'Connell, Kathy Fitzgerald, by definition, their commitments were interim, time limited. You knew what being in need as a church meant these past few years.

But now, so much is in place.

And that security, has given us a luxury that only those whose basic needs are met can have: the luxury, to look beyond and out and to care for others.

And together, we want to know how we might participate in the more, because

 this church is not only about having a beautiful building, though it includes that;

 And it is not only about running a good program of religious education for adults children and youth, though it includes that;

 And it is not only about searching for companionship and comfort, though it includes that, too.

It is also about what we might do together in the community beyond our walls for the problems are tremendous: homelessness, battered women, the environment, world peace. The safety of humans often hangs by a tenuous thread. But not one of us alone has the answer to how we might help. The answer is out there, amongst us, knowing how together we might pool our gifts of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing and waiting to bless the world.

Just for a moment, close your eyes and imagine.

Imagine where you live--imagine your home and your family.

Now imagined, your neighbors and your neighborhood.

And imagine the wider community that surrounds your neighborhood and cast your thoughts as wide as you might want to cast them.

Now imagine the things that could be done to make the world a better place. Imagine them one by one. And imagine one

small way you could make it better. Now imagine yourself doing it. Now open your eyes.

We can and we ought to feel good about the good works in which this church is already involved.
No one can accuse us of shirking our responsibility.
But I understand when I hear you say we want to be doing more good works and you want to be doing it in companionship, not as individuals who belong to this church, but as this church.

At the conclusion of the worship service I invite you with refreshments in hand to join in the library if you are interested in being part of a group that brainstorms some of the ways we might want to use our gifts to bless this world. I and Carol Jensen, chair of the Social Action Committee, will join you in the library listening to our visions. And then we will do it.
Simply that-- we will do it, because

Alone none of us will save the world.
Together--that is another possibility,
waiting.

Amen.