

We Persist: Commemorating the Philadelphia Eleven
Sunday, July 30, 2023, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

It was a hot Monday in July 1974 at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia -- and as Barbara Harris told the story, "The phones were ringing off the hook."

One woman said 'Are you people going to ordain women there today?' and I said 'Yes, we are!' and she said 'You're gonna split this church right in half.' And I said 'The church is already split in half -- that's why we're doing it.'

And so on that day July 29, 1974 eleven deacons -- who came to be known as the "Philadelphia Eleven" -- and four bishops gathered in front of a standing-room-only-congregation at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia and made history with the ordination of the first women as priests in the Episcopal Church.

Forty-nine years later it might be hard to imagine -- in a parish like All Saints, Pasadena with a long history of women clergy serving at this altar; in the Diocese of Los Angeles with a history of women bishops on its staff; and in an Episcopal Church with a woman as one of our former Presiding Bishops -- what a radical act that was. But it was.

Protesters at the ordination called the proceedings "*unlawful and schismatical; constituting a grave injury to the peace of Christ's Church.*" One priest said, "*You are trying to make stones into bread.*"

Yet, in spite of the warnings and protests, the hand wringing and the phone calls, the threat of schism and the dire predictions of the end of the world as we know it, the Episcopal Church kept moving forward.

In September 1975 four more women were ordained in Washington DC. And in September 1976, at the 65th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, the ordination of women was "regularized" with a resolution that simply said that the canons for ordination "shall be equally applicable to men and women."

And while the church may have said it, that did *not* in fact settle it.

The protests continued, including some congregations (four here in the Diocese of Los Angeles) trying to leave the Episcopal Church over the ordination of women -- and a number of dissenting bishops refused to either ordain or license women in their dioceses.

In 1994 -- twenty years after the ordinations we commemorate here this morning -- I was in seminary and serving as the legislative aide to the Bishops' Committee on Constitution & Canons at the General Convention in Indianapolis ... and the chair of that committee was one of those bishops -- Bill Wantland from the Diocese of Eau Claire.

As convention was wrapping up, Bishop Wantland thanked me for my work on the committee and told me I clearly had gifts for ministry but ... he couldn't resist adding ... could never actually be a priest because I was **ontologically incapable of being an efficacious bearer of a sacerdotal presence.**

Yeah. That's a moment you don't forget.

What he was saying – with big churchy words – was that very nature of my being as a woman made it impossible for me to preside at this or any altar as an icon of the priesthood of all believers ... something he was capable of doing by virtue of having been born a man.

And that – I believe -- was the split Barbara Harris was talking about to the irate woman on the phone in Philadelphia that hot July morning.

It was the split between those who saw the church as an institutional structure steeped in patriarchal privilege they were determined to protect at all costs and those who saw the church as the Body of Christ still growing into the Beloved Community they were determined to help birth into being.

It was the split our rector emeritus of blessed memory George Regas described in his appeal for support for the ordination of women: *"I suggest to you that we cannot wait to settle questions of the freedom of all humanity. Women are either free in our society or they are not."*

And it was a split the courageous women, their ordaining bishops and those who supported them were determined to bridge, fix and heal -- which led us to July 29, 1974 and a moment in the Episcopal Church where those two tectonic plates crashed into each other and set off the ecclesial Richter Scales in a seismic event that challenged what had for centuries been the patriarchal narrative controlling women and limiting men ... and making God's beloved nonbinary children utterly invisible.

And the aftershocks continued – in fact, continue to this day.

Remember – my "ontologically incapable" conversation with Bishop Wantland happened in 1994 ... **a full 20 years** after the ordination anniversaries we commemorate today.

For while we have made tremendous progress, sexism remains a thing in our church, our nation and in our world -- and the church still struggles to live into its high calling to dismantle rather than participate in the myriad interlocking oppressions that keep us from seeing each other as fully human images of God.

Nevertheless, we persist.

The work of dismantling oppressive systems is long and hard and usually involves at least two steps forward and one step back ... and what we have learned in this struggle to dismantle patriarchy in the Episcopal Church applies not just to the finite number of women who feel called to holy orders and the vocation of priesthood – it applies to the ongoing work of becoming Beloved Community where all are seen, all are represented, all are loved, valued and called into the work of being agents of love, justice and compassion in this beautiful and broken world.

And as we persist, we stand on the shoulders of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, whose story we heard this morning in Exodus; women who were willing to defy Pharaoh in order to bring new life into being ...

We persist in the tradition of Sirach and the personified-as-feminine Wisdom that has been part of creation from its very inception ...

We persist in alignment with the words from Paul in his letter to the Galatians: that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female – all are one in our Big Fat Human Family ...

We persist in solidarity with the women who were the first proclaimers of the resurrection, ignored by the men who dismissed them as being ontologically incapable of being efficacious bearers of a prophetic witness ... rejecting the good news they had to offer as the first preachers of the resurrection as “nonsense.”

We persist because we know that centering those who have been historically excluded is not erasing those who have historically centered: it is erasing the silos, barriers and boundaries that keep us from being the Beloved Community God created us to be.

We persist because we refuse to be limited by the false narrative that maleness, heterosexuality and Whiteness are “normative” reducing all the rest of us to somehow-less-than variants thereof: a narrative that is – for the record – just as destructive to those who identify as men as it is to the rest of us.

As author, activist and academic bell hooks wrote long before the Barbie movie was even a glimmer in Greta Gerwig’s imagination:

“A patriarchal world view teaches a man
that his value is defined by the things he can achieve,
rather than who he is.
In an anti-patriarchal culture,
males do not have to prove their value and worth.
They know from birth that simply being gives them value,
the right to be cherished and loved.”¹

That my brothers and sisters and gender fluid siblings
is the message every single solitary precious human being
brought into this world should know
as deep down as it is possible to know anything –
that their existence is a blessing;
that simply being gives them value;
and that the God who loves them beyond their wildest imaginings
wants one thing and one thing only from them –
that they love each other they way God loves them.

That is the message Jesus loved us enough
to become one of us in order to show us how to live it;
and that is the message the institutional church has failed to live up to
over and over and over again
every time it has chosen protecting patriarchal privilege
over birthing Beloved Community.

Nevertheless, we persist.

And the reason we persist
is because we love the vision of what this church *could* become
so much that we’re willing to endure the pain of the birth pangs
of bringing that new reality into being
of being co-creators of a world of liberation for absolutely everyone
of believing that another world is not only possible, she *is* on her way –
of saying yes to the vision Alla Bozarth –
poet, author therapist and one of the Philadelphia Eleven --
describes in her 1978 poem “Call”:

*There is a new sound
of roaring voices
in the deep
and light-shattered
rushes in the heavens.*

*The mountains are coming alive,
the fire-kindled mountains,
moving again to reshape the earth.*

*It is we sleeping women,
waking up in a darkened world,
cutting the chains from off our bodies
with our teeth, stretching our lives
over the slow earth—*

*Seeing, moving, breathing in
the vigor that commands us
to make all things new.*

*It has been said that while the women sleep,
the earth shall sleep—
But listen! We are waking up and rising,
and soon our sisters will know their strength.*

*The earth-moving day is here.
We women wake to move in fire.
The earth shall be remade.²*

The earth shall be remade. The kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. Beloved Community will become a reality we live, not just a dream to which we aspire. The other world that is not only possible will no longer be on her way: she will have arrived.

So won't you pray with me, this prayer we have prayed together before in this sacred space, as we ask the God who gave the Philadelphia Eleven the courage to be the change they wanted to see as they stepped out in faith 49 years ago to give us the courage to go and do likewise as we step forward in faith into God's future.

*Another world is not only possible
She is on her way.
On a quiet day, you can hear her breathing.
She is on her way.³
Amen.*

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¹ "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love" by bell hooks

² "Call" from Womanpriest by Alla Renée Bozarth

³ Ana Hernández from text adapted from a quote by Arundhati Roy