

Our Mothers
Ruth 4:11-17; Psalm 105 (selected verses)
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Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Several years ago, while living in New Orleans, I officiated a wedding on Halloween weekend and the wedding venue was in the French Quarter. Because I was officiating a wedding, I looked very clerical. I was wearing my collar, and at the end of the evening as I was leaving the wedding to walk to my car, as I crossed the street there was a man staring at me, awkwardly so, and as I was passing him, he said "That's a costume right!" Realizing that oh yeah, it's Halloween, I responded and said "actually no, I just finished officiating a wedding". His eyes widened, he took a step back, and suddenly belted "HERETIC!" Of course, I was shocked and decided to keep on walking. This guy followed me for two blocks yelling "heretic" behind me (I was very grateful that the streets of the French quarter were full of people, and he couldn't do any more harm, but he was certainly causing a commotion! Then a youngish woman came running up to me- and said- is that a costume?!? Again, sigh, no, I just finished officiating a wedding. she said YES! I love it! "Can I get a picture from you because I want to send it my grandma :) And I happily smiled and posed for the selfie.

Being a woman in ministry, still in 2022, can cause a raucous on the streets, and can be met with hostility. I look back at this story and it always makes me laugh, but I also think it captures a bit of my experience with the church. You may or may not know part of my story is that the church I was raised in did not nor does not ordain women and so much of my faith formation was a real struggle to come to terms with my call to full time ministry. For much of my young life I never saw or knew any woman that was a pastor. In college when I declared my major to be Bible and Theology, so many people would say to me "what are going to do with that degree?" so I didn't even have the imagination that I could even be a pastor and I was met with resistance by my community when I took steps towards my calling to be a pastor. And as I struggled and reconciled with the fact that I did indeed feel called to full time ministry I then had to find a church home that welcomed me, which eventually became the Presbyterian Church, but it was a long and sometimes painful road to find a church home that recognized the gifts and talents I had to offer to the Church and just because I found a welcoming and affirming home church does not mean that I can just turn my back on the church that formed me for it was in those earliest days of my young life that I met and encountered God. I know God was there, and God was especially there in the women of my family and the women of my childhood congregation who mentored and cared for me. It was the mothers and grandmothers who loved and nurtured me and gave me the confidence and audacity to follow God's call. And I know that I would not be here today if it were not for my own mother and grandmother, neither of whom were ever ordained clergy (my grandmother certainly always wanted to be) but whose prayers, and permission to "rebel" allowed me to push forward and to dream big! And so I smiled proudly with that young woman on the streets of New Orleans for that picture being sent to her grandmother.

Today is also the first Sunday of lent, and the first Sunday of our Lenten Sermon Series *The Spirituality of the Psalms*. In this sermon series, we will be learning from the psalms the copious ways that we can express our faith through our emotions and through the experience of being human. Our focus today is on the Psalms and community, which is why we begin Psalm 105. Psalm 105 is a litany of

praise to God retelling the story of Israel from the call of Abraham, to the settlement in the land of Canaan. This psalm describes God's unfailing goodness.... The psalmist writes:

*Remember the wonders God has done,
God's miracles, and the judgments God pronounced,
He brought out his people with rejoicing,
his chosen ones with shouts of joy;
So that they might keep his precepts
and observe his laws.*

The witness of Psalm 105 encourages us to take up the practice of telling our story as both an act of worship and also an act of understanding our call into the future. When I tell my story (as I just did) I can look back and see all the ways that God was faithful to me, and when I reflect on my story I see clearly that my call is to offer welcome and encouragement to those who have historically not felt welcomed or encouraged by the church.

Our congregation is in the midst of celebrating our 175th Anniversary! In our celebration we have been remembering our past (I especially love the 175th Anniversary notebook notes in the bulletin each week) and today we are going to take a cue from Psalm 105 and hear the founding story of our congregation, Lewinsville Presbyterian Church, to hear and celebrate the goodness of God that can transcend and breakthrough in spite of our human tendencies, to just be oh so human. *We learn from Psalm 105 to tell our story is to both celebrate the goodness of God, and also to learn from our past, so that we may hear God's call going into the future.*

March 8th is International Women's day, which is a global holiday celebrated annually on March 8 to commemorate the cultural, political, and socioeconomic achievements of women. And so as I was preparing for today I thought there is no better time to look back to celebrate and learn from Lewinsville's founding mothers.

One of my favorite Seminary Professors, Yolanda Peirce in her new book, "In my grandmother's house" introduced me to the term **Grandmother Theology**. Dr. Peirce states that Grandmother theology

Is rooted in generational wisdom, in the way that time and age and maturity provide an alternative lens through which to know and understand God. In a world eager to promote the newest wunderkind, grandmother theology carries us two or more generations back: to the kitchens, hair salons, gardens, and church basements of older black women who are often invisible in theological discourse but without whom the American Christian church would cease to exist. Dr. Peirce states: I had a praying grandmother and nothing I have accomplished would have been possible without her prayers.

To prepare for this sermon today I got to sit down with both Roland McElroy and Cathy Saunders, who have both done a lot of historical research on our church community, - and they both helped me begin to understand our church beginnings, and the truth is that the founding of our church is quite the complicated tale. To quote Cathy "It's easy for founding stories to get smoothed over as time goes on, and that can make it seem like conceiving projects and bringing them to fruition in the present day is more frustrating than it was in the past, when in fact it was probably pretty frustrating in the past, too."

So we must begin with Elizabeth Lee Jones (who was sometime referred to as Miss Betty). She was the daughter of Lettice Corbin Turberville Jones, and Elizabeth potentially moved to this area of Virginia as a refugee after the British burned many homes on the Northern Neck of Virginia, where she was born, during the War of 1812. She moved to Lewinsville because her mother's family, the Turberville's, apparently owned land here. It is hard to sift through all the details of why Elizabeth was here and who she lived with (because her parents died when she was young), but it seems that by 1815 Elizabeth lived in Fairfax County and began attending worship services at the home of Rev. Maffitt. While taking part in Rev. Maffit's house church, it appears that Elizabeth had the idea to donate land for a church building. Unfortunately, Elizabeth also died rather young and never got to see her dream of the Lewinsville church realized, but in her will she bequeathed 4 acres of land for a church and church (cemetery). And she designated in her will that Rev Maffit (or another Presbyterian pastor) is to be the pastor of the congregation.

But this is when the story gets a little confounding and confusing- Lewinsville Presbyterian Church was not established or chartered until 1846, meaning that 24 years passed before the church was built and chartered, and sadly Rev. Maffit also passed away before the church could be established. 24 years passed by because Elizabeth's will got all messed up in the drama and gambling debts of her uncle Troilus (every family has a crazy uncle, and Elizabeth's Uncle Trollus was a big problem for her will). I'm not a historian and it is too complicated to explain all the details of 1800's will drama, but basically because Elizabeth was a woman, her will was enmeshed with her uncle's will. And Elizabeth's will could not be enacted until her uncle's debts were settled.

Elizabeth's dream of a church in Lewinsville would have been a lost dream if it had not been for the commitment of two other women. Mary Walker Carter Jones and Martha Corbin Tuberville Ball (I do love that their names are Mary and Martha! And for ease I'm going to refer to them as Mary and Martha for the continuation for this story, Mary was the step- daughter of Rev. Maffit and eventually married Elizabeth's brother, The Commodore Thomas Jones. Martha was Elizabeth's aunt and eventually settled the debts of her brother Trollus, and donated the land that would become Lewinsville Presbyterian Church. Mary was also deeply devoted to the creation of this congregation, encouraging and pushing hew now husband Thomas (Elizabeth's brother) to honor his sister's legacy.

It's interesting to note that The Commodore Thomas Jones is often cited as the founder of our congregation. And he was a founding Trustee, but it seems clear from historical digging that our congregation would not have existed if it were not for the imagination and persistence of Elizabeth, Mary, and Martha. To quote Roland "The Persistence of Women is why we have a church." One reason that "the commodore" is recognized and remembered as the founder of our congregation is that he was a decorated war hero, and he is the most well known and most well documented of the Jones/ Tuberville family, which is typical of history. The stories and actions of men are often the stories that are preserved and the names and actions of women are lost in the passing of history.

And there are some other names: Letty; Amy; Nancy; Belinda; Charlotte; and Cinthia. These are the names of enslaved women who I count as founding mothers of our congregation. To quote Cathy these "women's lives were intimately intertwined with those of Lewinsville's founding mothers, and their labor was essential to running the Ball and Jones households." It is reasonable to believe that they also played an important part in the creation and founding of our congregation. But because they were enslaved, their names and stories are even more lost in the passing of time. We do know that Belinda is buried in our church cemetery. But I believe as we remember and celebrate our history it is

important to not lose what little bit of history we have of Letty, Amy, Nancy, Belinda, Charlotte, and Cinthia, which is to remember at the very least their names.

The Ruth Passage that Spencer read today is one of my most favorite verses in my most favorite book of the Bible. The text today picks up with Boaz at the town gate to “publicly redeem” Ruth and Naomi, and the whole town is a buzz about this good news, or at least thrilled to have something to gossip about :)! The text tells us that all the Elders and the people come forward saying:

“We are witnesses! May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

This is a blessing, and it is brimming with excitement, but as a reader it should stand out as odd the historical figures named in this blessing. In this blessing three women are named, Rachel, Leah, and Tamar, it is already weird that the Elders would name women in a blessing for a man, and it is even more odd that these three particular women would be named in a blessing at all. All three women’s stories are recorded in the book of Genesis. Rachel and Leah are sisters and also the wives of Jacob. Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah and then had to work and barter to marry Rachel. Rachel and Leah’s story is one of being pitted against one another in competition for their husbands love and affection, and competing against one another in bearing children. Leah had many children but did not have the affection of her husband; Rachel had the affection of Jacob but only had two sons and died giving birth to her second child. The story of Tamar is even more salacious. Tamar is the daughter in law of Judah who is passed from son to son and never bearing a child. She eventually is cast out by the family left with nothing. And so she entraps Judah by dressing up like a prostitute and eventually conceiving a son, named Perez, with Judah.

A famous feminist biblical scholar, Phyllis Trible, considers stories like Rachel, Leah, and Tamar’s “the Texts of Terror” meaning they are stories in the bible of abuse, exploitation, and violence against women. Rachel, Leah, and Tamar are all women who had to survive in a man’s world, and who had to navigate considerable danger and trauma throughout their lives. But what is remarkable is that here in Ruth’s story, they are not forgotten, and these women are viewed through new lenses. Instead of being viewed through the lens of pain, competition and scandal they are seen as builders of houses, and mothers of a model family. Here in Ruth The LORD is giving and blessing through female agency.

These women’s stories are being recognized as important and their cooperation in the story of God commended. Their stories/names/lives are able to be retrieved by Ruth’s story. Ruth’s story chooses to remember their names and shine them in a new light, causing them to not be forgotten but rather to be celebrated! Ruth and Boaz are blessed by being a part of Leah, Rachel, and Tamar’s Story. As we are blessed to part of Elizabeth, Mary, Martha, Letty, Amy, Nancy, Belinda, Charlotte, and Cinthia’s Stories. ****

Last week Pastor Scott mentioned that he wants us to be a Revelation 7:9 congregation- Rev 7:9 describes a scene at the end of days when there is a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne. Pastor Scott was encouraging us to be a congregation that looks to all people from all places where everyone is welcomed and all people are seen as children of God. When we retell our story what we learn is that if anyone is overlooked, or unheard we take the risk of not hearing all that God has in store for us. When we look at our founding story we see that our roots are with the young, the almost forgotten, the enslaved, and those fleeing war looking for safety, our founding story tells us that we are called to be a congregation that makes

room for all voices to be important. To listen to ideas and imaginations our youth, our elders, and from those new members who we might not have even met yet. What if a young girl's dream had been ignored, left to be lost to her uncle Trollus' drinking and gambling debts we wouldn't be here today. We would not be celebrating our 175th year!

So this leaves us with the question, who are we missing or overlooking, youth, women, refugees? How do we create a culture here at Lewinsville Presbyterian Church that encourages and helps our youth to dream big and seed new ideas of ministry in our church and community?

I recently became aware of a really cool story of one of our congregation's young women. Audrey Gebhart and her girl scout troop decided to interview women in their lives to try to identify "problems" that exist in our community and do something about it. After their interviews they talked to each other about the problems they had discovered, and began to brainstorm some ways that they might be able to influence solutions to the problems. Finally, the troop voted and decided that they wanted to do a project to help the Falls Church Homeless Shelter, which many of you know is a mission partner of our congregation. The troop then organized a visit to the Fall Church Homeless Shelter and asked how they could help. During their visit they found out that what was needed most was gift certificates to Giant or CVS as well as used backpacks and suitcases. So, this year some of the money earned from selling their girl scout cookies will go toward purchasing gifts cards and the troop is also doing a collection of backpacks and suitcases. If you have one you want to donate, I'm sure Audrey will take it.

When I heard this story, I was also deep in the weeds of Lewinsville's history, and i thought to myself that this is the very spirit of Elizabeth Jones happening within our congregation. Young women with an idea, trying to enact help and care, to make our community a more loving and gracious community.

So as we go forth celebrating our 175 years as a congregation, let us tell the story of who we are, but let us continue letting that story inform where we are going. Let us encourage the dreams of our youth and let us help them seed those new ideas into reality. Let us be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit that bring new people, and new ideas, and new ministries. Let us not get discouraged when projects are difficult or hard, or take a long time to come into fruition. Let us not overlook anyone, for when we ignore or think one has nothing to offer us, we just might be shutting out the very voice of God calling us into our new day.

Let us pray:

Holy God, "Today we have been witnesses to your word and to your story and celebrated your faithfulness to our congregation- may we continue to see your face and hear your voice in our neighbors, friends, and community... and may we continue to be a people who share your good news with all we encounter. Amen