

Stand Up!

By Kathy Jacobs

Emily arrived at the Gates of Heaven. While she was waiting for Saint Peter to greet her, she peeked through the gates and saw a beautiful banquet table. Sitting around it were her parents and friends she had loved who had died before her. When Saint Peter came by, Emily said to him, "This is such a wonderful place! How do I get in?"

"You have to spell a word," Saint Peter told her.

"Which word?" she asked.

"Love."

Emily correctly spelled Love and Saint Peter welcomed her into Heaven.

About a year later, Saint Peter came to Emily and asked her to watch the Gates of Heaven for him that day. While she was guarding the Gates of Heaven, her husband Bob arrived. "I'm surprised to see you," she said. "How have you been?"

"Oh, actually I've been doing pretty well since you died," Bob told her. "I married the beautiful young nurse who took care of you while you were ill. And then I won the multi-state lottery. I sold the little house you and I lived in and bought a wonderful mansion. Then my wife and I travelled all around the world. We were on vacation in Cancun and I went water skiing today. I fell and hit my head and here I am! What a disaster! How do I get in?"

"You have to spell a word," Emily told him.

"Which word?" Bob asked.

"Czechoslovakia ..."

This is National Women's History Month but no man will have to take a spelling test today.

In 1980, a group of women in Santa Rosa, California noticed that women were absent from our textbooks. No more than 3% of the content was devoted to women. Dr. Myra Pollack Sadker who lived from 1943-1995 pioneered much of the research documenting gender bias that was in America's schools. She stated "Each time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history she learns she is worth less."

The women in Santa Rosa founded the National Women's History Project to broadcast women's historical achievements. They also successfully lobbied Congress in 1987 to designate March as National Women's History Month which is now celebrated across the country.

Every year National Women's History Month has a theme which the United Methodist Church also chooses to celebrate. This year the theme is **"Honoring Women Who Fight All Forms of Discrimination Against Women."**

Recognized are women who have "shaped America's history and its future through their tireless commitment to ending discrimination against women and girls." (NWHP website)

Fifteen women have been selected to be recognized by the National Women's History Project. They are from all walks of life. They have campaigned against sexism, discrimination based on race and ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation, veteran status, and many other categories.

A few examples:

Margaret Dunkle played a key role in implementing Title IX, the law that transformed education for women and girls, from athletic fields to graduate schools.

Attorney **Saru Jayaraman** responded to the 9/11 tragedy by organizing displaced World Trade Center workers and co-founding Restaurant Opportunities Centers United.

Marty Langelan pioneered feminist self-defense training and bystander tactics, organized the first major city-wide anti-harassment campaign (1985-87), and conducted the first feminist survey on harassment.

Arlene Mayerson has been a leading attorney in disability rights law for over 35 years, including playing a key role in drafting and negotiating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Linda Spoonster Schwartz overcame a military injury to become one of the nation's leading veterans' advocates, focusing especially on the unmet needs of women veterans. (NWHP website)

The United Methodist Church stands alone among denominations in providing a Commission on the Status and Role of Women. Its mission is to challenge The United Methodist Church at all levels to work for full and equal participation of women in the total life of the denomination, including ordination of women, equal access to policy-making, and recognition that Jesus Christ calls men and women alike to salvation, liberation, discipleship and service in church and society. The Commission also acts as an advocate

for any woman in the church who is sexually harassed. (GCSRW Facebook page)

The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women will celebrate this National Women's History Month by highlighting laywomen's contributions to the United Methodist Church. They will also be sharing stories of famous United Methodist laywomen on Facebook.

As we think about honoring women who fight all forms of discrimination against women we have to admit that at this time in our country women have attained all the basic human rights that men have. They can vote, they can work, they can own property, they can drive cars, they can hold public office, they can become astronauts, they can be appointed to the Supreme Court, they can participate in professional sports, they can own companies, they can become doctors, writers, journalists, lawyers, artists, and entertainers. Even the poorest among us are considerably better off than women in third world countries around the globe.

Women who wish to defend other women in 2018 most likely will be advocating for additions to some of the current rights that women enjoy. For example, it has been suggested in various opinion pieces that the equal pay issue for women who do the same work as men needs to be improved and that more women need to be elected to political office. Some of you may have a cause you advocate for of which I am unaware.

The most critical matter today concerning women that has dominated the public square for the last year has been the explosion of charges of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and domestic violence that have unexpectedly been made against prominent men in all professions. Since these crimes have long been a part of the human condition we might ask why the sudden public indignation. What is different today is that the charges are being exposed in the media.

There is no dispute among women that we must defend all women who have actually been abused either sexually or physically. Less well-defined are the claims of sexual harassment. The problem is that we are not clear on the definition of sexual harassment. If women are making sexual harassment claims against men that are false or frivolous in order to gain notoriety or money, other women do not have to defend them just because they're women.

Early in my life I knew that two people cannot have a conversation or a meaningful debate if all the vocabulary is not mutually understood and agreed to. It was only a couple of years ago that I learned that in the South "Bless her heart" is not always a compliment. It is often an insult.

For instance, if someone came to me and said, “Nona doesn’t think Peter is crazy,” and I replied, “Well, bless her heart,” I wouldn’t be opining that Nona is loving and caring. I would actually be declaring that she is a bit of a crackpot herself.

In deciding what traits women today need in order to stand up and defend other women, let’s examine where we’ve been as a culture and how we’ve evolved. There still exist parts of our society where girls and women are instructed to “act like a lady.” In 2018 what does that even mean? I was going to list a few points that were prevalent in the 50s, but I decided to Google the phrase instead. It turns out there are pages and pages of suggestions (read rules) for acting like a lady. The site that I chose to take examples from had 100 commands! Here are a few:

- >Always say please and thank you. Civility never goes out of style.
 - >When in doubt, dress up.
 - >Drink responsibly. There’s nothing adorable in being sick or comatose.
 - >Don’t laugh at another’s mistake. A lady knows no one is perfect.
 - >Dress the part. You don’t have to wear a suit or dress but a lady always wears clean, coordinated clothing.
 - >Tracksuits and sneakers belong at the gym.
 - >Never talk on your phone when in a restaurant or at the movies.
 - >Don’t gossip.
 - >Don’t swear.
 - >A true lady doesn’t start fights.
- (100 Tips to Be a Lady)

To be fair, expectations for male behavior pose similar inconsistencies. A couple of years ago I had a minor debate on Facebook with our district superintendent, Zaki Zaki, over the phrase, “Be a Man.” His contention was that in the 21st Century such a directive inhibits young boys from owning their emotions and limits their choice to cry. My response was that in earlier decades the charge, “Be a Man” came at a time when men were most often the sole providers for and protectors of their families and were expected as men to have honor and strength and integrity. So it was a good thing.

Since every individual is unique let us put aside stereotypical definitions of behavior and let’s concentrate on what traits a woman needs if she is going to defend another. She needs to be strong and she needs to be courageous if she is going to answer the call to stand up, to speak up, to speak out.

While we can all agree that men and women are different, there is no reason to assume that bravery is gender-specific. However, women often don’t acquire an easy sense of fearlessness until they reach their middle or senior years. Not only should we lobby for all women to own their courage, we should strive to instill in our young women the concept that being strong is in their DNA.

Now, to be a strong woman you don't have to argue and fight with everyone in order to stand up. If someone at your workplace or in your family or at your church speaks rudely to you or criticizes you unreasonably you don't have to respond. You can leave it to a stern God as in Romans 12:19 (NLT):¹⁹ "Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the Lord." Or you could rely on the love of Jesus: 2 Timothy 2:23-24 (NLT)²³ "Again I say, don't get involved in foolish, ignorant arguments that only start fights."²⁴ A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone, be able to teach, and be patient with difficult people."

The difference between annoying remarks of thoughtless people that you can ignore and important causes that you choose to defend is that for the latter you need a deeply developed sense of what it means to be courageous. The dictionary defines courage as "the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc., without fear;" The Bible has many many scriptures about fearlessness. Here are just two: Psalm 27:1 "The Lord is my light and my salvation—so why should I be afraid? The Lord is my fortress, protecting me from danger, so why should I tremble?" (NLT) 2 Timothy 1:7 "For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline." (NLT)

Is it easy to take a position of strength to defend a person or a situation? No. Even when you have your beliefs solidly established in your mind and heart, going against a person of power can be scary. The last principal for whom I worked was a tyrant. His contract at his first principalship was not renewed by the local school council because of his authoritarian manner with his staff. Adding to the council's understanding of his general unpopularity were the statements of many of the teachers at his school.

When he was chosen by the council at my school he instituted a campaign of antagonism toward the veteran teachers in hopes they would transfer and he would have a more malleable young staff. That first year was pretty much open warfare between the principal and the tenured teachers. Complaints and counter complaints flew back and forth to the district administrator. Finally, the district administrator commanded the principal to establish some harmony at the school at the start of the second year.

On Teacher Institute Day of his second year he had all the staff line up in the corridor. If you're not familiar with 100-year-old Chicago schools, know that they are massive three-story structures with long long corridors. He had half the teachers stand at the north end of the corridor and the other half stand at the south end. He was going to read feel-good statements on work behavior and for each statement that we agreed with we were to step forward. The goal was

for all of us to come together in the center of the hall in one large can't-we-all-just-get-along group.

The only problem was that all the statements inured to his benefit. He had no skin in the game. Four of us who had been teaching the longest and were not impressed with his management style never stepped forward even once. Was it scary to be left further and further behind? Yes. But, there were ethical principles at stake. You can be a good employee for someone you dislike until you are demeaned and degraded for that person's ulterior motive. Like Esther you may be a woman for times just such as these. You have to be strong and if you perish you perish, either figuratively or literally!

One of the most heart-breaking revelations in the sexual harassment charges being revealed is that young women felt that their career advancement eclipsed their moral compass. No job is worth your soul. Somewhere along the line the culture failed these women.

You may ask, "What is all this doing at the pulpit?" The answer is easy. Everything that we say or do belongs to God. Genesis 1:27 says "So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This means that every current event or historical perspective about God's people can be discussed by the minister.

Women get their moral compass from the teachings in the Bible. Moral compass is defined as "an internalized set of values and objectives that guide a person with regard to ethical behavior and decision-making." (dictionary.com) We start out with the Ten Commandments: honor your father and your mother, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't covet. The New Testament further directs us that ²²"...the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!" Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

If your parents and your teachers and your Sunday School teachers translated these scriptures into examples of everyday behavior, you were lucky. But it is never too late to stoke up your courage. Habakkuk tells us that the vision is going to come to us, plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. In other words, listen for God's message. Don't be intimidated by the anti-Christian sentiment that is so prevalent on the news. God speaks to us.

There have been many strong women in our United Methodist Church. Our very own Susanna Wesley, born in 1669, married Church of England pastor Samuel Wesley and bore 19 children. Managing a home took great planning but she made time to nurture each child. Susanna led by example. Her life and faith journey shaped Methodism in ways we see today. Long before women were ordained, Susanna would sometimes gather friends around the kitchen

table and lead prayers when her preacher husband was away. She kept the parish going in his absence. Susanna also planted the unconventional idea of letting lay people serve as local preachers.” (UMC website)

So little discussion about strong women ever makes the news. We know that sensationalism sells so news outlets are not interested in the philosophical or spiritual background of courageous action by women. In my own mini-evangelism campaign I speak freely and casually about things I’m involved in at the church in many kinds of venues.

Let me close with an anecdote that might illustrate that strong women don’t need to purchase a sword and a shield. About a year and a half ago I went paperless on my Visa account. I didn’t do it voluntarily. I must have clicked on something in an email they sent me. I like to have that paper bill in my hand that shows the amount and the due date. But, since there is a Chase Bank branch in my Jewel in Glenview I thought I’d give it a try.

The branch is staffed by four young men who work in two-man shifts. They call me by my first name when they see me pass by. There is no truth to the rumor that their eyes light up when they see me coming to pay my bill because their monthly quota will then be reached because I have the largest bill in Glenview. They call me by my first name because I make them laugh.

Chase Bank was closed on Presidents’ Day, but the Jewel was open. The next day when I saw one of the young men I started out, “I conducted a study.” He looked all serious assuming I was going to complain about the interest rates that Visa charges. I continued, “The only people who were off for Presidents’ Day were teachers, postal workers, and Chase Bank employees. How did you manage that?” Of course, he had to laugh.

On Friday, March 2, I went in to pay my bill. I sat at the desk and started writing my check while the young man was pulling up my total on the computer. He said, “So, do you have any big plans for the weekend?”

“No,” I said. “I’m writing a sermon for next Sunday to celebrate National Women’s History Month.”

His hands came off the keyboard as he looked at me because I promise you, no Chase Banker kid has ever had that reply to that standard question. I told him I was the Woman person at my church, but that I made sure not to insult the men. He said, “No men were harmed in the making of this sermon?”

I told him that the theme was “Honoring Women Who Fight All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,” but that I was going to talk about strong women. I then asked him if he was married. He said no, that he was

concentrating on himself at this time. I told him to read and listen to what is said during National Women's History Month. He said he liked to be kind.

As I stood to leave I said, "Maybe I'll write about the Chase Bank men." He smiled, started brushing off his lapels, and asked, "About how dapper we are?"

I said, "No. I'll mention how Chase Bank men weren't working on Presidents' Day when all the women at the Jewel were." Boom. Direct hit.

There are some women in this congregation who have claimed their courage. You wouldn't want to get into a knife fight with them. Actually, it's fun to be freed up from the inhibition of "I'm just a girl." Get started. Remember, as Reverend Moon says every week, "God is always with you." Fear Not!

Amen.