

# The Gift of Presumption

*Stephanie Dyrness Lobdell*

A couple weeks ago, I sent my daughter off to kindergarten. The excitement radiated from her little body as she donned her first-day-of-school outfit: Wonder Woman T-shirt, pink tutu, and jean jacket. She loaded up her Wonder Woman lunchbox, complete with detachable cape and threw on her (you guessed it) Wonder Woman backpack. As per our family tradition, she climbed onto the stump in our front yard and proudly stated her name, age, and what she wanted to be when she grew up (a police officer this year). It was precious in every way, but especially poignant was her guileless presumption that she can be and do anything.

As I watch my daughter mature and develop a rather alarming perceptiveness, I wonder when she will start to notice the vocational gender disparity around her, particularly in the church. Her wide-eyed five-year-old self knows nothing of a world in which her gender has something to say about how she can embody the gifts and graces given to her by God. Even as she watches her mom ascend the platform each week to preach, when will she notice that most of the other preachers in our tradition are men? Will that precious *gift of presumption* be stripped from her hands by the incongruence between her hopes and the reality she encounters? And will she even notice when it's gone?

The USA has always prided itself on being the place where anyone can become anything. With just the right combination of hard work and talent, you can be and do anything your

mind can imagine. And yet, under the din of our declarations, our children are shaped by quiet assumptions, those underlying conventions, that indicate that some vocations are more suited for men than women.

The church is not exempt. Young girls feeling the call to vocational ministry are more often directed to children's ministry or cross-cultural work than they are directed to the pulpit, regardless of their gifts and graces. A national study found that only ten percent of Protestant congregations in the US had female *lead* pastors.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that the numbers are headed in a positive direction, but we have a long way to go.

In the meantime, Wonder Woman lunchbox or not, my daughter is going to notice a gap like that.

It's nothing new, this idea that gender should be the defining factor in determining the expression of a person's gifts and graces, abilities and potential contributions to society. To our shame, it wasn't even a century ago that it was assumed women were incapable of managing the responsibility to vote. Reasons varied from perceived biological inferiority and emotional instability, to an assumed lack of desire among women to participate in national conversations.

In the church, similar ideas have persisted, such as the suggestion that men are more naturally suited to leadership than women. To the biological and psychological defenses of these positions, the church added the voice of Scripture, distorted and grotesque in its interpretations.

1. "Number of Female Senior Pastors in Protestant Churches Doubles in Past Decade," Barna, September 14, 2009, <https://www.barna.com/research/number-of-female-senior-pastors-in-protestant-churches-doubles-in-past-decade/>.

But the voting rights situation changed. Through persistence, dedication, and sacrifice, women and men laid those inaccurate gender-based assumptions to rest. My female peers and I go to the polls each election, blissfully presumptuous, because we know that we belong there, contributing to society in that specific way. It does not even cross our minds that we wouldn't have a place casting a ballot alongside our male counterparts. The generations who have gone before have blessed me with the gift of presumption.

But in the church, that gift of presumption still eludes us, particularly concerning the pulpit. I am privileged to stand behind a pulpit most weeks, bringing the Word of God to the people of God. But I am an anomaly in many ways: a young mother, preaching to and shepherding an evangelical church in a traditionally conservative part of the country. It has not been simple or straightforward.

I am the minority at every pastoral gathering, often the only female in the room at all. I have had my pregnancies described as “situations” that hindered my pastoral work. I have navigated the weirdness of trying to nurse a baby in between preaching back-to-back services, and hoped against hope I would make it back to the pulpit without a stained shirt. I have been assumed to be the “pastor's wife” more times than I care to recount and have graciously (most of the time anyway) explained that yes, *I am* in fact the pastor, yes *I am* in fact an adult, and yes in fact, *I will* be the one performing the funeral service today.

I grieve when I see my highly-gifted female clergy peers place their call to vocational ministry into hibernation because of the social pressure on moms to be the “default parent,” which is hard (sometimes impossible) to do while *also* pastoring a church. I grieve that not many churches find creative ways to make pastoring possible for busy moms. I grieve when women clergy continue to be excluded from mentoring opportunities because of a lack of imagination and possibility for cross-gender relationships among church leadership.

I grieve because it is clear that we do not yet have that precious gift of presumption to place in the hands of our children.

These days, the testimony of those suffragettes and the testimonies of their predecessors who confronted false narratives of gender-based exclusions call to me as I look with longing at the future generation, the ones carrying the Wonder Woman lunchboxes to school, with big God-dreams in their hearts and minds. I ache to place



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in their tender hands the gift of presumption, the unshakeable assurance that if God should call them to the pulpit, they can answer, “yes!” without a second thought.

We are not there yet, but we endure, women clergy together with the champion men who have eyes to see how God is gifting both God’s daughters and sons. We persist. We keep preaching. We keep showing up to male-dominated meetings. We wisely and graciously insist on redirecting chauvinistic, small-minded comments. We debunk assumptions with our presence. We expose false narratives with our faithfulness.

Why? Not to further a self-righteous, self-serving agenda. Not to prove a point or stick it to the powers that be. No. We persist out of obedience to a call and a profound sense of responsibility to the next generation of would-be preachers and pastors, little girls who need to see someone who looks like them behind the pulpit. We stay when it’s hard out of our great gratitude for the

sacrifices of those who have gone before us and given us the gifts of presumption, the presumption to own property, to vote, to run for public office, to participate in high education, to wear pants for mercy’s sake!

And our brothers, those who have taken up the cause of egalitarianism in the church alongside us, have a unique role to play. As they occupy places of power, having experienced the gift of presumption themselves, they intentionally make space at the table for their sisters. They insist on hearing the voices of their female peers at every level of leadership. They create opportunities for women clergy, especially in the pulpit, by purposefully seeking out female voices to bring the Word with power in their churches. Our clergy brothers join us in persistence as they deliberately make time for young women feeling the call, time to both hear their stories and time to guide and support them on their journeys through mentoring and advocating.

We persist together because we have been given bountiful gifts and now, it is our turn to be the givers. It is our turn to forge new paths in the wilderness for our daughters and nieces, for every little girl that sits in our pews. It is our turn to do the hard work of enduring difficulty, of silencing false narratives, and of showing up even when we are alone in order to have the profound privilege of placing in our children’s small hands the gift of presumption, the audacious belief that when God calls and they find themselves endowed with the gifts and graces from God, they can and must preach the Word. By the power of the Spirit and by our faithful persistence, may it never cross their minds that they could *not* say yes, yes, a thousand times yes.



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