

# My First Time: When Being Who God Made You Isn't Okay

*Heather Henderson*

“Heather has no business being in the pulpit.” The words leaped out at me from the computer screen, screaming at me from an email not written to me, but about me, to two of my male colleagues.

First of all, we don't even have a pulpit. We're a nondenominational church that meets in a high school. We have a stage and an auditorium. His words though, reflected his heart, his experience, and a church upbringing that led him to believe his email was helping our church.

I entered ministry through a nontraditional route—from a master's degree in education, to volunteering in our youth ministry, to being asked to join the youth staff, to ultimately being asked to join the senior leadership of our church and serve alongside our lead pastor. It's been an honor, a gift, a vocation so much greater than I ever could have dreamed or planned for myself.

When we talked about me preaching, I was daunted. It's a big job that carries pressure and responsibility. Yet, I knew God

had made me to communicate his truth. To be my authentic self and talk to people about the God of the universe who created and loves them. I am uniquely made, and I am a gifted communicator.

God made me this way on purpose and gave me this desire and dependence that is just grafted into my marrow. I must preach and teach and lead. It's how God made me.

I didn't grow up in the church world, but I'm not naïve; I knew there might be pushback to a young woman preaching. I didn't realize it would hurt so much or feel so personal. I felt stripped naked, void of value, and broken.

I knew him, of course. We had served together, and I loved his family. Still do, though they are no longer at my church. In an email to two of the men with whom I work, this church member outlined the ways in which, because of my gender, I was unfit and sinful in speaking God's message to people. He was sure to note that it was nothing against me, not personal, of course. Just a matter of making



sure the church doesn't become steeped in grave sin.

I saw the email because one of my colleagues wanted me to know about the conversation. Truthfully, I'm not sure he should have shared it with me. Or he should have warned me. But maybe he couldn't know how much it would just cut me to the heart. I know my male colleagues have experienced complainers, detractors, whiners, and people who are sure they know better than what was preached on Sunday. But I suppose they don't know—couldn't know—what it's like to read in an email how their very person, an essential element of how God made them, was wrong, was sinful.

I'll never forget the words:

*"No business being in the pulpit."*

*"Women shouldn't be allowed to pray if there are men available."*

*"This will bring the church nothing but trouble."*

*"How can you allow her to do this?"*

*"Women are ruled out as teachers or leaders over men."*

Thankfully no one was around, because this email was a sucker punch. I went to a nearby office, curled up on a couch, and sobbed. My heart hurt. My soul was injured. The *imago Dei* in me had been trampled on, doubted, deemed unworthy and sinful. I was devastated.

As women in ministry, most of us have become used to emails, conversations, and questions like this. I certainly have. As I've learned more, read more, lived in Scripture more, and grown to understand my own self, I am certain that mutuality is God's plan for man and woman. I'm comfortable engaging in conversations about relevant Scripture passages, and I understand that, as a woman who preaches and

teaches, I will carry this burden and responsibility. I'm now much better equipped and spiritually and emotionally secure, having walked this road for some years.

However, I will never, ever, forget that first time. The first time I saw words written about me, not to me. The first time I was told I was wrong, sinful, and direct party to the downfall of a church. The first time this academic conversation about women in ministry became painfully personal.

And while his words hurt me deeply, I was most hurt because of the catch-twenty-two that they represented. Why didn't he just talk to me? Why email my colleagues?

Of course, talking to me about this would imply my equal standing to engage the conversation. Of course he couldn't talk to me about this; these decisions are the work of men. And so, we've never spoken about the email. We haven't spoken at all. He left the church, not able to be party to such sinfulness. I was sad for his family, who were well-loved, and sad that he hadn't wanted to engage in conversation. An occasional "like" on Facebook is all that remains of that relationship.

I worked to a place of forgiveness for him. He was speaking what he had been taught was true by so many male church leaders. And while I wish he had engaged in conversation with me and with others, and been willing to take another look at Scripture, I understand that will not always be the case.

The memory of my "first time" reminds me that every time I preach, it will be the first time for someone—the first time they've heard a woman preach or teach in church. Every time I preach, I bear what the director of Harvard's Center for African and African American Research, Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr., calls, "the

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freight of being iconic.” What a perfect, scary phrase.

Being a woman in vocational ministry is not easy. It is still far too rare. Being a woman who preaches requires grit and confidence in who God made me to be. It is one of the greatest honors of my life to speak to people about God’s love for them. I am truly humbled and in fact baffled that I get to do this.

My eight-year-old daughter asked me recently, “Mommy, why do people treat girls differently?” I was surprised by the question, and saddened. Already at age eight, she has picked up on this. We chatted, and she noted, “Not very many girls get to preach, do they?” I agreed with her, but we talked about how that isn’t God’s plan. I pray that my three children will grow up to love and serve Jesus. And I pray that my daughters as well as my son will speak words of inclusiveness, of unity, of mission, when they speak of the church. No one is greater or lesser in God’s kingdom. My

husband is not in vocational ministry, I am. I am not greater or closer to God because of my work. Nor am I further from God because of my gender.

Understanding the gospel is both easy and impossibly difficult. We are all loved. We are all enough. We all bear the image of God within us. I pray that more people would know those truths, and that more women would be safe and confident and empowered in the unique ways God has made them. Church is complicated and messy. Jesus is not. And so I return to him, place my trust in him, find my identity in him. And I commit to continue serving in his church, because it’s still a beautiful and excellent plan.



Heather Henderson is a “barely makes the cut” millennial, striving to live a kingdom life in the Washington, DC suburbs. She is a mom of three, wife of a brilliant IT guru, and associate pastor at a non-denominational church in Maryland.

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