I was thirteen the first time I heard the words, “women cannot be preachers” spoken into thin air and inside the walls of that place where I had always been loved, had always felt safe. The words felt like a stone thrown into the rudder of a ship, they caught me, caused me to heave forward and halt.

I was raised up in love. I was reared in the faith tradition that also loved and fostered my parents and grandparents. I was born into a local church where a founding pastor in the 1930s had been a woman. I was raised up under a sense of welcome and inclusion, taught the distinctions of our Wesleyan-Holiness heritage.

I was reared in a church where I was invited to sing a solo at six years old, where I watched women kneel and wash the feet of other women, hold one another up as they walked through the hardships of life, spread a feast of pimento cheese and tuna fish sandwiches and cherry pie to raise money for missions, and gather over Maxwell House coffee for the sacred hour of Tuesday morning prayer.

It is funny now to consider I attended Sunday School in that same church more than a million times in my life, but the day I heard the words “women cannot be preachers”—the first time I heard gender-based restrictions, confines, limitations, issued from within the kingdom—this is the day above all other days that stands out.

It was summer day in Tennessee, so hot and humid that we’d given up all hope of wearing pantyhose. It was an ordinary morning in the educational wing where I had first been a toddler, then a primary, then a junior, before becoming a full-fledged member of the youth group. I was gathered with my friends at the far end of the hall, just past the water fountain and the Warner Sallman painting of the blue-eyed Jesus. We sat on folding chairs planted on carpet surrounded by white walls filled with Bible verses and stars for those memorized. This was before there were special services for young people or special spaces for teens to hang out. This was before people wanted to create music for certain generations of Christian folk. This was back when you brought your King James Bible with your name embossed on the cover to class.

My teacher was a gentleman who had come from another denomination, and we loved him and his family like our own. But that Sunday morning when he said that women could “only be song leaders” I knew we were from different places. His remarks were so shocking and so foreign. I was sure he must’ve come from a far off land. I knew he didn’t know our stories; he didn’t know who we were.

At thirteen I had no inclination of ever becoming a pastor, no interest church ministry or clergy life, but it was the eighties, and of course, I was a feminist. I was raised by a single mother who held down three jobs, was the Girl Scout director for the city, and taught Wednesday night church. She not only could—but loved to—camp in tents, could change her own tire, and was also always
dressed to the nines. She wrapped me in the stories of Scripture and clothed me in shirts that read, “Anything boys can do girls can do better” and it turns out I had taken it to heart.

Not at all bashful and less so as a newly-minted teen, I challenged my weary teacher. I regaled for him the story of how the church in which we worshipped was founded, told him of Sister Ada Cooper and her sisters who by the power of Christ led and sustained the church after its founding on the outskirts of Nashville in the 1930s. I told my teacher, my class, about how Sister Cooper had been my father’s pastor, my grandmother’s friend—how Sister Cooper’s daughter Ms. Elizabeth was sitting out on the third pew behind the piano and would be happy to fill him in.

At forty-something, I am still not bashful, and I still make it home often to that church where I was raised and where my aunts and cousins and nieces still worship. These days when I’m there I’m often in the pulpit, as now I am an ordained pastor, associate professor of biblical studies and know deep and well the material of 1 Timothy and the Deutero-Paulines. I have read Ignatius in the Greek and have studied epigraphy and archaeology and fragmentary evidence.

If my Sunday School teacher were still alive and I could find him on Facebook, I’d invite him to Starbucks, buy him an almond milk macchiato and apologize for being such a brat. I’d then engage him in biblical, historical, and theological conversation regarding the centrality of women leaders, pastors—preachers—in the spreading of the gospel and the growth of the early church. I’d tell him what I’d come to know about Mary and the Magdalene, about Phoebe, Junia, Lydia, and Prisca. I’d tell him about Epiphanius’ *Indices Apostolorum* and I’d show him some of my work. I’d ask him how his daughter was doing, and we’d talk about how much we miss Mrs. Ricketts and her pimento cheese.

I’d thank him for loving me through our differences of interpretation and for helping to launch me into my life’s work so that I had to reach deep to find out who I was, for helping me start from a place of knowing where I come from, for forcing me to put words to what I believed and for helping me tether myself to the stories of my foremothers so that when my own call to follow in their footsteps would come, I would know the way was open to me.

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