

# Why Not You?

A SERMON BY JENNIFER MORROW

Why not women? This is the question we are asking this weekend.<sup>1</sup> I would like to suggest a follow-up question: Why are we *still* asking *this* question?

Early in my college experience, when I was trying on churches like jeans or shoes, I attended a college-age class at an area church. There I was asked another series of questions, the same ones you hear in college-age Sunday school classes every fall: “What’s your name, where are you from, and what do you want to be?” I said, “Jenny Patterson, Jacksonville, Florida, youth minister.” The teacher, the associate minister at that church, said to me, “You want to be a youth minister, in this denomination?” And laughed. That was years ago, and if we are still asking this question, then it is still a laughing matter. Which, in my opinion, is no laughing matter.

Think of the litany of reasons you have been told that women should not be ministers: personal reasons, social reasons, family reasons, so-called biblical reasons, *ad nauseum*. It is tempting, when on the receiving end of this arsenal of reasons, to respond in a similarly systematic way: to line up all the difficult and affirming biblical texts with which we have wrestled, and then using our careful study and intellect, construct them into an impressive, water-tight answer to the question, “Why not women?” How satisfying it would be to answer back, tit for tat, why Joe Opponent-of-women-in-ministry is wrong. After all, we have scholarship, historical criticism, and contextual factors on our side.

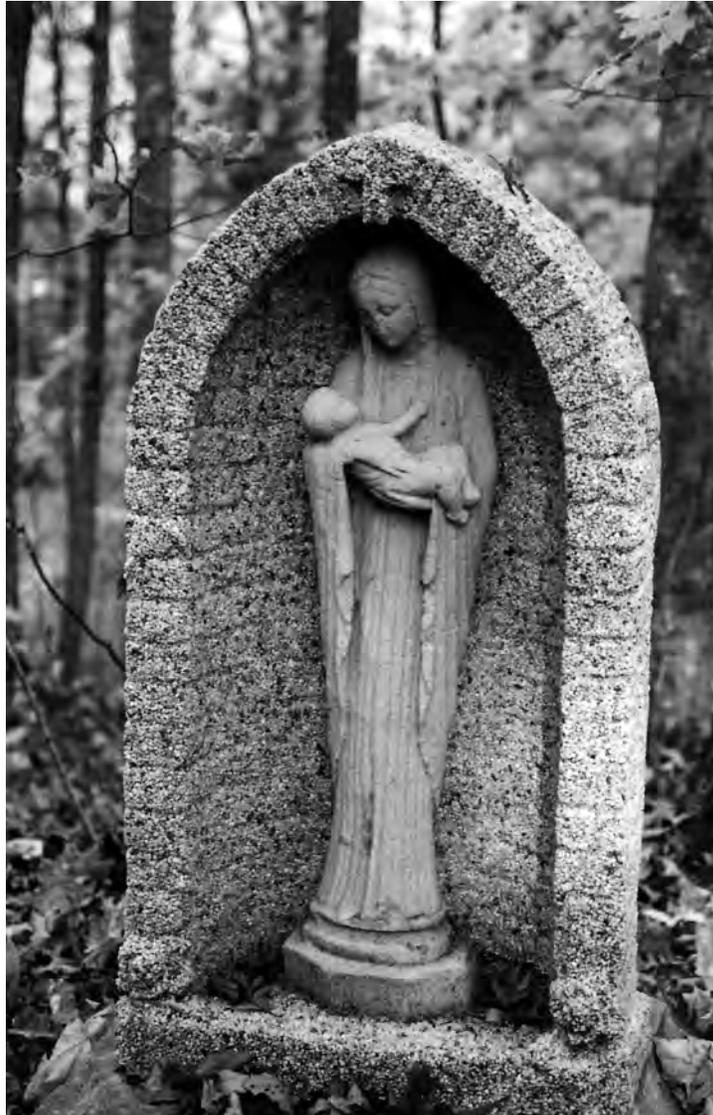
Invigorating as the inevitable argument might be, I am convinced this is not always the way to respond. And I am convinced of this for two reasons. One was impressed upon me in a conference elective I attended several years ago entitled, “Biblical Answers for Every Question.” The cynic in me relishes

the chance to debate such claims, so I went to the workshop to raise a little Cain. While there, *our very question* was asked, “Why not women?” Already working as a minister at this point, and aware that my profession was unknown to those around me, I settled in for the show. About ten minutes in, not long after a fellow participant cited something he called “creation law” as “God’s reason” women must not assume positions of authority, I spoke up, way up. And I pulled out the big guns,

reinterpreting passages my opponents had cited, using as many multisyllabic words as possible. The discussion became quite heated, and the poor guy leading the class seemed desperate to get things back under control. To that end and in that moment he said the single most helpful and honest thing I have ever heard from someone who is opposed to women in ministry. Exasperated and resigned, he finally said, “I guess I just don’t want a woman telling me what to do.”

This answer is the first reason I think systematizing may not be our most appropriate response. To argue our point, however artfully we do it, against a competing view of scripture or history may score a win on paper, and might possibly even change our opponent’s mind about that scripture or history, but scripture and history do not stand alone as means of theological reflection. My Methodist forebear, John Wesley, is helpful in this regard. “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian

faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.”<sup>2</sup> For my friend in the elective, he was relying not only on his understanding of scripture and history (tradition), but also leaning on his own *experiential* bias and baggage. And it will take more than an argument to change that. Luckily, we have more than an argument, but more on that later.



And speaking of arguments and correct biblical interpretations, I was especially fond of both in high school. I went through a time of particular religious fervor for a few years and took it upon myself to argue for my faith. I railed on at lunch about prayer at graduation, sex before marriage, and my favorite topic, creationism. I was on a mission to argue the hell out of anybody, literally. For someone so impassioned about getting at the truth of scripture, I certainly did not let it get at me. In fact, as I think it through, I cannot remember one biblical account of the gospel being proclaimed via argument. Rather, the good news of Jesus Christ finds its way into the hearts and minds and corners of the world in far more interesting and personal ways, and by “interesting and personal ways” I mean people.

So how do we answer the question, “Why not women?” The answer is as unique as you are. Because what will make your work important, what will be your answer, is you. Now, one mistake that can be made here is to assume that who you are, mostly, is a woman. You are indeed women, and that does matter; it matters so much to some that we have to answer their question. But what I think we really ought to call this retreat is “Why Not You?” because asking the question, “Why Not Women?” puts an unbalanced, albeit important, emphasis on only one aspect of who you are. But you are more.

Besides, “Why not you?” is really God’s question, ringing out like a refrain throughout the biblical narrative. This question came to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. It came as well to Rebekah. To Moses. To Deborah. To Isaiah.<sup>3</sup> And eventually to Mary of Nazareth. An angel named Gabriel unexpectedly addresses her: “Hail, Mary,” the angel speaks, “the Lord is with you.” Mary is perplexed at the very least. The angel continues, “You have found favor with God.” God’s call is gracious: When God calls us, God also gives us the grace to respond. And this is how grace comes to every last one of us. It comes despite us. It comes as an impossibility but for the power of God. Without God, Mary is just a frightened virgin, the angel is just a bad dream, and the baby? Just impossible. Without God, so is grace.

When God calls people to be co-laborers in the relentless work of loving the world, God does not let little things like age (Abraham), past mistakes (Moses), gender (Deborah), “unclean lips” (Isaiah) get in the way. And so it follows that, of course, God would choose a young woman—not unlike you—to bear Love incarnate. When God asks Mary, “Why not you?” the category of “impossible” gets stricken from the record: “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:31-32 NRSV). “But I’m a virgin,” the girl protests. “True, but

we’re talking about God here. Nothing is impossible.” Shattered expectations. She had gone to bed that night young, engaged, and a little tired. But now, there she was, seated at the edge of the same bed: young, engaged, wide awake, and pregnant. And what does Mary do? She proclaims. She takes her (cosmically) unique set of experiences, and as herself, in her voice, she proclaims the word of the Lord in a song, “His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:50–53 NRSV).

If you have ever listened to Handel’s *Messiah*—indeed another proclamation of the word of the Lord in a song—you might recall one of the shorter choruses in Part II (it happens to be among my favorites in the entire piece). With a resounding organ blast it begins, “The Lord gave the word: great was the company of the preachers!” It is a powerful musical moment, and a powerful call. As the voices soar, it is not hard to imagine how great indeed

is that company. The text of the song is, of course, a text from scripture, from Ps 68:11 to be precise. Where Handel penned, “preachers,” the original text is not so vocationally specific. In fact, the New American Standard Bible reads, “The Lord gives the command; The *women* who proclaim the good tidings are a great host.” Imagine: all those choirs, in all those cathedrals and concert halls, for all these centuries may just have been singing about *you!*

You, dear women, are a part of that “great host.” Maybe standing right next to Mary of Nazareth in the alto section. Called by God to proclaim the word of the Lord. To proclaim that word amidst your own unique set of experiences. God has been present to you in specific ways. God has seemed to be absent from you in others. Your work as a minister is to communicate that. Frederick Buechner has said of the minister (using masculine language as was common in 1977):

But let him take heart. He is called not to be an actor, a magician, in the pulpit. He is called to be himself. He is called to tell the truth as he has experienced it. He is called to be human ... and that is calling enough for any man.<sup>4</sup>

And ultimately, who you are, fundamentally and before all else, says Paul, is not male or female, slave or free, Jew or gentile, but you in Christ Jesus. And “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1 NRSV). So first, you are loved. Ridiculously so! That love, not your gender, is the one

**“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.’”**

(Luke 1:30 NRSV)

**“The Lord gives the command; The women who proclaim the good tidings are a great host.”**

(Psalm 68:11 NASB)

**“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”**

(Isaiah 6:8 NRSV)

thing that nothing can separate you from: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39 NRSV).

If you are going to be a minister, or even alive, the thing that you cannot miss, that you must get, that everyone must get, that you must make it your business that everyone gets, is that you are loved by God. God loved you into being. The prayer of confession that we say together each week at my home church contains this line, “You know us as we are, and yet you love us.” You are women. Yes. Be ministers. You should. You can. You must. But what God is really calling you to is to know you are loved. If you want to be loud about something, be loud about that: as loud as the sixteen-year-old me was about creationism, as loud as the guy in the seminar was about women, you be louder about being loved by God. And better yet, do it from behind a pulpit, in any church that will have you. Your work will matter. Because the truth of it all is that you matter. You matter enough to God to risk everything. And by risk everything I am not necessarily suggesting that you must, I am suggesting that God did. And a God who works in such boundless, measureless ways is not interested in binding you by your gender, measuring you by your stature. *Theotokos*, God-bearer, is what Eastern Christians call Mary. You are God-bearers, no less. It is a beautifully feminine image.

On retreat at a monastery, I once spent some time looking at a lovely statue of Mary in their retreatants’ garden (see image on page 28). What I remember most about it, likely because it is what struck me most about it at the time, is that Mary looked tired. Bearing is work. It hurts, and not just while you are in labor. I have a daughter whom it hurts to love. It is work, much harder work than those few hours in the hospital. Bearing a child does not end when the epidural wears off; it is a life’s work. Bearing

God to the world, it can be your life’s work. You are so well suited for it, for the God whom you bear loves you. So, “Why not you?”

Let your lives answer. The Christian mystic Teresa of Ávila penned these words hundreds of years ago. They are words I spoke at my ordination. Claim them as your own and speak them with your lives that they might echo for years to come: “Let us make our way together, Lord; wherever you go I must go, and through whatever you pass, there too I will pass.”<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. This sermon was first presented at a conference for female college students considering ministry. The conference was titled, “Why Not Women?” Provided to conference attendees was the book of like title: Loren Cunningham, David J. Hamilton, and Janice Rogers, *Why Not Women: A Biblical Study of Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (Seattle: YWAM, 2000). The sermon has been adapted for *Priscilla Papers* and could be adapted for various audiences.
2. “Our Theological Task,” in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012*, paragraph no. 105, section 4.
3. Gen 24:58, Exod 3–4, Judg 4, Isa 6, respectively.
4. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 40.
5. *The Complete Book of Christian Prayer* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 284.



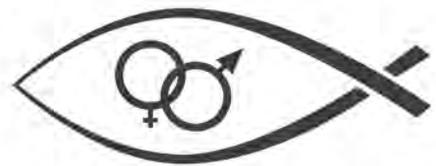
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