The Strength of Women

April 29, 2007 (The 5th Sunday of Easter)

Acts 9:36-43 Psalm 23 Revelation 7:9-17 John 10:22-30

All the widows stood beside Peter, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

Amongst all the sweep drama and long-winded sermons that make up the Acts of the Apostles, there is something heartbreaking about this sentence – the grieving widows, the friends of Dorcas, facing the first death in the Christian community. They are nearly speechless with sorrow, holding in their hands the work of their friend who has died.

Throughout the bible, women have stood guard at the most vital moments of our faith. Sara's laughter and Hagar's strength, Judith's cunning and Deborah's leadership, Miriam's prophetic vision, Mary's revolutionary courage. The women at Jesus' tomb, the first evangelists of the resurrection; women like Lydia who founded some of the first churches.

Today, though, women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, produce half of the world's food, and yet earn only 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property

But the great power of Christianity has been in finding strength were others only saw weakness.

It is the strength that Jesus declares on that chilly Hanukkah morning at Solomon's portico in the Temple. A crowd follows him as he walks through the courtyard. They are waiting for a militant Messiah, a king of sword and fire who will overthrow the Roman empire, purify the temple and drive out gentiles, pagans, Samaritans, unclean women and lepers…

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"I have already told you," Jesus explains. I have been feeding the hungry and healing lepers, I have been dining with Gentiles, and listening to women.

It is not the Messiah they expected. It is not the Messiah we always expect – just as flowers that turn towards light are heliotropic, we are often *dynotropic*, turning towards power.

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Jesus lived in a culture that divided people into clean and unclean. On the clean side were religiously pious, wealthy, married men. Outside stood women, children, lepers and foreigners. Jesus revealed his power, his very unity with God, through his solidarity with those who were most rejected.

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It is as true today as it was when Jesus stood in the portico of Solomon. Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, produce half of the world's food, and yet earn only 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property

The Episcopal Church had discovered that the work we do of disaster relief and community development works best when we tap into the great strength of women. Helping women help their families and one another has proven everywhere to be a good investment.

Last week I preached about nets – nets feature again today, a network of women, and a type of finely-woven net that is saving thousands of lives:

This week is Africa Malaria Day. And the most important line of defense against malaria is also the simplest, and it is squarely in the hands of women: inexpensive, long-lasting

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mosquito repellent nets, under which their families can sleep every night in safety.[1]

To date, Episcopal Relief and Development has trained over 2,000 community malaria agents, almost all of them women, members of the Mothers' Union, and has distributed more than 210,000 long-lasting insecticide-treated nets in Angola, Zambia, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

With the Church of South India, Episcopal Relief and Development is helping women to train as entrepreneurs, while also creating communities of women that support one another; we're doing similar work with the Diocese of Honduras, and alongside HIV-positive women in Burundi

Where the world saw weakness, we find great strength.

Our church's faith in the strength of women – from Mary to Dorcas, to the Mother's Union groups in Africa and the Caribbean to our presiding bishop, Katherine Jefferts Schori, and our president of the house of deputites, Bonnie Anderson -- our church's faith in the strength of women has made our church stronger; it has strengthened families and quite literally saved lives.

The strength of these women transforms and empowers all of us, men and women. a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, gathered around that Shepherd who leads us through abundance and scarcity, through green pastures as well as the darkest valley; the Shepherd who calls strength from us, where we thought there was only weakness, who calls life from us where we thought there was only death.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.

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[1] *Thanks to the Rev. Barbara Crafton's Gernaium Farm (www.geraniumfarm.org/) for this inspiring information.*

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