

February 7, 2010 (Women's Week and Holy Communion)

Psalm 31:1-5 11-16 21-24 Luke 5:12-16

"Women in Peril"

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This Sunday is the beginning of U.C.C. Women's Week. In my optimistic naiveté during my seminary years, I imagined that one day, in the near future, there would no longer be a need for a "women's week" any more than there is a need for a "men's week." In fact, in my time here at F.U.C.A., I have not always dealt with the subject of woman and religion very directly on Women's Week Sunday, figuring with a woman up here preaching, you would be getting your full share of a womanly perspective 52 weeks of the year. But this year, I am compelled to tackle the subject of gender inequality head on.

It has come into the light more and more in recent days that women around the world, especially poor women, continue to face unspeakable atrocities at the hand of their own people. This issue, gender inequality and the abuse of women in the developing world, is "not about equal pay for equal work, under-funded sports teams for girls, or statistical under-representation of women in leadership positions in government or business," struggles more typical in the Western world in the last few decades. No, this issue is about gender discrimination so deep and so widespread that it claims the lives of millions of women. Every year, another two million girls simply disappear. Today, I need to focus for a few minutes on this terrible subject—a subject which is causing tremendous suffering of young women in many developing nations in the 21st Century.

The facts and figures, stories, and current strategies for change which I will use this morning are drawn from a book entitled, *Half the Sky*, by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, who are by the way, the first married couple ever to win a Pulitzer prize for their work. The personal stories and statistical information about the widespread kidnapping and sex trafficking of young women in countries such as Cambodia, India, Pakistan, China and Thailand are deeply disturbing. Nevertheless, the subject must be addressed directly. There can be no beating around the bush. The atrocities suffered by women today include widespread and socially acceptable rape and brutal beating, kidnapping and forced prostitution, imprisonment in brothels, drugging, disfigurement,

and bride-burning. Even a useful form of medical technology like ultrasound, which makes it possible to identify problems with a developing infant prior to birth, has been turned into an instrument of gender discrimination. Because ultrasound allows for the identification of the gender of a fetus, it also allows for selective abortion. Far too often in places where gender discrimination is rampant, if a fetus is discovered to be female, it is aborted. When discussing the subject of this new technology, one Chinese peasant woman raved to the reporters, “We don’t have to have daughters anymore.”

This morning, I considered sharing with you a detailed story of a young woman from India named Meena who was imprisoned and forced into prostitution for over twelve years before she could find a way to escape from her captors. It seemed that focusing on one painful story of a real life girl rather than just offering up general information and statistics about a terrible problem, would stir the heart much more deeply. Someone with a name and a story--someone with a kind young face, sad eyes, a hopeful timid smile, and a shy laugh becomes real and human and her story once heard can haunt you for sometime. But after some consideration, I decided that a story like Meena’s is just too horrible to lay on a group of people who did not come prepared for such a thing on an ordinary Sunday in church. Listening to this kind of story has to be your choice. You have to be ready to expose yourself to the pain it might bring you.

Instead, I merely want to present the problem and make it clear that this is not the reporting of isolated instances but of widespread practices that take place everyday in many countries. These cruel actions speak to a disturbing capacity in human beings to dehumanize other human beings. For whether the topic is slavery in America in the 18th and 19th century, the sending of masses of Jewish people to concentration camps and gas chambers in the 20th Century, or the sex trafficking of millions of young girls in the 21st Century, those engaged in these practices or standing by on the sidelines and just letting them happen, must have somehow found a way to dehumanize other human beings in order for this kind of cruelty to continue.

Nicholas Kristof spoke somewhat critically about the journalism coverage of China, the very same coverage that won him the Pulitzer Prize. He put it like this, “When a prominent dissident was arrested in China, we would write a front-page article; when 100,000 girls were routinely kidnapped and trafficked into brothels, we didn’t even consider it news. Partly that is because we journalists tend to be good at covering events that happen on a **particular** day, but we slip at covering events that happen **every** day.” I, myself, have often wondered why certain things are considered news and others are not—why what a movie star diva wore at the Grammys is worthy of a story but the dousing of a woman with kerosene and setting her on fire because her dowry is too small and her husband wants to be able to marry again, is not newsworthy. Why isn’t cruelty to women news?

In a New York Times column this month Kristof discussed how not only cultures but religions themselves have perpetuated the oppression of women. He quoted former President Jimmy Carter in a December speech to the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Australia, who declared, “The belief that women are inferior human beings in the eyes of God gives excuses to the brutal husband who beats his wife, the soldier who rapes a woman, the employer who has a lower pay scale for women employees, or parents who decide to abort a female embryo.” Carter, though a life long Baptist, boldly declared that religion is one of the “basic causes of the violation of women’s rights.” Carter is part of a group of world and religious leaders which also includes the Dalai Lama, who call themselves “the Elders.” These devout leaders believe “that religious groups should stand up for a simple ethical principle; every person’s human rights should be sacred, and should not depend on something as earthly as their genitals.”

No matter how far a field Christian perspectives on the place of women in church and society might have strayed, Jesus words and actions were always in support of women and other marginalized people. Today’s story about the healing of the leper is an example of this. Lepers were shunned in their society. It was socially and religiously acceptable to ban lepers from the world of other human beings. In *Half the Sky*, story after story speaks of the banishment of women from their communities, women who are

left to die because they are seen as damaged, and, as such, obviously cursed by God. These helpless, voiceless women, now pariahs, have been referred to as modern day lepers by the nurses in the hospitals where the lucky ones have somehow escaped and are now receiving proper care. Jesus didn't see the lepers the way the culture he was brought up in, saw them. He saw the leper in this story as worthy of healing. He listened to the man's request, touched him, healed him and then invited him back into sanctified society saying, "Go, show yourself to the priest and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing for a testimony to them." He saw the diseased man's humanity and welcomed him back into the world of human beings. Now he too could be whole, safe, and accepted. One of you told me a simple story this past week about how when you were a young boy an uncle of yours would look at you with your head hanging down and say, "Quit kicking rocks. Lift your head up, remember that you are a child of God and be proud." This is what the story of Jesus' healing of the leper teaches us. When I heard this, I thought of the millions of young women who are destroyed in body and spirit everyday, kidnapped as mere children, sold into prostitution, beaten, and imprisoned. Even if they should, by some miracle, escape the torture and find a way back to their communities, how can they recover a sense of self-worth so that they can "quit kicking rocks and look up like the child of God that they were born to be?"

The problem is overwhelming, but there is hope. One very powerful tool that is changing the role of women in gender biased societies is an economic program called micro-financing. Micro-financing is only a few years old. It was developed by a Bangladeshi economist named Muhammad Yunus. It became so effective that he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in 2006. Micro-financing is allowing women to develop some financial self-sufficiency, more respect within their own culture, and thus some power over their lives. A very small loan made by a few caring people from all over the world is all that is necessary to change not only an individual life, but ultimately, whole societies. Over 98% of these micro-loans are paid back fully and in a timely manner. Most of you know that we have a group of people here at the church who get together periodically and make micro-loans to people in developing nations, mostly women.

Another profound vehicle for change is education. When women are given educations and a chance for economic self-sufficiency they prove over and over again that they are hard workers and capable people. The chief economist of the World Bank is reported to have said, "Investment in girls' education may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world." Many scholars of development and public health now believe that "Women are the key to ending hunger in Africa." Even the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the military now "hold discussions about girls' education in Pakistan and Afghanistan." Kristof reported that "some security experts are aware that the countries that nurture terrorists are disproportionately those where women are marginalized." In other words, if you want to fight terrorism, one significant way is to build up the women in the society that hosts terrorist organizations. Several members of our church have been involved in supporting a school in Nairobi, Kenya. The February church newsletter has an article of recent events at this school and mentions the name of a young student there that our church sponsors for \$20 per month. Her name is Cynthia Awino. We know that ours is a token effort in a world of such insurmountable need. But it is an action and that feels right. It reminds us that a tender young girl with so little to hope for the future, now knows that church folks across the world, for no reason other than that they heard her story, care and want to help.

The words of the Psalm read this morning express the calling out to God of one who has been shamed. Though these words are attributed to David, they speak with the voice of all people who have come under siege and have been broken in spirit and body in this life. We are assured in the poetic expression of the Psalm that God hears the cries for help of the wounded ones of the world and responds to those who wait. Religion may participate in the perpetuation of the oppression of women, but it also can be the motivation for changing it. The church can sanctify the status quo, no matter how cruel and unjust, in cultures around the world, or it can stand up against it. And make no mistake, the light of the media and public opinion in civilized nations can effect change in human rights.

I'd like to close with a story of hope. Meet Sakena Yacoobi, an Afghan Muslim woman who escaped violence in her country and traveled to the U.S. where she studied public health. She returned to Pakistan to work in the Afghan refugee camps and within a short time opened a school in Peshawar . The Taliban didn't allow education for girls so it all had to be underground. People supplied houses and Sakena's organization paid teachers and provided supplies. They had rules that students would arrive at intervals, that no men were allowed inside, and that people would serve as look outs. They soon had 3,800 students in eighty secret schools. When the Taliban fell, she moved her organization, the Afghan Institute of Learning back to Kabul and now provides education and other services for 350,000 women and children. The institute has 480 staff member, 80% of whom are women and many of the women students in Kabul University are graduates of her schools.

This is what Sakena says about her work today, "Education is the key issue for overcoming poverty, for overcoming war. If people are educated, then women will not be abused or tortured...If we took the foreign aid that goes to guns and weapons and just took one quarter of that and put it into education, that would completely transform this country...On behalf of the women and children of Afghanistan, I beg you! If we are to overcome terrorism and violence, we need education. That is the only way we can win."

Thanks for your patience in listening to this subject. I have included a list of *Four Steps You Can Take in the Next Ten Minutes* in the insert of your bulletin. Take a look, take it home. History has shown that individuals who care can together become broad movements for change. Over two thousand years ago, twelve disciples grew into a worldwide religion. That's why we are all here today. Who knows, maybe my one time optimism wasn't entirely naive? Maybe sometime in the years ahead, we will not need a U.C.C. Women's Week.