

Eleven

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

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Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

From Paul, to the church at Ephesus:

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: **4** there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ...**11** Christ himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers **12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. **14** We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming; **15** but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, **16** from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

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Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...

A momentous event occurred fifty years ago this week. You will have to forgive me for being unable to offer an eye witness account - this extraordinary thing happened the day before I was born. But, I don't think most folks over 50 remember this event, either. If you were paying attention to the news this week 50 years ago, my guess is you've just flashed back to what was going on in Washington, D.C. However, I'm talking about an event in Philadelphia, a church moment. Most of us are UCC, and this event took place in a different Christian tradition. So this is, if not a hidden history, at least not one that sits at the top of our minds. Anyone here know the great occasion to which I refer?

Before I tell you about this event, let me go back to our text this morning:

Christ himself granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...

On July 29, 1974, eleven women were ordained as Episcopal priests.¹ They were the first women ordained in that tradition. The Philadelphia Eleven, as they are known, were part of a movement within the Episcopal Church in the US, a movement begun 50 years prior, a movement advocating for women's ordination. In 1970, women were allowed to serve as delegates to the national body - the General Convention - and at that meeting a vote on women's ordination was called. The motion did not pass. Organizers got to work, strategizing before the next General Convention of 1973. In 1973 a motion to allow the ordination of women failed by a greater margin than in 1970.

Well.

Advocates for the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church were done being patient, and three bishops agreed in 1974 to ordain eleven women,

¹ Historical notes from The Philadelphia Eleven documentary, 2024.

foregoing wider church authorization. A local congregation, the Church of the Advocate - pastored by an African American civil rights leader - agreed to host. The Philadelphia Eleven were all highly qualified, well educated, and already serving as deacons. One of them was Carter Heyward. I was deeply blessed to have Rev. Dr. Heyward as my professor of Christology in seminary, and I continue to admire her ongoing theological work including her most recent book on addressing white supremacy from a Christian perspective.

There is an amazing documentary about this moment in the Episcopal Church called, not surprisingly, *The Philadelphia Eleven*. It's wonderful to watch archival footage of the worship service that took place that day, the words of support, the words of the newly ordained themselves. But the documentary is distressing, too: caught on camera were truly terrible things said about the eleven, about what women were allowed to do, about whether women could lead, about how women should or should not serve the Body of Christ. There was a church trial at which the ordinands themselves were not allowed to speak; colleagues who invited them to celebrate communion in their parishes were also put on trial. They were vilified by family, friends, colleagues and in the press; their lives were threatened. "It was as if we'd pricked an abscess and the poison ran out" one of the eleven commented. Some of the priests and bishops who refused to recognize their ordination did so "in the name of collegiality and in loyalty to the institution" of the Episcopal Church. If there is one thing I know, speaking the truth in love means prioritizing justice and equality over any institution. One of their male colleagues who did make room at the Table and was put on church trial asked his colleagues, "you marched with Dr. King but won't allow women to be equal?"²

Now these pioneering women kept on. With joy, they celebrated the Eucharist - the very first time, at the Riverside Church (UCC and Baptist) because they could not do so in an Episcopal church. Four more women were ordained. The matter came back to the next General Convention of 1976 at which, women's ordination in the Episcopal Church was finally

² Rev. Peter Beebe

authorized. The next step - Carter Heyward names in this documentary that all eleven of the first group were privileged white women and that was a failing of an otherwise prophetic event - the next step was the ordination of women of color which came by 1977. Following that came the first woman bishop in the Episcopal Church. Barbara Harris, an African American priest, was elected Bishop in Massachusetts in 1988.

Now, I share this history because it is in the living memory of the US, and of our ecumenical Christian community. When it was revolutionary, radical, pushy, bold for women to be ordained. Yes, the UCC can claim the first woman ordained, 1853, good for us - although she had a hard time finding a church that would call her. I am not here to critique the Episcopalians, and I'll note they were far from the last to ordain women. In fact, in 2024, the largest Protestant denomination in the US, the Southern Baptists, still denies women the right to lead churches. Beyond the Protestant churches we know other traditions with the same restriction. And beyond the church, in the civic context, we have only to turn on cable news to hear appalling comments about both Nikki Haley and Kamala Harris based on their gender and race. If you compare those current cable news comments with statements made on camera about the Philadelphia Eleven - well, the rhetoric is remarkably similar, and history will look kindly on neither.

So I went down memory lane this week, thinking about leading women and women pastors. At age 50, I am probably among the last who will ever be able to count it *remarkable* that almost all of my pastors and all but two of my ministry mentors have been women. My formative childhood pastor is Diane Blum, in college Jane and David McMahill were copastors, in young adulthood my pastor was Heather Kirk Davidoff, in seminary I looked to Ellen Aitken and Claudia Highbaugh and Dudley Rose and Carter Heyward and Margaret Bullitt-Jonas. You get my point.

Here at Pilgrim you have had only women pastors since 1992. Since 1992. I mean, go you. For 32 years our children have had women pastors as examples and mentors and spiritual leaders. A colleague of mine, a woman clergyperson on a team of women clergy, recounted to me that day that her child wondered aloud: can boys be clergy? Had I been at that

table, I might have quoted the same passages that Luther Lee referenced in his sermon at Antoinette Brown Blackwell's 1853 ordination:

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,... (Acts 2)

and

There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

Now, this is a summer sermon, and a Communion Sunday, too which means I'd better wrap this up. I've already gone on too long. But I do want to connect this with our text from Ephesians this morning, which is about ministry. About the ministry we have *all* been called to, and also about the specific ministry of pastors and clergy. I come back to Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward to conclude today:

"I have a particular understanding of the priesthood that has only grown deeper over the years. God calls certain of us to help others see reality through the eyes of God, and this is always about justice and always about compassion and always about kindness and mercy."³

Pilgrims, may we each know the grace given to us according to the measure of Christ's gift, and may we always be brave enough to speak the truth in love. Amen.

³ As quoted in the documentary *The Philadelphia Eleven*, released in 2024. All quotes in this sermon come from my own transcribing of that documentary.