Women and Girls on the Threshold of the New Millennium

The word “threshold,” so prominent in the Jubilee Year, challenges us with the image of a journey to be made. It suggests the need to go through a kind of passageway in order to come into a new, unknown place. The image of journey is very deep in the Judaeo-Christian tradition with its story of the journey of the Chosen People from Egypt to the Promised Land. In the midst of the jubilee and millennium journey themes in our culture, there is some value in drawing upon their richness in relationship to ministry to women and girls.

In his book *The Prophetic Imagination* biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann reflects on what gave the Chosen People the courage to make the Exodus journey. He suggests three sources of their courage: one related to the past; one to the present; and one to the future. *The past*: The Chosen People remembered God’s goodness to them in their past before their enslavement in Egypt. This memory gave them some of the courage to make the journey. But the memory by itself was not enough. *The present*: They were very conscious of their suffering under the Egyptians. They had no power over their lives; they did not like their situation. This dissatisfaction gave more than a little of the impetus to make the journey. However, even this was not enough. *The future*: They had to be able to imagine a future that was different from their suffering in Egypt; they had to be able to imagine the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. It was this imagination for the future which, when *added* to their memory of the past and their dissatisfaction with the present that finally gave them the courage to make the difficult journey. This powerful story of exodus and liberation can help women and men today to understand the three perspectives necessary to enable women to cross the threshold into the new millennium in a way that can change the world. Each perspective also provides a clear challenge to those who minister with and to women today.

**THE PAST**

The past exists in our memories, leading to the first task of a liberating journey—to remember the past. However, such remembering poses a special challenge for women because so much of the history of women has been either buried or erased from the history of the world. For ex-
ample, Lithuanian archaeologist Maria Gimbutas discovered evidence of a culture of Old Europe (7000 B.C.E. to 4000 B.C.E.) characterized by a strong sense of the feminine divine. Her findings indicated that, in this culture, the burial mounds did not reveal any weapons or other evidence of physical violence. She suggested that there was a connection between a notion of the divine as nurturing mother and the ability to create a nurturing culture. How many women (or men) have ever heard of this idea or of how long it has been in the human consciousness?

More recently, the history that most of us learned in school has been the story of the political, military, economic and spiritual achievements of men. In the United States the National Women’s History Project was initiated in 1980 by a group of women history teachers to correct this imbalance. In our ministry to and with women, how do we incorporate new research into the contributions that both ancient and modern women have made to the development of our Church and world? Before women can remember their history, they have first to uncover it, to discover the truth about themselves.

THE PRESENT

The present exists in our awareness. The second step on a liberating journey into the future is to tell the truth about the present. The Chosen People could not deny that they were suffering. Their children were being killed by the pharaoh; they were dying from the hard work of slaves; they could not worship God according to their traditions; they could not sing their sacred songs. They were treated by the Egyptians as if they were invisible; they existed only to serve the pleasure of those in power. Women also, if they are to journey into the future, must tell the truth about their lives before anything will change. Women have kept silent for too long about the ways in which they suffer because it has been taboo to talk about their sufferings. The Egyptians did not want to know about the sufferings of the Chosen People, and men in general do not want to know about the sufferings of women. If they know, they will have to change. Yet, the most important part of changing a sinful situation is to break the silence about it.

A recently published United Nations document summarized the latest international research about what the countries of the world have done to make life better for young women and girls around the world. While some progress has been made in the area of education, the greatest ongoing problem world-wide remains the sexual and physical abuse of young women and girls. In the developed world, it is possible to add “cultural abuse” as well. Psychologists such as Mary Pipher have documented the negative changes that take place in adolescent girls living in developed countries whose childhood self-esteem crashes into the cultural norms of being beautiful and thin—and silent.
One could ask: how much ministerial attention is given to adolescent girls, who have been identified as some of the most vulnerable members of our culture? Pipher maintains that they need the attention of adults the most at this time in their lives.

A vivid example of breaking the silence and telling difficult truth comes to mind. During World War II, Chinese and Korean women were used by Japanese soldiers as sexual slaves. Deeply violated and ashamed, these so-called “Comfort Women” kept silence for nearly fifty years about the atrocity they endured. It was only when they heard of the use of rape by Serbian soldiers against Bosnian women as a weapon of war that they spoke out in anger that such violence against women was happening again. They finally broke the silence and told the truth about their experience, testifying with courage and boldness, overcoming their shame in the face of seeing the crime repeated again. Breaking silence in the present about past suffering is the second step toward a less violent, more truly human world.

THE FUTURE

But just as remembering the past and telling the truth about the present were not quite enough for the Chosen People to make the journey to the Promised Land, so for women, also, there is a third step. The future exists in our imaginations, and in our willingness to work. When the Chosen People imagined the land flowing with milk and honey, it gave them the energy they needed to cross the desert toward it. People on the whole find it very difficult to change. We need our memories of the past and our realization of our present sufferings and hardships to push us into the future from behind. But we also need our images of a different future to pull us from in front. Between the push from behind and the pull from in front, we may take some steps toward change and into the future.

The third step for women to change the world is to imagine what the world would be like if it were friendly toward women and then to work to bring that kind of a world into being. It is axiomatic among futurists to say: “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” If you want to be sure that some idea you have will exist in the future, then you must work to bring that idea into reality. Otherwise, it may remain only an idea. If all the women who had ideas about how the world could be different actually put these ideas into practice, then the world would be changed. What we can imagine we can bring about.

One example of successful imagining is the Woman’s World Bank which lends money to women who want to start small businesses, especially in poorer countries. The United Nations reports that women do three-fourths of the world’s work, yet, in many places, almost all capital is controlled by men. In the face of this reality, some women
imagined a bank that would be just for women. Because they could imagine it, they could bring it about. They created the Women’s World Bank which, by giving women access to capital for investments and new businesses, begins to correct the grave imbalance which presently denies such access. The point could rightly be made that those who minister to women and girls must help them to imagine many similar break-throughs toward a more woman-friendly world.

In sum, as we stand on the threshold of the new millennium, ready to make our jubilee journey into the future, we must

• uncover, and then remember and celebrate, the great women of the past—the great women of the Church and of the world;
• help women and girls to break the silence and tell the truth about their present reality; and
• invite women and girls to imagine a future, a new millennium, that is different for women and girls—and then work with them to bring that new future about.

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

REFERENCES


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