

Sermon Starter and Response – Challenging Gender Roles

Exodus 15:19-21, Judges 4:1-24

Sermon Starter

Miriam and Deborah are named as prophets of Israel, spiritual leaders called to speak to the people on behalf of God. Women and men alike were to heed their words. Miriam led women in triumphant dance, and Deborah led men into a war for the liberation of her people.

Before Israel became a monarchy, the people were governed by judges instead of kings. In addition to her role as prophet, Deborah was the judge of Israel, making her Israel's recognized leader. She is one of the few who is depicted as a wholly just and good leader. In ancient Israel, a just judge was one who honored God, administered justice among the people, cared for the marginalized and oppressed, protected Israel from harm, and did not abuse the power of leadership for personal gain. While other leaders in the book of Judges (and elsewhere in the biblical record of Israel's history) fail to meet the expectations of this role, Deborah preforms them all. In the book of Judges, she is lifted up as a model example of a righteous and faithful leader.

In some areas of church and society today, women are welcomed into positions of leadership. In others, certain leadership roles are reserved for men only. But a community must do more than take stock of the gender identities of those in leadership in order to determine whether it is participating in the systemic oppression of women or making headway toward undoing patriarchy and facilitating community-wide justice and healing. (For explanations of patriarchy and systemic oppression, see the introduction to *Do You See This Woman?*) The subliminal dynamics that shape relationships between members and guide a community's system of values and beliefs play a hidden but powerful role in revealing a community's level of commitment to creating places of faith that are just, safe, and healthy for both women and men.

Society is full of patriarchal messages that teach us to stereotype gender roles. Women are told they must be kind, warm, accommodating, sexy helpers. Men are told they must be strong, decisive, brave, independent providers. If a man exhibits qualities that are traditionally ascribed to women, he is called weak. If a woman exhibits qualities that are reserved for men, she is called unfeminine. While all patriarchal stereotyping is built on the implicit claim that women are inferior to men, the pressure for men and women to fit into stereotyped gender roles is harmful and restricting to all.

The relationship between Deborah and Israel's military commander, Barak, shows what is possible when we commit ourselves to God's vision of all things reconciled and let go of the pressure to fit socially prescribed standards for male and female identity.

Traditional gender role stereotyping prescribes that military responsibility should fall on the shoulders of men. Historically, and even sometimes today, it was considered inappropriate for women to participate in the military at all, much less serve in its leadership. But in Judges 4 it is Deborah's responsibility to protect Israel from its oppressors. She is the one who makes the decision to send Israel's soldiers into battle and gives orders to Israel's military commander, Barak.

Being under the authority of a woman might have been challenging for Barak if he was raised in a culture that taught that men were supposed to be in control, especially of the military. Responding to societal pressure to demonstrate his masculinity, it is conceivable that he might have resisted Deborah's orders and attempted to subvert her authority. But Barak doesn't show any sign of discomfort with her leadership. He doesn't seem to feel that being under the authority of a woman poses any threat to his identity as a man of God. To the contrary, he responds by saying that he will accept Deborah's instruction as long as she accompanies him into battle.

His request vulnerably reveals his belief that his chances of winning are better if he has Deborah's guidance during battle. He is so convinced of the value of her leadership that he is willing to give up the honor he might have received for Israel's victory had he led the soldiers into battle on his own. Since Barak chose not to lead alone, Deborah lets him know that Israel's victory will be won by a woman. Again, Barak shows no sign of offense. There is no reason to believe that Deborah's prophecy is intended or received as an insult. Rather, it is welcome assurance that Israel will, indeed, be victorious. The liberation of the people of Israel from their oppressors is what is important. The gender identities of those responsible for achieving liberation are not.

The point of examining the relationship between Deborah and Barak is not to conclude that women must be leaders and that men must follow. Rather, it is a relationship that demonstrates that among God's people gender is not a determining factor in whether one will be called to lead or follow. Both roles can be filled by women or men. Both roles have value, because both are necessary for the work of God to be carried out. In a world where society teaches women and men from a young age that they may only act in ways that fit within the boundaries of their stereotyped gender roles, it is important that communities of faith intentionally dismantle patriarchal messages so that we are not restricted in our ability to discern the direction of God's leading for each uniquely gifted member.

The story of Deborah and Barak cannot be completed without mentioning Jael. She is the one who fulfilled Deborah's prophecy that Israel's victory would be secured by a woman. Jael won liberation for Israel when she killed the leader of the Canaanite army by driving a tent stake through his head while he was sleeping. The violent nature of this act can tempt readers to gloss over Jael's part in the story without recognizing her heroism. In fact, readers may find themselves uncomfortable calling Miriam and Deborah model leaders due to their participation in violent acts. Especially for Christians whose faith results in a commitment to nonviolence, it can feel uncomfortable to hold up women who participate in violence as models of faith.

This is discomfort that is important to acknowledge and wrestle with. At the same time, the dilemma is one that applies to most all of Israel's leaders. In the Old Testament, many of those who are called people of great faith are involved in violent acts. Abraham was presumably willing to kill his son at God's command. Moses murdered an Egyptian and directed the Hebrew people into battle against foreign nations. David killed Goliath, went on to command Israel's military, took sexual advantage of Bathsheba, and had her husband killed. While the violence in the stories of Miriam, Deborah, and Jael may make a more striking impression on readers since patriarchal societal messages claim it is more natural for men to be violent than for women, there is no reason to question a female figure's relationship to violence with a vigor greater than that which we apply to male figures of the Bible.

Lastly, putting the stories of Miriam, Deborah, and Jael in conversation with one another provides an opportunity to see women as dynamic individuals rather than as a group of one mind.

Jael was not from the Hebrew lineage. She came from a Midianite clan called the Kenites. Her people were dark-skinned, seminomadic, and originated from Kush—a region which today covers parts of Ethiopia and Sudan. The Kenites joined the Hebrew people during the exodus from Egypt led by Moses, albeit not without experiencing opposition. When Moses announced his intention to marry a Midianite woman, Miriam disapproved based on the woman's ethnicity and tribal affiliation. Jael and her people were aligned with the Israelites, but she was not officially one of them. Leaders like Miriam contributed to her marginalization. And yet, it was Jael who fulfilled Deborah's prophecy and secured liberation for the Israelites.

Today, similarly complicated dynamics between women exist. Some women carry more systemic power than others. Women with more power sometimes use that power to oppress women who have less. In the United States, there is a history of white women attempting to separate concern for undoing patriarchy from concern for undoing racism, therefore contributing to the oppression of women of color. By learning to acknowledge the differences,

tensions, and conflicts that exist between respected women leaders of the Bible, like Miriam and Jael, we can learn to acknowledge the differences and tensions that exist between women today. Only when women are respected as leaders, allowed to be different from one another, and held accountable when they perpetuate injustice will we find ourselves in right relationship with one another.

Response

As a way to embody movement toward right relationships, invite those gathered to turn toward one another and pass the peace of Christ, using this modified greeting:

Person 1: For either of us to be well, we both must be well.

Person 2: Truly. The peace of Christ be with you.

Person 1: And also with you.

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