

I had just returned from our vacation to Destin
and our stop at McDonald's,
where my almost 10-year married life
would change forever with the D-word.
I had no idea that just around the corner
Actually, 20 years ago today, I would meet Susan.
And my life would change once again forever.
And I was sitting at Brentwood in my Senior Pastor's office,
sharing the words I didn't want to share with anyone,
let alone, Dr. Howard Olds.

He was, of course, pastoral and present with me,
but he then said words I didn't want to hear.
Jeremy, we are going to have to send out
a letter to the congregation about this.
Of course we do, we can't sweep it under the rug.
It will become public, and my closest 4,500 friends need to know.
Talk about feeling shame and being in a fishbowl.

Have you ever had a situation when you felt like
your whole life was on full display for all the world to see?
It used to be that public humiliation was reserved
for the wealthy or the infamous for crimes they committed.
You know, back in the day, they had a newspaper column
just to shame those who had been brought
into court or up on charges for something.

But in an age of social media, now even regular folks
can find themselves in the limelight.
Like the Kisscam moment that went viral.
And I remember when I was in that moment back then,
how much I wanted in any way possible
for things to go back to normal.

As the cross looms near, we find the disciples craving comfort.

They have watched Jesus be arrested,
on trial, and led to the outskirts of Jerusalem.
By this point, almost all of the disciples have scattered.
But really, who can blame them?
They have been exposed, and everyone
knows they are his followers,

as they entered Jerusalem together on Palm Sunday.
They just want it all to go away.
That is what we do when the news is bad,
when everything seems too risky,
and we just want to hide and heal.
We want our comfort and safety,
the routine of the rut of our ways,
and people who won't push on us or punish us.

Have you ever been in a situation
where you wondered if you should get involved?
Maybe like when you saw someone
broken down on the side of the road,
and they looked like they might need assistance.
And we start rationalizing why we shouldn't stop and help.
Looks like they have a cellphone.
The police will come and help.
Do I really even know if they are broken down?
Now, don't get me wrong, there are lots of legitimate excuses
for choosing not to get involved,
but sometimes it just comes down to fear and the unknown.

Or have you ever stood by and watched someone
be bullied because you were too afraid to act?
We have all seen this many times in movie plots,
especially those 80's ones involving teens like Can't Buy Me Love,
where finally someone bigger and stronger, or maybe just bolder,
comes to the aid of the one being mercilessly bullied.
And others have an interesting twist where a girl
who likes the boy or is a friend of the bullied boy
is the one to stop it, with unlikely courage.

Our scripture in Matthew tells us a story of unlikely courage
coming from an unlikely place at the cross.
Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him.

In the final moments of Jesus,
he was surrounded by courageous women at the cross.
While the men disciples fled in fear, these women stayed.
They bore Jesus' suffering intentionally,

having followed him all the way.

They are so important in the story of Jesus that ALL the Gospel writers mention them by name.

Usually, though, women go unnamed. Not this time.

Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

And although Luke softens the statement by saying all his acquaintances were there, Mark will have none of it and says there are no male disciples there at all, highlighting the women's courage even more.

This was even more striking because, in their society, women had little status, no real legal rights, and they were seen as insignificant.

And yet all the Gospels put them front and center as ones who remain faithful.

Yes, they were not perceived as a threat to Rome like men were, but even if they were, it is obvious that these women completely disregarded their own safety and security. Why? because they had been touched and transformed by Jesus.

Mary Magdalene is prominently listed in the accounts of the women at the cross and the tomb.

And you know what I find interesting? Each Gospel records a different list of names for women who are with Jesus in both places.

What if...what if there had been dozens of different women hanging around Jesus? Or they took shifts around the clock so he would never be alone? Women have always had that superpower of showing up with casseroles and chicken noodle soup and being caregivers.

And there is no stronger example of that at NFUMC or other churches I have served than the UMW, now known as the United Women of Faith.

They have a long history of caring for those in the church and community.

In 1869, right after the Civil War,

a group of eight women in Boston, courageously stepped out in faith to help women in India with health care and education. They formed the Methodist Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, and from there their work began.

They lived their faith out.

They still are doing that, not only here but throughout United Methodist churches everywhere.

In the month of March, when we celebrate the history of women, we all probably have stories of women stepping up to serve and going out in faith to ensure that everyone is cared for and has what they need.

But who were these united women of faith at the cross?

And why were they there? Mark mentions

Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome,

And Rachel reminded me that Mark's description of Salome contrasted with how women were often referred to in that male-dominated society.

Mark recognized her for who she was, not for who she might have been as a wife or mother.

He was saying that Salome was a direct disciple of Jesus who cared for him, maybe money-wise too, and with uncommon freedom to support Jesus and his traveling ministry while he was in Jerusalem.

For centuries, Christians have debated the presence and role of women in the church. From the Catholic church that is still wrestling with that question to the Southern Baptist church that, only in the mid-80s, in a theological/political takeover, removed the ability for women to be senior pastors or deacon leaders of their churches. To other denominations such as the Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and United Methodists.

The Methodist Church granted full clergy rights to women in 1956,

a milestone that allowed them to be ordained as elders or deacons, serve as pastors, and be elected as bishops.

Marjorie Matthews was elected as the first female Bishop in 1980, and Leontine Kelly became the first African American female Bishop in 1984. This year is actually the 70th anniversary. Today, approximately 25% of United Methodist clergy are women. In fact, Harriet Bryan, my best friend and clergy colleague, is the Senior Pastor of the largest church in Clarksville, Madison Street. She has also been the District Superintendent of the old Nashville District, led our General Conference delegation, and a part of electing and selecting our Bishops, including our current one.

I can't imagine what ministry would be like without women like her and Shelby, called by God to use their God-given gifts at every level of the church. And yet, even after all this time, there are still churches that will not accept an appointment of a female pastor or are not very supportive when they do.

When people during my time in ministry have talked to me about why women shouldn't be able to preach, I remind them that Jesus opened all kinds of doors and possibilities for women to be in ministry. Beginning with the Samaritan woman at the well, where he empowered her to be his first evangelist. There are many stories of women in the Bible who showed unlikely courage in their faith in God, even if they went unnamed most of the time. But in every case, Jesus treated women with respect and dignity.

The women at the cross show us what faithful discipleship looks like.

They did not know what would happen next. To them, they just saw their beloved teacher being put to death, and they had no idea that resurrection would be just down the road. But even with their hearts broken, their faith was fully formed, and they refused to abandon Jesus. Why? Because Jesus never abandoned them, and you know what? He never abandons us.

The courage of these women challenges us today
And Rachel reminds us that in being a disciple.
That it is one thing to follow Jesus when it costs us little,
when faith is convenient and comfortable.
But when the weight of the cross becomes real,
when being a follower and not a fan of Jesus asks us
to carry our cross in uncomfortable ways,
will we be found to be a follower of Jesus or just a fan?

On our summer grand tour of 8 states,
one of them was the upper part of New York State.
And one stop was Seneca Falls.
Now, I learned that Seneca Falls has two big claims to fame.

The first is that it is the town portrayed as Bedford Falls in It's a Wonderful Life.

The director Frank Capra was staying there
when he wrote it, and the famous bridge
is in the middle of the town, with a tragic story
mirroring George saving Clarence.

You know what the other one is,
and more important?

Seneca Falls is where the Women's suffrage movement started

with women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton.
Lucretia Mott and Susan B Anthony, among others,
Who gathered on a hot day in July in 1848
at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel for their first conference.

These women, with unlikely courage,
gathered to begin the long struggle to secure women's rights.
It was amazing to stand on that corner in Seneca Falls
and wonder what all had taken place and
how much risk they had taken for what they believed was right.

And that makes me ask myself how much risk I am
willing to take for what I think is right?
I think most of you know I am not a risk taker by nature.
Would I have been just another one of the guys who ran away,
or **would I have been like the women or the one disciple only in John who remains?**

What about you? If I am honest, it probably depends on the day.
As we come closer to the cross on our journey to Holy Week,
are we just fans of Jesus or followers of Jesus?

Are we content to stand at a distance,

believing in all his teachings and enjoying
the comfort his words bring to us,
but running for comfort when the cross appears?
Or will we, like these women with unlikely courage,
stand with Jesus in the hard places,
to follow him even when it costs us?

The cross calls us to answer.

And it is only through the cross that the road runs to resurrection.

So how do you answer that crucial question:

Am I a follower of Jesus or just a fan?