



# NORTHMINSTER CHURCH

DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK  
HUMBLY WITH GOD. MICAH 6:8

## ***The Practice of the Better***

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Claire Helton

February 17, 2019

*<sup>1</sup>Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.<sup>2</sup>I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

*<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

*<sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

*Philippians 4:1-8*

In 2007, Baptist churches around the United States began observing the Martha Stearns Marshall Month of Preaching throughout February at the invitation of a national organization called Baptist Women in Ministry. In the twelve years that have followed, hundreds of churches have used this month as an opportunity to open their pulpit and hear from women who have been called by God into ministry, to celebrate the gifts and the call of God in the lives of women. In a church like Northminster it is not unusual to hear from a woman in the pulpit, but the burden of lifting up the call of all women is one that we still share. It is incumbent on us, particularly for churches like ours that find themselves to be somewhat of an anomaly in our area of the country, to make space for women who have felt that call on their lives but do not

have a regular place to use their voice. You might be wondering, then, why I'm taking up that space today, since I obviously do have a pretty regular preaching gig (when I'm not in the ER or at home with a stomach bug – it's good to be back, by the way!). The honest answer to that is that we just got here, and February came up so quickly that we just didn't have time to work it out. However, I didn't want to miss this opportunity to mark publicly my commitment to taking part in this annual occasion of solidarity and support for Baptist women in ministry.

The reading from the letter to the Philippians that we just heard has a special place in my heart. The last verse – “whatever is true, whatever is right, whatever is pure...think about such things” – was on a cassette tape I listened to as a kid called “Hide ‘Em In Your Heart,” a collection of Bible verses set to music by Steve Green, and I must have listened to it a thousand times growing up. I’ll spare you the catchy melody, though it *has* been stuck in my head for days. This teaching holds a great deal of wisdom. In the same way that there’s truth in the old saying, “you are what you eat,” so too is it true that if we fill our minds with that which is good and right and pure, we are perhaps more likely to find ourselves drawn toward goodness, righteousness, and purity. It’s not always the case, but we can recognize the wisdom there.

But there’s a way to misread this text that I find to be particularly dangerous, and it’s a misreading that’s as easy to slip into as one word: “only.” It goes like this: “Whatever is true, whatever is right, whatever is pure...think only about such things.” This is the kind of Christian logic that, in some circles, results in the desire to shut ourselves away from the secular world, to shun evil to the extent that we only shop at Christian retailers, only send our children to Christian schools, only listen to Christian music or watch Christian movies. There’s a lot to say here about what we’re missing out on when we seclude ourselves in this kind of “Christian” sub-culture, or about the danger that when we succumb to this kind of logic we can be lured into a false sense of security about those Christian institutions. I would imagine that perhaps these are the kinds of conversations taking place in many Southern Baptist churches this week in light of the reporting from the Houston Chronicle about sexual abuse within the walls of so many SBC churches.

Perhaps more dangerous still, though, is that this logic leaves little room for those whose experience has been filled with much that is not true, or right or pure – whether by their

own fault, or the fault of others. The logic of the Christian bubble is one that often unintentionally leaves hurting people out to dry, because it fails to address their pain. But if we are following in the footsteps of Christ, we will spend at least as much time dealing with whatever is difficult, whatever is hard to stomach, whatever is uncomfortable, whatever is being covered up, whatever is hypocritical, whatever is reprehensible; if there is any systematic oppression or anything worthy of unapologetic condemnation – we've got to think about such things. We have to allow ourselves space to consider together that which we might rather brush aside if we are ever going to be able to move forward as a community of faith, and that's why I want to spend some time with that article from the Houston Chronicle this morning.

Perhaps this morning is the first you've heard about this story; in that case I'd like to offer a bit of background. As Zach shared earlier, in a series of articles released earlier this week, the Houston Chronicle outlined their investigation into the Southern Baptist Convention's handling of sexual abuse within SBC churches over the last two decades. Through searching news archives, websites and databases nationwide their reporters compiled a list of hundreds of cases of abuse, and that's just within the last two decades. They did their homework, examining federal and state court databases, prison records, and sex offender registries, as well as conducting interviews. The resulting report includes 380 credibly accused officials in Southern Baptist churches, including pastors, deacons, Sunday school teachers and volunteers – with over 700 victims, many women and many more children – and, as we acknowledged earlier, the most horrifying finding is that many of the accused were able to serve again in other Baptist churches because of the lack of accountability that haunts the Baptist principle of the autonomy of the local church.

If you have no connection to the Southern Baptist Convention, you may be glad of that in this particular moment. Our church is not affiliated with the SBC, and some of you may even be surprised to hear this much concern for Baptist affairs of any kind coming from the pulpit since we don't even use the word "Baptist" in our name, but Northminster is, in its bones, a Baptist institution. Being Baptist means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, and it's because of some of those differences that the Alliance of Baptists branched out to create their own network thirty years ago. However, one of the principles on which all Baptists agree,

at least in theory, is this notion of the autonomy of the local church. In practice this refers to our ability as the local church to make decisions and to partner with whomever we choose, without interference from any larger governing body. So, although the Alliance of Baptists is much smaller than the SBC – so it's easy to think we could never find ourselves in this kind of situation – our shared foundation of local church autonomy means that we do face the same challenge: we lack the built-in accountability that goes along with the oversight of a denominational board or a system of bishops. And so, this is very much our story, too.

You know, in the version of that passage from Philippians that we read, it uses a word that wasn't in the children's song I learned growing up, it uses the word "just." Alongside whatever is true or right or pure, it exhorts us to fill our minds with whatever is just. Justice, as I understand it, is about the work of setting things right. And so, I don't just want to dwell on what's wrong in this situation, I want to focus us on what we can do to contribute to the work of setting things right. And you might be saying to yourself, "This is terrible and important, but it's not my fight." To which I want to counter that we all have ownership in this struggle, because this epidemic is a problem of culture, a toxic culture of patriarchy, and culture is something that is shaped in small doses, in everyday interactions and decisions – not by governments but by individuals and local communities. So, let us do our part as this small community called Northminster Church to respond. And where do we begin?

A core principle at Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation is this: The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.

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Let me tell you what I think the "bad" is here so that we can move toward the practice of the better. Many of the crimes in this story were committed against minors and that is a sermon unto itself. Because of our emphasis today on the Martha Stearns Marshall month of preaching I want to focus in on how this plays out with women specifically. A society does not come to the point of a crisis like this without a fundamentally misogynistic view of women, a view grounded in a patriarchal belief system that values and listens to men (mostly white men) over and above women and children consistently, persistently; a view that says women's lives, women's bodies, are not as important as the lives or bodies of the men who assault them. This

value system, conscious or – much more often – unconscious, is the only explanation for the repeated instances of churches choosing to turn a blind eye or offer a second chance (or more) to the men who committed these crimes in their congregations, many times within the walls of the church. And while we might claim that these patriarchal beliefs are unconscious in individuals, when it comes to institutions that have written down and voted to approve their beliefs, there is no room to shrug off the blame. The “bad” here is bad theology. It is harmful theology and it is our responsibility to name it as such.

The belief that God is male is harmful theology. The belief that there is a divinely instituted hierarchy governing every sector of society from the church to the home to the public sphere, a hierarchy in which the man sits, enthroned, at the top is harmful theology: it is male supremacy. The belief that women bear the image of God even one iota less than their male counterparts is harmful theology. And let’s be clear: I’m not saying it’s harmful just because it’s scripturally unfounded – we’re talking about theology that rapes people. This theology is harmful because people, real people, get hurt when this is the theology that informs our culture. And it’s everywhere. Just think how often you’ve heard someone describe “talking to the Man upstairs.” This is the theology that results in churches that will not hire a woman as a pastor or allow women to serve in leadership. And when so much of our culture is conditioned to see women as even just “slightly less than,” that is how we get to a point where stories like this are even possible.

There’s the bad.

So, let’s practice the better.

Let’s start by naming the image of God in women – particularly when we find places to do that in scripture. When I chose the text for this sermon I almost limited it to that last verse, since that was really what I wanted to draw on. But I made the decision to include verses one through seven so that we would have the opportunity to hear about two women who served as leaders in the early church. It’s easy to miss since Paul is writing with a reproving tone, urging Euodia and Syntyche to see past whatever differences they were having, but notice that he’s writing about two women – they may not even sound like names to us but they are, Euodia and

Syntyche, and they're the names of women – who he then identifies as co-workers alongside himself and Clement, a man.

And even if it's a challenge to find examples of women leading in scripture, and I'm the first to admit that it is, there is no shortage of examples of women leading in the church throughout the ages. Even and especially within our Baptist heritage, there are countless stories of women who have served in leadership roles in the service of the gospel – whether or not they were given the credit or the title they deserved. In telling these stories, in naming and celebrating these stories, we are expanding our imaginations for what is possible when the image of God is affirmed in all people. And the more clearly we can see the image of God in a woman's face, the less likely we are to abuse her, or to dismiss her claims of abuse, or to allow her story to go unheeded by putting her abuser back into a position of authority within the church. If you grew up Baptist, you've already heard about Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon. I want to spend the rest of our time this morning telling you the stories of a few of their sisters, women who preached and ministered in the Baptist tradition.

Martha Stearns was born in the year 1726 in the British colony of Connecticut. She married Daniel Marshall, who was a preacher, though not a very good one; good preaching ran in the Stearns family, though. Martha's oldest brother was known for his musical and strong voice, and his ability to "make soft impressions on the heart and fetch tears from the eyes." The three of them found themselves planting churches in the Separate Baptist tradition in the southern colonies, first in North Carolina and then in Georgia; Martha often preached right alongside her brother. In fact, in 1810 when she was nearing 90 years old, a Baptist historian had this to say about the Marshalls: "Mr. Marshall had a rare felicity of finding in this lady a Priscilla, a helper in the gospel. In fact, it should not be concealed that his extraordinary success in the ministry is ascribable in no small degree to Mrs. Marshall's unwearied, and zealous cooperation. ...Mrs. Marshall, being a lady of good sense, singular piety, and surprising elocution, has, in countless instances melted a whole concourse into tears by her prayers and exhortations." In Martha Stearns Marshall, we see the image of God.

Helen Barrett Montgomery was born in 1861, the daughter of a Baptist preacher. At her father's church in Rochester, New York, she began what would become a 150-member

women's Bible class (some might just call that "a church"), which she taught for forty-four years. She often preached in her father's place and after his death she served as the interim preacher until a new one could be called. Helen was licensed to preach by her church in the year 1892. She also served as the president of the Northern Baptist Convention, and in 1923 at the Baptist World Alliance gathering in Stockholm, as one of only two women speakers, she addressed the crowd on "New Opportunities for Baptist Women," preaching Jesus as the great emancipator of women, concluding that "in the mind of the founder of Christianity there is no area of religious privilege fenced off for the exclusive use of men." In Helen Barrett Montgomery, we see the image of God.

Ella Pearson Mitchell was born in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the parsonage of the church where her father served as pastor. She began her ministry as an eight-year-old girl, riding the handlebars of his bicycle, accompanying him on pastoral visits. As a young woman Ella often preached for her father when he was out; in 1941 she became one of the first African Americans to graduate from Union Theological Seminary in New York. She spent her life serving in ministry in churches, as a professor of theology, and as the first woman dean of Sisters Chapel at Spelman College in Atlanta. She also edited or co-edited six volumes of sermons by women. In Ella Pearson Mitchell, we see the image of God.

Edna Lee de Gutiérrez grew up in Mexico City the daughter of a Chinese father and Mexican mother, in an environment where all people were welcomed and respected. She committed her life to ministering to the poor and serving the Baptist community around the world. She married a pastor and through their ministry she worked with those who were in prison as well as victims of illiteracy, drug addiction, and prostitution. When her husband died, she stepped into the role of pastoring their church and served there for almost two years. She ran the gamut of Baptist leadership roles, serving with the Mexican National Baptist Youth Union, the Nicaraguan Baptist Convention, the Baptist Women's Union of Latin America, and the Baptist World Alliance. In Edna Lee de Gutiérrez, we see the image of God.

You can read more about the stories of each of these women on fliers provided by Baptist Women in Ministry; please, pick one up on the table in the narthex on your way out. And what more shall we say? How many women have played a role in your spiritual pilgrimage?

What have your mothers and spiritual mothers offered in the way of leadership in your life? Let's practice the better by telling one another these stories. Seriously – who are you going to lunch with? Take some time today to share and to listen to the stories of the women who have led the way for us. Let us give one another the gift of these stories as something to chew on, as food for the journey, so that we might all bear one another up as we continue on in the struggle toward the "better" that we see in the teachings and the way of Jesus. There is much that is painfully wrong in our world; there are harsh realities we cannot ignore. In the face of that pain, it is a balm to lift up the positive stories of women living into the fullness of all that God is calling them towards, in the ministry and beyond. As the body of Christ, ours is the work of redemption, of taking hold of that which is in need of setting right, and taking the first steps toward justice, dignity, and humanity for all. So, Northminster, how will we allow the stories of these women to shape us? Let us open ourselves to the possibility that it may require more of us than we are eager or even willing to give. But whatever we do, let us walk together toward the better that God imagines for our world.

Amen.

## Hebrew Scripture Reading

26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, to be like us. Let them be stewards of the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, the wild animals, and everything that crawls on the ground.” 27 Humankind was created as God’s reflection:

in the divine image God created them;

female and male, God made them.

## Prayer of Confession

There is a lot to pray about this week: the joys and difficulties of Valentine’s Day, the rhetoric and results of the State of Emergency, for those in our own town and our own congregation, and I trust that you will take those home and prayerfully hold each of them, but my communal prayer of confession this morning is more focused, and deserves a preface.

Over the past week, the Houston Chronicle has released a series of three articles revealing that over the past twenty years, there have been over 700 cases of sexual abuse, primarily against minors, perpetrated by leaders in Southern Baptist Churches. The articles reveal that somewhere around 220 church leaders were accused, though these numbers certainly only represent the fraction of victims that came forward. They go on to shine light on the utter failure on the part of churches and church leadership to address the abuses, to implement policy that would prevent further abuse, and how in at least 35 cases, abusers were allowed to continue working in church settings.

I’m still dealing with the grief and deep, deep anger I felt as I encountered these stories. Perhaps you feel the same, or perhaps you’re mourning the fact that these numbers don’t surprise you at all anymore.

The reason I bring this up now, in the context of worship and in the company of this community, is because for many of us the Southern Baptist Convention is one of our spiritual ancestors. Some of us came here from SBC churches or are one generation removed from the SBC, but even if you’re not, we’re talking about relatives in our faith tradition. I’m bringing this up now because I believe in owning up to the sins of our families, our forbearers, and our systems, of confessing that we share roots and in some ways are complicit in these crimes. I’m bringing this up now because I believe it is only through confession and by leaning heavily on God’s grace that we will be able to make today different from yesterday. I believe this is the way we continue to more fully become the beloved and inclusive people we are called to be, people who listen to, and make it our work to protect the vulnerable among us.

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But, before I lead us in this prayer, I want to be clear that lending our “thoughts and prayers” is only as good as what those thoughts and prayers prompt us to *do*, who they prompt us to *become*, to co-create a better world with God moving forward. After the service, I will have a sign-up sheet on the table in the narthex for any who want to gather and explore in more depth the concrete ways Northminster can be a safer place and advocate for safer places going forward.

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If you put your name and email address, I’ll email you copies of the Houston Chronicle articles this week along with some questions for reflection, and then next Wednesday, February 27<sup>th</sup> at 5:30pm we’ll gather to have a conversation and discern what should come next.

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Now, would you join me in prayer?

O God, have mercy. O God, we are bearers of your image, called to embody your Love in this world, and yet over and over the clouds of our own ego, our own privilege, our own self-interest and self-protection cover over this image and make us enemies of your cause.

We have made you a religion, an institution, have leveraged your Word for our own power, and in so doing we have silenced the voices of those you love.

We have created a hierarchy, a patriarchy that clears the way for heinous abuses to take place, protecting the oppressors in our own perverted version of your name.

We have created a narrow category for who matters, who is *actually* created in your image, and in so doing give license to objectify and use anyone outside of that category for our own gratification. O God, have mercy.

We confess that we stand in the same tradition, we were born into the same family that commits these crimes. We acknowledge that we are touched by the same system that perpetuates these sins. O God, have mercy.

Give us the courage and vulnerability to become aware of and root out these constructs and blind spots that clear the way for destructive action.

May your justice roll down like a waterfall and your righteousness like the mighty current of a river.

May we answer your call to die to ourselves, to crucify our flesh, to put to death our self-justifying and self-interested egos in the pattern of Christ, so that your Love may radiate out from us.

May we recognize that your image dwells fully in male *and female*, adult *and child*, and that in Christ there is no longer slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, white nor people of color, man nor woman. Open our fists to truly share power equally with all of your children, to live into *your* Kingdom, not ours.

May we live into the identity to which you've called us, children of the covenant to bless the world, sharers in your Divine, loving likeness, and repairers of creation.

We pray in the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.