

# Feminist Worldview

Numbers 12:1-16  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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One of the most important things I learned during my first year of seminary training back in 1989 was that **women view the world differently than men**. Sorry to say, but even then at 33 years old at the time, that was a fairly new concept for me. Isn't human experience, human experience? I learned, sometimes the hard way, **there are many factors that can lead individuals to experiencing life differently – and gender is perhaps one of the most prominent of those factors**. The result was a lesson in learning how to listen, really listen, to women's experiences and perspectives on everything, including things such a biblical interpretation and spirituality. Yes, **gender plays a role in how one connects with and experiences the presence of God**. That's one reason why so many women are drawn to Celtic spirituality, which has always valued the feminine characteristics attributed to the Divine.

I'd like to share with you this morning a few readings from female authors and scholars that made a strong impact on me, and perhaps will for you, in leading to a greater understanding of what can be called a feminist worldview – in the most positive sense of that term. Since I feel it would be more meaningful and appropriate to hear these words coming from a woman, Polly Kelly, our liturgist this month, has kindly agreed to help me out.

The first reading comes from the Introduction to ***The Women's Bible Commentary***. Editors Carol Newsom, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, and Sharon Ringe, Professor of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., write:

Although women have read the Bible for countless generations, we have not always been self-conscious about reading as women. There are many reasons why it is important that we do so.

**Women have distinctive questions to raise about the Bible and distinctive insights into its texts:** our experiences of self and family, our relationship to institutions, the nature of our work and daily life, and our spirituality have been and continue to be different in important respects from those of men.

But there is another reason, too. Because of its religious and cultural authority, the Bible has been one of the most important means by which woman's place in society has been defined. **Throughout the centuries, of course, the Bible has been invoked to justify women's subordination to men. But it has also played a role, sometimes in surprising ways, in empowering women.**

It has barely been over 100 years that women, once excluded from both religious offices in the church, and most higher educational opportunities, have been

able to enter the arena of biblical scholarship. That has changed drastically, however, over the past 50 years. It has been even more recently that female biblical scholars have been received by academia as writing about biblical interpretation and theology with authority and respect.

In her landmark 1964 book, female professor of biblical literature, Margaret Brackenbury Crook, published a study on the status of women in Judaism and Christianity entitled **Women and Religion**. In it, she makes reference to the Old Testament passage from Numbers 12 we heard this morning concerning Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. As you noticed, Miriam and Aaron both get on God's bad side for questioning Moses' authority. However, only Miriam is punished with leprosy, not Aaron. Although insisting that hers was not a "feminist" project, Crook pointedly observed:

A masculine monopoly in religion begins when Miriam raises her indignant question: 'Does the Lord speak only through Moses?' Since then, in all three of the great religious groups stemming from the land and books of Israel - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - men have formulated doctrine and established systems of worship offering only meager opportunity for expression of the religious genius of womankind.

Though I haven't read Crook's work, I was deeply affected by a book that was required reading in a spirituality class at seminary entitled, **Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction**, written in 1989 by Kathleen Fischer, a theology professor at Seattle University and a counselor at Mt. St. Vincent Nursing Center. In the Introduction she states:

Since feminism has a variety of meanings, I want to clarify my own use of it in designating this book as feminist perspectives on spiritual direction. I understand feminism to be a worldview, a lens through which we see the world and all its internal relationships. As such, feminism stands in contrast with sexism as a worldview.

Sexism gives us constricted perspectives on the natures of women and men. It has become so much a part of our consciousness that the way the church and society are presently structured seems to be the way things naturally are. With the support of religion, these structures even appear to be divinely ordained. The distortions of sexist perspective are not evident until we switch to a fresh viewpoint.

Feminism provides a new way of seeing reality. It is an alternative worldview which replaces the divisions intrinsic to sexism with models of wholeness for both women and men.

**Feminism is a vision of life emphasizing inclusion rather than exclusion, connectedness rather than separateness, and mutuality in relationships rather than dominance and submission.**

Feminism also entails the conviction that full individual development can take place only within a human community that is structured in justice. **And so feminism works for social change.**

Needless to say, College Hill Presbyterian Church would not have designated itself as a 'More Light Presbyterian' congregation back in 2001, advocating for the equality of LGBT persons, if it hadn't already understood and embraced feminist perspectives. For **feminism has helped lead the way for other inclusive movements**. And the church today is slowly beginning to reevaluate numerous theological perspectives and biblical interpretations after carefully listening to the voices of those long silenced.

Another helpful reading, also dealing with spirituality, is by United Methodist minister Judith Smith, written in 1993. (*The Weavings Reader: Living with God in the World*, John Mogabgab, ed., 1993). The article, entitled **This Ground Is Holy Ground**, reads somewhat like a diary. Smith echoes the reality that her spiritual journey just didn't seem to fit the male-dominated understanding of spirituality. She writes:

For many years, the metaphor of life as a spiritual journey has been powerful for me. It has helped me hear God's call to move out from the safe places and travel new roads. And I have looked for road maps in the words of others who have traveled along the road seeking God. Day by day I have attempted to find my way along the road that they were describing and to reach the same destination.

Most of the road maps I have used to guide me were drawn by celibate men who lived solitary, monastic lives. I thought that these voices of authority had all the answers. They were holy voices, and the place where they stood was holy ground. If only I could find my way along the same road they had traveled until I could stand on that same piece of holy ground. But in recent years their voices have been more difficult for me to understand. The road they describe and the ground on which they stand looks and feels strange and somewhat alien. **Their experience often does not fit mine...**

Because of the nature of our culture and tradition, most of those authorities have been male. Historically, men were educated and women were not, men could write books and women could not, men dominated the church and the world and God was viewed as male. And so, with a few notable exceptions, the authorities in the Christian tradition are male. I have always wanted my experience to match theirs, thinking that would give it validity and integrity. Thus I have discounted important aspects of my own experience of God. I have failed to pay attention to the wisdom and experience of many around me who may not carry the weight of the tradition but who speak with authenticity and authority...

Recently, I have begun to look around and listen to some of those closest to me, many of whom are women... It has been a conscious shift for me to value the stories told in kitchens and basements and bedrooms in the same way I value what is written in books. Stories about family are often seen as just anecdotes, but they carry wisdom and depth and direction for our lives...

**For the first time I am learning to pay attention to the deep calling of my own spirit and the Spirit within me.** I am learning to listen in new ways to my mothers and sisters and daughters in the faith. Attempting to mold my spiritual life to those traditional voices often has not led me to new depths. I took a major step when I recognized that perhaps that was not due to some shortcoming on my part but simply a reflection that my journey was leading me down different roads...

**It took courage for me to claim that the life of the Spirit in me was no less present because my road was different from that of some of the authorities I had look to for so long.** Learning to trust that our own inner authority is valid is often difficult for women... I have found deep joy in learning to value my own experience, to trust the Spirit of God in me, and to pay attention to the connections between myself and other women.

So to each one of you here this morning, **I encourage you to listen more and more to your own voice, and learn to value and trust it. And let us be even more intentional about listening carefully to the experiences of each other. When we practice open, active, non-judgmental listening we can broaden our own understanding and theological perspectives if we allow ourselves to see the Bible, spirituality, theology, and the world itself through the lenses of others.**

It's not an easy process to hear and accept things in a new way from a different perspective. It's even harder for us to allow ourselves to expand our often ironclad boundaries of understanding, even as progressives. So it is on this day, and every day, **we give thanks for the unique voices, questions, perspectives, experiences and worldviews of women.** And let me just add (as a man), if it looks like I'm not listening carefully enough from time to time, please remind me to pay attention.

So at this time, please rise now, in body or in spirit, and join me the *Litany In Celebration of Women* that you will find as a bulletin insert. [See next page.]

• A Litany in Celebration of Women •

Leader: Today we give thanks to God for all women,  
 Women who live in all places and throughout all time.  
 For women who are mothers of children.  
 For women who choose not to have children,  
 For women who are unable to have children,  
 For women who have lost a child.



**People: For women who create, who bring to birth art and ideas,  
 For women who have blazed trails for others to follow,  
 For women of music and dance, arts and the sciences,  
 For women in leadership positions,  
 For women who work in the market place,  
 For women who work in the home.**



Leader: For women who are ill or abandoned or who grieve,  
 For women who are surrounded by love and comfort,  
 For women in poverty or abuse,  
 For women who are respected and heard.  
 For women whose voices have gone unheard.



**People: For women who reach out to other people,  
 For women who nurture God's creation.  
 For women who love and are loved by others,  
           regardless of sexual orientation,  
 For women of faith,  
 For women of fortitude.**



**All: For all women we give thanks to God.**

**To the God who is without gender and of all genders.**