



Sermons **from Northwood United Church**

“These are the Women”
Ruth 1:15-18, Acts 16:9-15
Will Sparks October 21, 2012

Gracious one, like a mother hen you long to gather us together under your protective wing, that we know you are always with us, nurturing deep connection in love. May we know that deep connection and grace as through the words we now share. Amen

My question is, who are the women who have shaped you, and how did that happen. This year is the 50th anniversary of the UCW- the organization within the United Church that has brought together women of the church for 50 years. And so as a starting place for our reflection this morning I have asked 3 women to tell us about a woman or women who have shaped them, and tell us a little bit about that.

Barbara Warren

Pam Mason

Addy Alleyne

I am 49 years old, and I can't remember a time when I was not associated in some way with the United Church. Even when I left it as a teen ager, I still left it. It was a thing to leave and come back to. And the most significant figure in that association for me has been my mother. Oh we were all involved, my dad every bit as much as mom, but she was a stay at home mom, so she had more of the hands on role in my association with the church. And she was always part of a UCW unit. That's what they called them. Units, often named for significant women either in the bible or in the community. When I was younger UCW was just three letters for something I knew nothing about. It might as well have been the CIA or the IRA or the PLO. But as I grew up the UCW started to be associated with my own experience.

First significant experience was in the kitchen of Penticton United Church. I was in the Youth group and we were having pizza or something and I went into the church kitchen, much like I would have gone into the kitchen at home, to get some dishes or something, and there were women working in there. And so I simply asked to use some dishes or a tray or something. And I remember the response of the women I asked was... well, it was kind of like I asked for the keys to their car or for the use of their Mastercard. And, as a 13 or 14 year old, I was bewildered. The only thing more I remember about that interaction was that when I went home and told mom about it, she wanted to know who it was that had been there, and started to use words like dictator and police state. “Maybe the UCW was like those other three letter titles after all,” thought my adolescent brain.

But I discovered as I grew and learned, that there was far more to it than that. My mother's UCW Unit met regularly, checked in with each other, got her through raising 4 boys, supported her in more ways than I can name. That group probably saved her life more than once. It gave her a place of respect as a stay at home mom in a world that did not offer much respect for that. It gave her an outlet for her to be the radical that she was outside the male dominated world in which she lived. I love that my mom had her UCW unit.

And that is the thing. Western culture and the church within it has always been shaped by patriarchy- that social political arrangement imbedded in the culture, that gives power and authority to men. And women, God bless them, have found ways to carve out places of power and influence anyway.

Take Ruth and Naomi for example. They lived in an utterly patriarchal society. Without being associated by marriage and family with a male patriarch, they had nowhere to live. They were literally on the streets. So when all the men in their lives died, they were literally homeless. So Naomi decided to go back to famine ravaged Israel in the hopes that she might associate with the household of her father's family. And Ruth had a choice. She could trust in the generosity of her father's family, or she could hope that Naomi's family would take her. She shoes door number three, a previously uncreated option. She chose to create a new unit of association, one that had no place in her society- the unit of two women held together by simple love and loyalty. The story of Ruth is the story of this unit and how they make their way in the world.

Another example- Lydia and the church in Philippi. This is the earliest level of Christian history we have, right here. Paul goes to Philippi and wants to find people who are open to the gospel message he brings. So what does he do? He goes outside the city walls, outside the places of social organization, outside the influence of power. "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there." Sounds like the gathering of another three letter group. This is where conspiracies are born, outside the city gates, down by the river. This is where powerless people go to create units of association that gives them life in a system that just take life away. And here he meets Lydia, a dealer in purple, a wealthy woman, but a woman who needs a unit that gives her life. And there, the church in Philippi is born.

Friends, think about it for a moment. Who have been the most influential women in your world? Can you identify perhaps two in your life- the two biggest. And in our culture in which influence has been handed more readily to men than to women, today we celebrate the life-shaping influence of those women, an influence that often jumps the walls of patriarchy, often creates new units of association, is often found off the beaten path, and shapes us by the Godly bonds of loyalty and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.