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Women in Christian Leadership

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Women in Christian Leadership

A Sermon preached in Parker Chapel

at the dedication of the Moulton Garden and Stele

McMaster Divinity College, Wednesday Sept. 29, 1999

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I grew up in Toronto and often took the Bloor streetcar from my home on the Danforth. The streetcar looped near Yonge Street before continuing on its way and I looked forward to glimpsing the wonderful old building which housed Moulton College. I greatly regretted the closing of the College in 1954 and the loss of an elegant landmark which fell to subway construction.^[i] I associated Moulton College with my aunt Marjorie,^[ii] who graduated from Moulton in the 1920's. I was named for her—my first name which I preserve in my first initial “M.”—and she was my early hero, leading a life beyond my wildest dreams on the equator, photographed among exotic flowers, with a pet monkey and white-suited husband.

So my memories of Moulton bring back memories of my aunt: the dedication of the Moulton Garden and stele have prompted me to think of the contribution she and many other women have made to life in Canada and overseas. I am sure that you are similarly reminded of women important to you.

In the first Scripture passage read to us (Esther 4: 9-17), a woman is faced with an opportunity to make a difference. Esther, a beautiful young Jewish woman who became the favourite of Ahasuerus, king of Persia, was in a position to save her people from the evil Haman

and his plot to kill all Jews. It took a great deal of courage as well as extraordinary diplomacy for Esther to intervene. The story reveals her trepidation and her awareness of her own possible fate, should the king not receive her well. If he did not extend his golden sceptre to her, she could meet the fate of the previous queen, Vashti, who had dared to offend his majesty. Her relative Mordacai puts it to her in unforgettable terms: “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Like many women, Esther was influential because of the men she knew. Her negotiations with the king, the way she sets the stage for her request, and her patience, all model for us the behind-the-scenes activities of women through the ages: mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of famous men who have influenced those men almost invisibly as far as history records, but effectively. We honour Esther because she took advantage of her relationship with the king in order to do good.

In our second reading (Romans 16:1-16), the apostle Paul sends greetings to a list of women (and men). Paul is often, and I argue unjustly, criticized for the limitations he placed on women in the early Christian church. In this chapter he praises and commends ten women who worked by his side in the Lord. He expresses his gratitude for their gifts of encouragement, their personal support and their leadership in the church.

Foremost among them is Prisca, who with her husband Aquila “risked her neck” for Paul and served as leader of a house church. It has been observed that Paul here and elsewhere names Prisca (a fine old Roman name) ahead of her husband as if she were the first of the pair to come to his mind. [\[iii\]](#) We learn in Acts 18:2-3 that Prisca and Aquila had left Rome when the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews; they traded a settled home life for the life of wanderers, supporting themselves as they moved from one city to another by their profession of tent-making.

There are others—names with tantalising snippets of information added: Mary, Junia, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, Rufus' mother who was a second mother to Paul, and Nereus' sister. Many are “hard workers,” some “beloved,” some imprisoned with Paul, all receiving

his special greetings. Like Prisca, they worked at Paul's side, offered hospitality (a home away from home), and were prepared to go to prison for their faith in Christ.

But I want to call your particular attention to the woman named at the beginning of the chapter, Phoebe, whom Paul describes as “our sister, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, anda benefactor.” From the way Paul commends her to his correspondents, it may be conjectured that she carried Paul's letter to them. She was, therefore, willing and able to travel—an independent woman.

Until recently, translations did not recognize Phoebe as a deacon, but rather referred to her as a servant, a “deaconess,” or even “a dear Christian worker,” because translators could not believe that any woman held an office in the early church.^[iv] “Servant” is fair enough as a translation—though if used should be applied to both sexes. The Greek word *diakonos* comes from the word for “dust” (*konis*), and conjures up the image of a figure who moves so quickly that clouds of dust rise from the dusty Mediterranean roads and village streets. A *diakonos* moved quickly in the carrying out of duties and Phoebe can have been no exception.

The term *diakonos* has caught the attention of historians who study women in the early church, but most have overlooked the other term applied to Phoebe: *prostatis*, translated in the NRSV as “benefactor.”^[v] The word comes from the verb *proistemi*: “to stand in front.” Someone who stands in front of a group of people may be facing them, and therefore speaking “to” them – giving leadership and instruction – or may be facing away from them and speaking or acting “for” them. You can see where the translation “benefactor” comes from. A benefactor acts on behalf of the group and somehow, no one objects to women giving their money or property, as indeed Susan Moulton donated the family home after her husband's death. But *prostatis* goes further than donations, for it could also be translated “champion,” “leader,” or even, “ruler.” It is the same verb

which describes the activities of elders “who rule well” in 1 Timothy 5:17, elders who “labour in preaching and teaching.”

What worries translators is, of course, that Phoebe is *prostatis* not only of “many” but of Paul himself. Haunted by the verse about Paul not permitting a woman to teach, what could a poor translator do but retreat to a vaguer and more acceptable “benefactor”?[\[vi\]](#)

Whatever she did to deserve Paul's commendation as *prostatis*, Phoebe and the other women of Romans 16 demonstrate the contribution of women in their own right to the cause of Christ and his kingdom. These women were not afraid of hard work (Paul singles out particularly Mary, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, and Persis) nor did they shrink from danger (in personal risk like Prisca, in prison like Junia). Whether by showing Paul kindness like Rufus' mother, or championing him like Phoebe, they served the Lord and served others out of their love for him.

It is all the more remarkable to read this list when we realize that in Paul's time “respectable” women valued most of all a stable and protected life at home. They were content to leave to men the running of the state and public life. It must have cost these women dearly to abandon their comfortable private lives for life in the public eye and danger. With reputation in tatters, Christian women in the next generations ran similar risks and endured humiliation – threats of public nakedness, being sent to a brothel until they came to their senses, and often painful martyrdom. A slave named Blandina was tortured in the arena in Lyons (AD 177) and became a Christ-figure to her fellow martyrs.[\[vii\]](#) A Roman matron, Perpetua, joyfully accepted martyrdom even though she had a baby son who needed her and a prominent family

who loved her (AD 203).[\[viii\]](#) For these women, “reputation” and “safety” were no longer important compared to the demands of Christ on their lives.

When we turn from the early church to Canada of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we see women with the same willingness to forgo comfort and reputation. The stele in the Moulton garden gives examples of women in many fields: missionaries, teachers, parents, preachers, martyrs, medical professionals, translators and scholars.

A few women have become famous. In medicine, women have fought for improvements to women's health. I am grateful for the contribution of my sister Marion Powell in reproduction and family planning. In government, Nellie McClung led the way for other women to serve in parliament and legislature, and as leaders of political parties. Women have become university presidents (McMaster's Geraldine Kenny-Wallace among them) and famous authors (like Alice Munro) read beyond the borders of Canada. But the famous few should not lead us to undervalue the contributions of the rest – the many teachers, nurses, caregivers, and others who have meant so much to us. Like Paul, we each could make a list of women who have influenced us and each list would be different.

We know that school influences thinking and behaviour. One of the contributions of education is to show us our responsibility to those around us: to our society, and to our world. In the garden we honour Moulton College for its influence on women and the Moulton-McMaster families who encouraged young women to try their wings and gave them a good foundation on which to build.

I want to conclude by telling you the story of my Aunt Marjorie, because she represents not the famous but the women who worked hard, ran risks, and made the society in which they lived better for others.

More than 100 years ago, South America was closed to foreigners, especially Protestant foreign missionaries who wanted to preach the good news of Christ. An American couple, the Reeds, went to Ecuador as the first Protestant missionaries – about the same time as the Reekies went to Bolivia – and began a church in Guayaquil, on the coast. It wasn't easy.

A generation later, in 1928, my aunt left her comfortable home in Rosedale and went to Guayaquil as the bride of their son Alan. When I try to imagine what it was like for her to be faced with poverty and hostility, I am filled with admiration. Uncle Alan ran a business, so Aunt Marjorie looked after her elderly in-laws and then—like Prisca—worked in the business, all the time believing that God had sent her there for just such a time as this. She started a school for believers' children who were excluded from Roman Catholic schools. She had studied French at Moulton and McMaster and used her linguistic skills to become fluent in Spanish. Six months after she arrived, she was confident enough in the language to teach a Sunday School class. On her rare visits home, I loved to catch her counting her money in Spanish after a day of shopping. (Those were the days before credit cards, when one kept track of expenditures by counting one's money!)

She became concerned about urban poverty and took children to an island in the mouth of the Guayas River for summer camp to get them away from the heat of the city. Before we were faced with street kids and beggars in Canadian cities, she talked to me about inner-city poverty. Before it became trendy to talk about indigenous leadership, she taught me the importance of not having “ex-pats” running the show.

Where did she get her formative influences? From her home, of course, and her church, but also from her school where she must have learned self-confidence as well as an obligation to help those around her. She went to Ecuador equipped not only to learn Spanish quickly, but to adapt herself to a new society and to contribute to that society.

There is a passage in the Apocrypha which praises famous men and lists their many inventions and accomplishments: Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 44: 1-15. If we were to write a similar song in praise of women, what would we say? Their contributions have often been undervalued; they have often been nameless. As the expression has it, “anonymous was a woman.” Few have been what the world honours: military and political leaders, scientists, explorers, and inventors. And few are remembered except by family and friends. We are learning how to recover women's history and how to appreciate their contributions. And so I propose this to you:

Let us now praise little-known women

and the mothers who gave us birth.

Some were faithful wives and loving mothers

whose husbands and children praise God for them;

others did not marry or were childless

but were mothers in Israel to many.

They nursed the sick and elderly with patience

and taught so that even slow learners blossomed.

They worked hard at anything their hand found to do

and used their skills in the service of others.

Some left comfortable homes to preach the good news abroad;

they faced dangers and some died as witnesses to Christ.

We are the heirs of these women and our lives are enriched;

their names may be forgotten but their influence lives on.

May the stele and the garden remind us of our debt to women, to Susan Moulton, to women who have nurtured us, to women who have inspired us. And let us remember that the best we can do is only a reflection of Christ's love to us.

A prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for women who have cared for us and encouraged us, for women of courage and skill. Thank you for the institutions which have educated women and increased their effectiveness. Grant that as we remember their examples, we may follow them in serving you. For we love, because of him who first loved us, Jesus our Saviour, Amen.

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[i]. The Moulton Window once in the Moulton-McMaster home is displayed on the McMaster University Web page with the comment: "now a large building stands over, and a subway runs under, what was the site of Moulton College."

[ii]. N◆e Malcolm, my mother's half-sister.

[iii]. Perhaps, in light of her name, she was, like Paul, a Roman citizen. Roman citizenship had its privileges though it did

not grant immunity from persecution. Luke in Acts 18 mentions the couple three times, first as “Aquila with his wife Priscilla” v. 2 ; then twice as “Priscilla and Aquila” vv. 18-19, v.26. For Paul the earliest mention (1 Cor. 16:19) puts Aquila ahead of Prisca, but Prisca is named before Aquila, in the passage in question (Rom. 16:3) and 2 Tim. 4:19. Paul prefers the more formal Prisca to Luke's (diminutive) Priscilla.

[\[iv\]](#). Servant (KJV, NIV), deaconess (RSV, Phillips), “who holds office” (NEB), “a dear Christian woman (for “sister”) ..[who] has worked hard in the church” (The Living Bible). The feminine “deaconess” does not properly reflect the Greek which uses the same term *diakonos* for both male and female.

[\[v\]](#). Succourer (KJV); helper (RSV); “of great assistance” (Phillips); a good friend (NEB); a great help (NIV). The Living Bible paraphrases “she has helped many in their needs.”

[\[vi\]](#). The purple seller Lydia of Acts 16 was a benefactor as a wealthy business woman with her own income, house and slaves.

[\[vii\]](#). The story of Blandina was told in correspondence from the church at Lyons and can be read in Eusebius *History of the Church* 5.1.1-2.6-7. For an English translation, see Kirsopp Lake, *Eusebius Ecclesiastical History* v. 1 (London and Cambridge MA: Heinemann and Harvard University Press 1926/1965).

[\[viii\]](#). Perpetua's prison journal is preserved together with an eyewitness account of the martyrdom in *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity*. For an English translation, see H.

Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1972).