



Do You Hear What I Hear?

As a teacher and a preacher, and as a woman in ministry, I am frequently astonished at the plethora of forces—both internal and external, both individual and communal—that can silence “voice” in women who feel called to preach, to minister, and to lead.

Many women seek to move out of silence and into an expression of themselves. Yet they are taught to attend to the voices of others and rarely to their own. Some women cannot envision themselves in the pulpit because they have rarely, if ever, seen any woman in that place. Others doubt they have anything of value to say. Some wonder whether the church community will accept them, or will the community discount or exclude them and in this way silence them? Still others find that other women are the biggest obstacles to developing their voice—jealousy, fear, and *one-upwomanship* characterize what many sisters who aspire to ministry have experienced.

But the church needs every one of us. Each voice represents reality in a distinctive way; each voice is an important part of the harmonic chorale that is needed for understanding. When some voices are suppressed, the church’s vision is not only distorted and deficient but also deeply flawed.

The concept of voice is prevalent throughout the Bible. God spoke the universe into being. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites saw no form upon Mt. Sinai but experienced the divine presence through the sound of God’s voice. It was God’s voice that distinguished the Israelite’s God from lesser gods. John describes Jesus as the Word itself, and Christ consistently spoke words of heal-

ing and liberation. The importance of voice comes to play again in Acts, where Paul, Barnabas, Ananias, and Peter all heard God’s voice for instruction on the steps they were to take next. Hearing God’s voice is critical to finding our own.

Finding our voice is truly a biblical notion. As women created in God’s image, our voice is an expression of the freedom and responsibility to be the unique souls God created us to be. God gave us a voice for a reason.

Anna Julia Cooper, a 19th-century African-American theologian, described God’s presence in human beings as a “singing something.” What if we considered ourselves as created not in the “image of God” but rather in the “sound of God”? Cooper asked. What if our God-likeness is something to be expressed through our voice? Being created in the sound of God, we listen for that voice which speaks from without and yet is part of the very essence of who we are.

Mayra Lopez-Humphreys, a 30-something social work professor at Nyack College and an emerging leader involved in church planting in New York, recalls her struggle to find voice: “Growing up in a Pentecostal Holiness church was a unique challenge and birthing place for my emerging voice. Male and female roles were clearly delineated, from the division of men and women in seating to who made decisions publicly. I grew up feeling a mixture of shame and anger for how women accepted the ‘wind beneath my wings’ role—even when they had awesome leadership gifts and callings. Maturity and a couple of knocks on the head have allowed me to appreciate the challenges we, as past and present women, have endured while in the process of nurturing our voices.”

Searching for meaning in the church can be frustrating for women. It is not uncommon for women to be excluded from leadership roles in certain churches and denominations. It is therefore not uncommon for women to question both

their place in the Body of Christ and the value of their voice.

Preachers need to learn to evaluate their teaching and to anticipate any tendencies they might have to silence or oppress those who are looking for a redemptive and liberating word—one that will challenge us to lift *every* voice. Women need to be invited to speak, to have the opportunity to experiment with our voices and be heard.

I, too, must exercise my pastoral and prophetic voice, especially for those who have been marginalized and left voiceless by the wayside. One of my prophetic tasks is helping women come to terms with themselves and the call they hear to lift their voice. For some, simply standing and speaking in a group setting is a prophetic act. For me, planting a church was a prophetic act.

Every prophetic act builds on the one before it. Across the country, one by one, voices once silenced are rising up to join the chorus God created for them. Moved by the Spirit, more and more women are speaking forth the prophetic and transformative Word.

Listen! Do you hear what I hear? Women trusting their own voices as an embodiment of the Word, naming the forces which alienate and silence as well as those that encourage and release. Going from silence to voice takes courage but, as poet/artist Mary Anne Radmacher says, “Courage doesn’t always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, ‘I will try again tomorrow.’”

Women of God, try again, for there are many others in the world yearning to hear your voice. ■

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