WOMEN’S HISTORY MONTH TEACHING AT 8TH DAY

By Alice Benson
Text: Luke 13:1-9

Sito asked me to do a teaching for Women’s History Month. The first time I did a teaching at 8th Day, called “Welcoming the Stranger,” was April 6, 1986 — ten days before our first daughter, Nancy, was born. Today is ten days before Nancy’s first daughter will be born — so this seems very appropriate.

I couldn’t figure out a lot of connection with the Luke 13 parable of the fig tree for this teaching on Women’s History – other than some things take time. Fig trees usually produce fruit at about three years – and sometimes they need not just time, but also nurturing and fertilizer before they produce. This can be true for empowering any oppressed people. That’s my only connection between the Gospel and this teaching.

General Comments About Some Recent History of Women

During most of American history, women’s rights were limited by laws brought to North America by English colonists. Because of marriage and property laws, a married woman did not have a separate legal existence apart from her husband. A married womanwas a dependent, like an underage child or a slave, and generally could not own property in her own name or control her own earnings. She did not own her own body. When a husband died, his wife could not be the guardian to even her own under-age children. Slavery laws in the United States were initially based on laws governing women in England.

During World War 2, many men in the US were off fighting yet there was a great need here at home for workers. Many women who hadn’t previously been employed started working outside the home. When the men returned, that process reversed for many of these women. Workplaces could fire women and tell them that they needed to give their jobs to men who needed to support their families. It didn’t matter that women also needed to support *their* families.

Personal Comments on Being a Woman

I was born in 1950. I loved action and adventure stories, but that was all done by men. The work roles I could aspire to were limited. When I was ten, I was disappointed to learn I could not plan to be a professional baseball player. Within my family, my sights could be set on being a teacher (my mom taught piano lessons), a librarian, a secretary, a nurse, a flight attendant (although that was seen as “too worldly” for my conservative family), or a missionary. According to my mom’s philosophy, women weren’t supposed to be better than men in games or sports and weren’t supposed to make more money than men – because after all, men’s fragile egos couldn’t handle things like that. While there was a goal to be educated, women weren’t supposed to be TOO educated, since men would be threatened by women who were too smart. Women were supposed to get married, give up paid employment, have kids, and perhaps work a bit here and there to help the family out but nothing that might interfere with the traditional ideal housewife. I was able to get a credit card in my name before my mother was. Granted, it was for Penney’s, where I started working as a salesgirl when I was 16, but even so.

With the civil rights movement in the 60s, there was not a focus yet on the rights of women. By the way, how many of you can name even one woman who was a leader in the civil rights movement other than Rosa Parks? There were five women leaders who hired MLK to be their mouthpiece, since people wouldn’t listen to women. (From the book *Tell Me Who You Are*). Roles for women and men didn’t really start changing much until the 70s and even the 80s when laws started enforcing less discrimination – although society still frowned on women who strayed too far from societal norms – meaning, the ways things had been done by their grandparents. I have lived and worked in a number of places where some type of sexism or harassment was a commonplace occurrence.

Women started questioning the automatic assumptions of roles, yet most continued to take on primary responsibility in domestic duties and child rearing – while they were also working with full time jobs. I don’t personally care how couples work out the distribution of their own household duties – as long as it is thought about and not automatic. I don’t need a show of hands, but how many of you men do your own laundry? Cooking? Cleaning? How many of you women have automatically done these roles and not even questioned them — or allowed your husbands to do them? Or taught your sons? Feminism was often seen as hating men, rather than simply wanting equality for women.

I remember in 1985 or so when 8th Day started becoming more aware of language – and what a big deal it was when we changed the membership covenant to include “I believe as did Peter AND MARTHA that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God” and “I will seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness” (We got rid of the “his” while leaving in the “kingdom.”) We started being aware that God was not just a Father but also a Mother. There were heated discussions about these changes: people who advocated that it was important to them that God was seen as male, and others who had negative images about their own fathers and wanted to get rid of that imagery.

When Kirk and I got married in 1985, we used several hymns (all popular with 8th Day at the time) that I now hear as having sexist language. I recall even in the 1990s — when we’d watch that wedding video — wondering when we started becoming more aware of the implications of these words on both our concept of God and in excluding women from full personhood. When I didn’t change my last name, my mother would still address mail to us as “Mr and Mrs Kirk Fitch.” (Believe me, I thought of sending things to her using her maiden name!)

I’ve been reading Howard Thurman’s book *Jesus and the Disinherited* written in 1976. He wrote “the disinherited man has a sense of gross injury. He finds it well-nigh impossible to forgive, because his injury is often gratuitous. It is not for something that he has done, an action resulting from a deliberate violation. He is penalized for what he IS in the eyes and the standards of another man.” While I do forgive him for using this language 46 years ago, I find it exclusionary – even as how we all know the phrase “all men are created equal” did not really include all men then, and it certainly did not include women.

History of Some Church of the Saviour Women

I have been inspired by too many Church of the Saviour women to name. When I came to Church of the Saviour (or C of S for short) in 1975, it stood out to me there were not separate groups for women and men – or for different ages. The School of Christian Living was for all people. Mission Groups were for anyone who felt called to that mission. I noticed there were quite a few divorced women. At first, I thought that was perhaps because marriage wasn’t considered as important as in other churches, but I then decided it was because when women got divorced, they still felt welcome, accepted, and not ostracized here. It seemed that women had as much leadership as men in most of the areas where the church was concerned.

I’d now like to share stories of some C of S women. I interviewed quite a few and heard stories about others. These stories are all true in someone’s mind at least. The main thing these women had in common was a desire to grow. As Basil Buchanan told me, “People came because they were hungry. People with pain. The focus was inward healing, getting to know “our many selves” and to be on the journey of faith and psychological and spiritual healing.”

I learned about women who continued to grow in their marriages, women who were widowed early, those who outgrew their marriages, who struggled with their sexual orientation, who had dynamic careers, and who worked with many of the church’s ministries. Many had children who have been part of this church. You might know these women perhaps far better than I ever did, and for some of you these are new names and stories. Time does not permit for everyone to be included.

I feel I need to start with **Mary Campbell Cosby,** along with her sister **Elizabeth Ann Compagna**, who were from a Baptist family from Georgia (their dad was a pastor) that moved to Lynchburg, VA, when Mary was nine. Here she met Gordon Cosby, then 15. Later, Mary resonated with Gordon’s call for a new kind of church, and she and Elizabeth Ann (or EA for short – though later she expressed a preference for “Elizabeth Ann”) were founding members of C of S. Mary never had biological children (although they had a foster child, Michael Murphy), but her influence was felt far and wide in the lives of others.

EA was the director of the Alexandria YMCA for many years. Her husband was an alcoholic, got involved with AA, and this was part of church members’ long involvement with this program. (Some of you might remember 8th Day member **Evelyn Turner** – who had the most glorious memorial service at the Potter’s House that I wanted to join AA for that sense of community).

Mary was part of most of the original ministries of C of S, but especially the Potter’s House, where she was an elder of the Potter’s House Church for perhaps 20 years or more. She long led the music at the Sunday worship service at the church headquarters (2025 Massachusetts Ave NW) – which was called “the ecumenical service” after the 1976 breakup of the church into small faith communities – and that was called ‘The New Land.’ (She went back to school and got a Masters degree in music from American University.) Her classes in the School of Christian Living in New Testament and Elizabeth Ann’s classes in Old Testament were always highly attended. She was a gifted preacher as Gordon was, and we used to have her regularly at 8th Day. Mary died in 2016 at the age of 93 after living at Christ House (a C of S mission) her last several years. Gordon died nine years ago today – in 2013.

The Three Responsible Women

In 1952, when the church decided it needed a silent retreat center, three young women were given the task to find a place. These three were **Jessie Henderson, Sally Jumper, and Carolyn Johnson** (later Hubers). The famous story, as told in *Call to Commitment*, is that when they went to sign papers at the bank in May 1953, the bank manager called Gordon and asked for someone responsible to come in to sign the papers. Gordon replied something like “we don’t have anyone more responsible than they are.” Generally, women were not given this type of power and responsibility in 1953.

**Dorothy (Dot) Cresswell** and her husband (Frank) came to C of S before it was officially organized as a church but was just meeting for worship at a boarding house chapel. She and Frank had both grown up Baptist in Mississippi. They also were founding members, and their son was the first baby born in the church (1948). After Dayspring land was purchased, at least 50 members would be at Dayspring every weekend, building and planting — creating space for retreat. They would work in the morning, have a communal lunch prepared by Louise Longfellow, Gordon would do a devotional, and then everyone played volleyball or softball. (We picture them all much older, but they were all in their 20s and 30s then!)

Dot was involved in many meetings in Oxon Hill, MD as the church worked on closing Junior Village, as well as in the Friday Night Potter’s House Mission Group. When her six children could look after themselves more, Dot went back to get a master’s degree in counseling — and then worked for DC Public Schools for almost 20 years. After the New Land (1976) when the church split into smaller faith communities, Dot became an elder in the Potter’s House Church. She took over leadership of the Potter’s House in 1988 and kept involved until her death in 2008.

**Yolande Ford and Family -** One thing Dot’s children learned at her memorial service was from Yolande Ford, a long-time member and a black woman. She said, in a tea room in the early 50s, Dot started to talk with Yolande’s mother (**Rose Williamson**, then a member of Shiloh Baptist), and invited her to visit C of S. Rose and her family started coming and felt very welcomed. Rose was a founding member of Hope and A Home, so children coming out of Junior Village had care, and was part of a general interracial trend in membership -- Yolande estimates about a quarter of members were people of color back then.

Yolande became the acting director of Hope and a Home and was the first director of FLOC (For Love of Children) which grew out of it. Yolande left C of S in 1968 as part of a deliberate effort with several other black members to go back to the black church, taking C of S principles with them. She was later ordained in the Congregational Church. Years later she returned to C of S to hear Gordon. Here at 8th Day we heard a teaching from Yolande’s daughter, **Diane Ford Dessables**, sometime in the past year. Yolande recently did a recording of her memories of C of S members who were people of color. I had often heard many of the names but I didn’t always know much about them.

**Sunshine (Sunny) Branner** was another founding member. She grew up Baptist in Mississippi, moved to DC after the war for a government job, and lived at the boarding house where C of S was meeting in the chapel there on 19th St. She met her husband, Bill, here, who became the church treasurer for decades. What attracted her to C of S were service, the disciplines, and “every sermon rang a bell deep inside me.” She was helped a lot by Elizabeth O’Connor as a friend and a writer. Sunny worked at the Potter’s House on Thursday nights for years. After the New Land, she attended 8th Day into the 1980s before she and Bill left to worship at Foundry United Methodist (they loved the choir there.). She began volunteering with the men at Christ House (another C of S mission) and loved her weekly work there for 28 years. They read poems, talked about their families, and had general uplifting conversations. She still does her disciplines now in the nursing home where she lives in Alexandria.

**Esther Dorsey** grew up in Petersburg, VA, just south of Richmond, and came to the church in the early 1950s. **Phyllis Holt** (former 8th Day member) recalls a story from Esther: when she was little and swimming in a stream with friends, a white man told them they couldn’t swim there. Her uncle told her the next time to tell that man it was a federal tributary and no one could limit them. Esther thought those words “Federal tributary” were like magic words.

Esther was a manager at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. She told Gordon that she’d like to pursue her lifelong dream of operating a little tea shop downtown. Gordon and Mary had wondered about some place other than the church where people of all opinions could come and feel comfortable expressing themselves. Gordon asked Esther if she’d consider being manager of such a place if they could locate a venue. Esther prayed and said yes. Artist **Jimilu Mason** (she who made the statues outside of Festival Center and Christ House, the brass elephant at the zoo, and hundreds of others, including one we recently saw at the LBJ Presidential Library) helped find the building at 1658 Columbia Rd, which opened as The Potter’s House in April 1960.

 Esther’s official title was “Prioress.” She managed the day-to-day operations and was also the moderator of the Saturday night mission group. Each night was run by a different mission group. The Ontario Theatre was at Columbia Rd and 17th Street and had first run movies (including *The Sound of Music*, which ran a few years). People came to the Potter’s House before or after the show, and every night was busy then. Many AA groups came after their meetings, since we didn’t serve alcohol. Esther managed the Potter’s House into the 70s. She was a founding member of 8th Day Faith Community in 1976, and also one of the founding residents of the 8th Day Building (Ontario Rd and 18th St) that same year. She died two days before the Sept 11 attacks in 2001.

**Elizabeth O’Connor** (called “Betty O” affectionately – although she later said she really preferred “Elizabeth”) came early in the church’s life, became a member in 1953, and was a staff member for over 40 years, serving as secretary, teacher, leader of small groups, and counselor. She had a twin brother who remained institutionalized for schizophrenia throughout his life. She and Esther Dorsey took courses at Union Seminary in NY at some point. Starting in 1963, her books: *Servant Leaders/Servant Structures*, *Cry Pain/Cry Hope*; *Call to Commitment*, *Journey Inward/Journey Outward*, *Our Many Selves*, *Search for Silence*, *8th Day of Creation*, *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims*, *The New Community* – all led people from around the country and the world to want to have speakers from C of S and/or visit. (When we had the Eighth Day Guest House and I was the hostess, we housed hundreds of these people. This was before Andrew’s House.) Elizabeth was one of the founding members of 8th Day in 1976.

**Verna Dozier** came from the Episcopal church in DC in the early 50s, another black woman. She was loved by all especially for her ability to teach and her writings. She was the founding head teacher in the School of Christian Living. (Some significant teachers for the C of S children by the way: **Thelma** **Rutherford**, a social worker who had a real gift with children, and **Jessie Ashton,** who was the first black salesperson at Sacks). Verna returned to St Mark’s Episcopal Capitol Hill in the late 60s, and became a world-renowned institution in the Episcopal Church – always insisting that she didn’t want to be ordained but that the role of the laity was equally important. From her book, *The Dream of God*, she encourages us to see Christianity not as creed or institution, but as “the vision of a new possibility for human life rooted in an ancient understanding of God and lived out by a Nazarene carpenter.”

**Mary Anders** movedto DC from South Carolina in 1952 to work for her member of Congress – who died two years later. Then she worked for Senator Maybank from SC who also died. (Her friends hopefully suggested for her to go work for Senator Joe McCarthy next!) She worked on the Hill for thirty-three years. Came to C of S in early 50s with her boyfriend Russ, when she wasn’t a Christian. They married in 1957 when she was 27 and he was 33. They never had children, and the adoption agency said they were too old.

She loved the School of Christian Living classes – and joined the church in 1961. She was involved with the original Potters House Mission Group. She said Elizabeth O’Connor started a church service there Sunday mornings primarily for young people who weren’t interested in regular church. Whenever they would open the doors, there would be lines of people waiting to get in. She was later in the Dag Hammarskjöld mission group (named after the former Secretary General for the United Nations – with an international focus of learning, with the goal of having greater understanding among people and peace). She was part of the Gateway Mission Group which served at the ecumenical worship service, welcomed people at worship, hosted coffee after church then the Lunch Bunch, and finally disbanded in 1999. Currently she is doing National Presbyterian zoom church. She is 92 now with Dixcy as her case manager.

**Katherine (Kay) Pitchford,** another African American women, came from Philadelphia in the early 50s and was the primary artist at C of S (other than “Mother” Ann Campbell, Mary and Elizabeth Ann’s mother, who did the murals at the church headquarters). Kay founded classes in the Potter’s House Workshop (across from Safeway – where Five Loaves Bakery used to be) on pottery, sculpting, wire working, stonework, tie dying, etc. She got her Masters in Art at Catholic University, and her thesis was the large bas relief at the Dayspring Lodge. (If you look at the faces you can see African/Palestinian features.) Her other jobs included being an occupational therapist and a professor at Howard.

**Mary Hitchcock** and her then husband, Bert, came from Ohio in the 50s and helped build Dayspring before she focused on the Potter’s House mission. She was a nurse with one son. She became manager of the Potter’s House workshop in the early 70s. Sometime after Mary was held up at gunpoint outside the Workshop, it merged into the Potter’s House without the classes. Mary became the manager perhaps around 1974. I remember when she hired me to be Potter’s House Night Manager in 1981. I was so thrilled – even though the pay was $4/hour and I had to recruit 5-7 volunteers each night. She had a very zen attitude about running the Potter’s House, accepting that everyone in the entire church viewed it as their own personal place and everyone thought they knew best for how things should be run. She would say, “What can you do… it’s the Potter’s House” as she’d throw up her arms! She died in November of 1988 after being diagnosed with ovarian cancer six months earlier. I still miss her.

**Ann Jarman (**from Nashville, TN) and her then husband, Fred Taylor, came to C of S after he served as pastor at a Baptist Church in Falls Church from 1956-1958. Fred started focusing on FLOC. Ann was strongly attracted to the Potter’s House where she began volunteering in the evenings. When she was working at Brentano’s bookstore, she was asked to come work at the Potter’s House and be Mary’s assistant, buying books and gifts. She worked there five years. She found the disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, journaling, attending church, being faithful to the mission, and tithing were life-giving. She loved the accountability of her various Potter’s House mission groups. She was excited when they were just about to break even and get out of the red — when Gordon decided to start giving children breakfast on their way to school. After her three kids were grown (and Chapman was very involved with 8th Day during the 1980s), she got her MSW. She and Fred divorced sometime in the 1980s, I believe, and she went back to using Jarman as her name. She is now a member at St Columba’s Episcopal Church

Many of you know **Carol Wilkinson Martin**! She moved from Austin, TX to DC in 1961 and then worked for the Presidential Prayer Breakfast. She met **Myra Flood**, who babysat her daughter, Beth, and who told her about C of S. After she was divorced, she later married Bud Wilkinson in 1970. When they had their first child and she was in the hospital, many church members visited her. Her hospital roommate told her, “I want what you have” as far as community. They moved to Columbia, MD, with other artists and were part of the Kittamaqundi Community, a faith community modeled after C of S. Carol then worked for the magazine, *Faith at Work*. She was involved in C of S ministries such as Alabaster Jar (an arts group with Jimilu Mason) and also Dag Hammarskjöld College.

Carol became the Dayspring retreat leader and they lived there from 1982 to 2003. Bud died in 2001. She next worked at C of S missions Jubilee Jobs, then Jubilee Housing with the children. She sold her house in Silver Spring, became an “Innkeeper” and lived at Samaritan Inns (a C of S ministry to get homeless people off the streets). Carol has joined Bread of Life Church (another C of S faith community), lives at Gail Arnall’s community house, and recently Sounded a Call (which means announcing an interest in an area of ministry and asking others to join you) for “Welcoming the Stranger” to address immigration and refugees.

Eighty Day Book Group

I also want to highlight a few other 8th Day women, from when we had a book group in the 1990s on issues of faith, religion, psychology, and feminism. This book group was well attended, usually by 6-10 of us – including Carole Brown, Harriette Mohr, and Carol Fitch then in their 60s, who had grown and worked to discover their own identities separate from that of their husbands.

I know these are a lot of names and stories, but I thought their stories should be told. When we heard Hebrews 11 earlier, known as the Faith Chapter, I wonder if it stood out to you that everyone was a man except for Sarah, the mother of Isaac, and Rahab, a prostitute. I’d like to close by reading my own rewritten version:

 Rewrite of Hebrews 11 that Includes Some C of S Women

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

By faith Kay Pitchford was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of her artist offerings. And by faith she still speaks through her profound work at Dayspring.

By faith Dot was taken from this life. But before she was taken, she was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please you, God, because anyone who comes to you must believe that you exist and that you reward those who earnestly seek you.

By faith Rose Williamson, although wary of white churches, in holy fear brought her family to Church of the Saviour. By her faith she became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

By faith Esther, when called to go to a place, obeyed and went, even though she did not know where she was going. By faith she left her secure job and made her home in the promised land of the Potter’s House like a stranger in a foreign land. For she was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Mary, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to have a foster son because she considered God faithful who had made the promise.

And so from these women came spiritual descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

All these people were still living by faith when some of them have they died. They did not receive all the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

By faith Elizabeth wrote books and blessed others in regard to their future.

By faith Verna, when her end was near, spoke about the hopeful future of the church.

By faith Carol sounded a call for a new mission even in her 80s, because she saw that God is still able to use her for good.

By faith the people built Dayspring for silence and spiritual growth.

By faith the walls of Junior Village fell, after the army had marched around them for seven years. Hope and a Home provided homes, and For Love of Children provided many other services as well.

By faith the members of many different Potter’s House mission groups handled muggings, threats, robberies, and wonderful opportunities for community -- because they welcomed the opportunity to serve, be welcoming, and represent Christ’s presence in the world.]

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to say more about Sunny, Yolande, the Thelmas (Jones, Hempker, Rutherford), Terry, Jimilu, Carols, Muriel, Sarah Jackson, Pat Sitar, Edith Booker, Emmy Lu, Alice Payne and Fenn, Sydney Johnson, hundreds others – all of who through faith conquered challenges, administered justice, fund raised, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of nay-sayers and quenched the fury of DC bureaucracies, whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in conflict and invasions of their missions.

The world was not worthy of them. They lived in DC, Maryland, and Virginia, they lived with husbands, ex-husbands, children, alone, housemates, and ministry clients.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them completed all of the missions to which they had been called, since God had planned something greater than all of us, so that only together with community could they be fulfilled. Amen.

Let us pray: Thank you, God, for the faithful women who have gone before us – those named and those not named. Those we remember and those whose work is now unrecognized or unknown. May we each be inspired by them and live our lives so that we, too, may be a blessed memory to others. Amen.