50th Anniversary of Women’s Ordination – Montana Synod

Jean Larson 9/29/20

“Real Agnostic Ready for Ministry.” So went the headline the weekend before my 1981 ordination in Billings. Lesson one: what not to say to reporters. I thought I was having an interesting conversation about my tumultuous road to faith, not mining for an attention-grabber. Oh well. As a result of this article, I got a phone call from an angry woman who informed me that God didn’t allow women clergy. Just what did I think I was doing? Well, I told her. I gave her my best Pauline take-down in 50 words or less. We Bible-bonked each other pretty well.

In the early years there was a lot of that – defending the legitimacy of God’s call, while at the same time convincing myself that it wasn’t a wrong number. Lordy, I had a lot to learn. And I was blessed with fine teachers along the way. So here’s to my early teachers, who helped me become a real pastor.

Gil Hilde, American Lutheran Billings. Gil was not only salt of the earth, but radical salt. He and Kay welcomed Vietnamese refugees into their family year after year. Now Gil knew his Bible. He was a humble, pious man who loved Jesus and loved the church. He had told me at the beginning of my internship that he was struggling with the Word and how women’s ordination might be part of it--Paul’s admonitions and all. He said this with serious tenderness. Over the course of the year, Gil showed up, engaging me kindly after worship and at potlucks. In the fullness of time, he told me that the Spirit had led him to see that this was good and true, ordaining women. He assured me of his continuing prayers. There are no words for this. Thank you will have to do. Gil modeled honest struggle with Scripture and with me in such a Jesus way. I wish I had followed his example earlier in ministry. I’m also gobsmacked at how the church provided a community in which Gil and I could journey through rough seas safely, with love.

Then there was Herb Strom, campus pastor at MSU. While I found many of my Billings male colleagues to be perplexed (at best) about how to relate to me, Herb was straight-out supportive-- of me, of women’s pastoral authority, of the goodness of women clergy. He encouraged me to be honest with his students when he invited me to address them. Share myself more, he said. Herb’s clear, feminist welcome to me as colleague did much to help me grow into the office of ministry. The hospitality he and Catherine offered was essential healing.

More teachers: Bob Anderson, Atonement, Billings. My first call was a disaster. I believed that God was calling me to witness against nuclear weapons. So I did, every time I preached. My senior colleague Merv Olson tried to talk to me. Bob Anderson stopped talking to me. He had been with the first group of Marines to enter Nagasaki after the bomb, and was convinced it had saved his life and the lives of many. (What horrors had he seen?) I wish I had talked with him about it, but I was lost at sea. Was it because I was a woman? Or first call? Or a political alien? It was so confusing. I had no mentor and my bishop was furious at me. Thank God I got pregnant. It was the out I needed to resign my call before they could fire me. Only after the fact did I come to see how aggressive my peacemaking was, with the help of no-nukes colleagues.

A few years later, I was up on the pastor-dunking board at the All-Lutheran Picnic. Bob Anderson was feeding Merv Olson quarters to dunk me. Bob had a big smile on his face, and we started trash-talking, Lutheran-style. Afterwards, Bob and I chatted about kids and family and what a bad arm Merv had. Reconciliation. The Spirit works in mysterious ways.

Still, I feared that I was not cut out to be a pastor. But Mark Ramseth invited me to consider a part-time call at King of Glory—despite our bishop trying to warn him off me as a ruckus-creator. What can I say? Thank you,Mark and KOG, for welcoming me and my family, for helping me re-set ministry. And thank you, Bob, for refusing to accept sermons without gospel. My utter failure at advocating for edgy faith commitments in my first call made it possible for me to do so more wisely and helpfully with the LGBTQ+ community later on.

Thank you, teachers. There were so many! I am grateful to have been among the first generation of women pastors in Montana. Grateful for the women colleagues whose feisty spirits kept most of us in the game and brought the whole church to this place of celebration. Happy 50th!