

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost – Kait Mathews

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

The first Christian church, filled with a Great Cloud of Witnesses, is talked about in Acts chapter 1, verses 13-14: *Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.* (NIV) It clearly states that women specifically were there too. Peter addresses the disciples further into the passage of Acts, *Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled...* (KJV) The words “disciples,” “men” and “brethren” are gender-generic terms. These words include the whole body of the church, not just men, and not just women. A Great Cloud of Witnesses.

Women are not only referenced in this passage of Acts, but later in chapter 6 of the Book of Acts as well. It states, *Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.* (NIV) To make decisions in the church, the twelve disciples did not work alone. They involved a multitude of different people. Part of the multitude were women too.

And yet the multitude of women have often been excluded from leadership—both in and out of the church. After all, it is one thing to say that you agree with women in ministry and it is another to affirm them and support them in ministry. B.T. Roberts, the founder of Free Methodism, boldly declared in his book, *Ordaining Women*, “The church has no right to forbid the free exercise of abilities to do good which God has given. To do so is usurpation and tyranny.”

Roberts discusses the reigns of Queen Elizabeth, Catherine II of Russia, and Queen Victoria of England. All three women were in positions typically held by men, and yet they were able to govern well, despite widespread concerns they would be too emotional. Princess Alexandrina Victoria actually won her people through pathos. Those emotions are precisely what led Alexandrina to be so well loved. These women recognized their emotions were not a weakness, but something to be embraced. That recognition allowed them to lead with honesty, vulnerability and integrity—a refreshing reality much needed in our world leaders today.

Our emotions are what make us human. They help us to connect with one another. It’s interesting that the word “religion” actually comes from the same root as “ligament” and it means, “tying together.”

As such, all leaders—but religious leaders in particular—need to be reminded of their own humanness as they lead through difficult seasons and strive to connect people with one another, themselves and God.

These leaders join in with the multitude of men and women. They join in with the Great Cloud of Witnesses. When we look at our passage from Hebrews, we see lists of ordinary people, broken

people, and their great faith in our God. In Ruth Huston's class this past semester, Professor Huston drew a big cloud on the board of the "Great Cloud of Witnesses". She invited us to write the name of a person who has strengthened our relationship with Christ, and who has a relationship that is admirable. Each of us wrote down one ordinary person who has made a profound impact on us.

The person who I wrote down is kind, Spirit-filled, humble, compassionate, and faithful—just like those talked about in the Hebrew passage. She is someone who has lit a fire in me and not only affirmed my calling in pastoral ministry, but also walked alongside me as I weave my way through the complexities and hardships of ministry.

We met after I had just finished an internship in Coffeen where I set up and ran a summer program for the youth. It was a growing experience, and through it, I thought I had solidified my choice to pursue youth ministry. At the time, I could only see myself as a youth pastor, because I was raised Catholic, and I had never even heard a woman pastor speak before. Anything beyond youth ministry wasn't even in the realm of possibilities for my future. I imagined I would be a 70-year-old youth pastor playing basketball at a park with my youth group and sharing the Good News with them. That was before I met Niquita. By faith, she hired me, even though she didn't know who I was or anything about me.

Niquita may have been forced into my life by being my boss in Residence Life, but she continues to amaze me by her dedication to living her life as Christ calls her. I am so thankful for her bravery and strength, paving the way for younger women like me in ministry. By faith, Niquita continues her obedience to Christ, following Him even when Satan is trying to deter her from the path paved by God. Other women who have been part of a Great Cloud of Witnesses are: Lucia, the first woman superintendent and who, by faith, taught me what perseverance looks like in ministry; Pastor Judy, who helps lead our church with conviction and love and who, by faith, has taught me what lovingkindness looks like in ministry; Pastor Deb Somerville of the GFMC who, by faith, has taught me how to lead with confidence and boldness. These three women have fought for the path to ordination for women in the Free Methodist Church.

By faith, these women fought to have our first female bishop, Linda Adams, elected. I was able to sit in the front row at General Conference this summer to listen to her first sermon as Bishop-elect. As a young woman in ministry, I am thankful to have a foundation of seeing and incredible women leading our denomination. By faith, other leaders have also paved the path for Bishop Linda. Bishop David Kendall, who recently published the book *Follow Her Lead*, declares his commitment to helping women prepare for and serve in key leadership positions in the church.

Kendall follows B.T. Roberts, whose radical view of women in ministry during the 1800's set the stage for our denomination. By faith, he warned the Church's oppressive teaching on women was just as wrong as its position on slavery. In appealing for equality, he wrote, "We must give her equal rights with men or we must reduce her to the servitude of by-gone ages. Either we must be governed by the Christian law of love and equity, or we must take a step back into barbarianism and be governed by the law of brute force." He used biblical evidence from Galatians chapter 3 verse 28 to defend his claim. Although B.T. died before he could see his idea

of women being ordained come into fruition, many women have indeed become leaders of our church since the ordination of women in 1974 was accepted as doctrine.

This summer I have been mentored by other women of incredible character who are leading our churches. I have spent my internship surrounded by women pastors. I met Arlene, who is the lead pastor of a smaller church, Mars Hill, on the west side of Indianapolis, and who, by faith, stepped back into the pulpit after years of not being in a lead pastor role. I also had the honor of working with Emily, who is the Children's Pastor at Aldersgate FMC in Indianapolis. By faith she left the comfort of her hometown in Michigan to move to Indy out of college to become a CMC in Wabash.

Also at Aldersgate, I met Pastor Julie Gray who is the lead pastor and president of the Wesleyan Holiness Women's Clergy, who by faith moved from Seattle to Indianapolis with her family 5 years ago. Pastor Estelle Martin is the Assistant Pastor at John Wesley in northwest Indy, and by faith has helped start LifeWay church, which is an African Immigrant church plant. These are just some of the women in the Wabash Conference who were in my immediate proximity. But I have also had the support of my grandmother. She has been faithfully praying over my life, since my birth. She always mentions, "I pray for you daily Kait, but I never worry about you" (which is funny, because she is the biggest worrywart that I know). She loves to hear about my pursuit of ministry and tells all of her friends about her excitement for my future. A Great Cloud of Witnesses leading by faith.

The specific pastor that I have spent my summer with has been more than just an intern supervisor. She has been a friend, confidant, supporter, and mom. Kristen is someone who had been able to expand my view of self and future. She is someone who called me out, when needed, but also someone who comforted me. I have been able to see both her passion and intensity help West Morris Street expand its view of what the Church is. She is more than just a pastor though; she is an author, a professor, a teacher, a spiritual director; she has a Doctorate of Ministry, and is a mom of 10 plus kids.

Although all of these accomplishments are incredible, I think her most impressive accomplishment is her faithfulness to our Lord. Her relentless pursuit of God's plan for her life has led her on an unconventional path to being a pastor. She has embraced her role as a leader in the church. In doing so, she has brought many along with her. Mara, T.J., Kevin, and I are all Local Ministerial Candidates at West Morris Street being guided by Kristen currently! She uses her position to bring other people along too, which demonstrates strong leadership. In so doing, she is growing a Great Cloud of Witnesses of ordinary people to follow God's lead. Kristen hasn't chosen people from top universities, or seasoned ministerial candidates to lead, but she has made space for a physics undergrad, a once-homeless man, a dad of four kids under the age of seven, and me.

One of the most important lessons that Kristen has taught me this summer was the importance of vulnerability. I had built up so many walls over the 21 years of my life that I hadn't realized they were preventing me from fulfilling my full potential in ministry. Kristen reminded me to follow God by faith. She was patient with me, to say the least, as she continued to chip away at the

walls and invite me to become more vulnerable. By the end of my internship, I had become so much more fruitful as I was able to make meaningful connections with those around me. Through all of this, I learned the importance of following God by faith this summer. By faith, I organized Vacation Bible School in a church where I had only been in for two weeks. By faith, I discerned that being part of Residence Life wasn't part of my future—even when I didn't necessarily know what doors would be opened. By faith, I started a youth group which consistently reached over 20 kids every Wednesday night in July. By faith, I ministered to a family who suffered from the tragedy of their son being stillborn. By faith, I transferred my membership to West Morris Street and became a Local Ministerial Candidate under Kristen. By faith, I learned the importance of my own life experiences and how they help me connect with others in theirs.

I wouldn't have been able to do this without watching, learning and reflecting on the women who I have been able to observe in action this summer. These strong women have been a Great Cloud of Witnesses for me as I have embarked on my own journey in ministry. They have shown me by the way they fearlessly lead their churches. They have encouraged me that both my emotions and my experiences are not only welcome, but essential. I have learned to lead with love, kindness, passion, tenacity, and emotions.

To the women who have gone before me, thank you. To the women who follow me, the road is still being paved.

This morning I invite you to reflect on those who have gone before you—who have paved the way.

Reflect on those who are currently walking the road with you.

And reflect on those who will follow you.

Who do you need to thank who has boldly created a path for you to follow? To whom can you offer unfailing support as they walk with you? And might there be others you need to seek out—to invite them onto the path you are creating for them?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.