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Just One Story?

Laura Buffington

This will start out looking like a story about me. But if I tell it right, hopefully it will end up being about much more. Even our seemingly small stories have that kind of potential: to communicate something giant about who God is, and why the world exists at all, and what the gospel has to do with bringing the two together. My story was never just about a little girl showing up in her Sunday best. Sometimes, our narratives—and our church’s—matter even more than we can handle.

It would be fair to say I wasn’t just raised *in* the Christian Church, but *by* the Christian Church. If my memory can be trusted, my parents had my sister and me at church whenever the doors were opened. They had been a part of the group that planted the new church near Columbus, Ohio, so our lives were closely tied to the community. I have vivid memories of refusing to sing along during children’s church, fighting with the boys during Vacation Bible School, and honing my crafting skills in the church basement. I certainly went through seasons where I would have rather stayed home to play, but eventually I came to love the church and to feel loved by the church. By the time I went through middle school and all the identity crises it brings, I thought of the church as a safe haven, as a place I belonged. Like a dutiful church kid, my summers always included a stint at camp. One year I was given the prestigious “camper of the week” award. The next year I had the quintessential “come to Jesus” moment as “I Have Decided” played quietly in the background, and I stepped out to come forward for baptism.

My high school years were textbook enculturation in the Christian Church. I was moving right along the “five-finger exercise.” I went to youth group every Sunday night. Occasionally, I sang into a giant puffy microphone accompanied by cassette tape tracks for the worship service. I served every week at the local church-sponsored nursing home. I was part of a small group for discipleship. My summers were packed full of mission trips and Christian college conferences. I went to public school, but I gathered every September to pray around the flagpole and I looked for opportunities to bring Jesus into conversations. When it was time for me to get my first job, I applied at a Christian bookstore and they hired me to sell Sunday school and VBS curriculum. A large part of my growing faith had to do with my youth minister and his wife, along with other adults in the church, nurturing me and modeling faithful lives for me. With my parents’ blessing, the older Christians around me took me into their lives, encouraging me towards maturity.

The summer before my senior year of high school, after extensive conversations with mentors and friends about all the impending future decisions, I sat around the church campfire one night and felt compelled to attach my future to the church. It was the granddaddy of all camp decision-time options: full-time Christian service. For some reason, I didn’t step forward to announce it. I simply resolved in my heart that my career would somehow involve the church. Up to this point, I didn’t have any other ideas so this made sense. My life had been saturated in ministry. The people around me affirmed this decision and encouraged me. I felt an inescapable sense of calling. Looking back now, it’s hard to know exactly where the movement of God collided with my own desires...or the pressure of other people...or the emotional power of a good campfire with acoustic accompaniment...but at the time I was convinced that the next faithful step was to train for ministry.

For all my years spent inside the circle of the church, and for all my exposure to different missions and ministries, my calling came without any specific directions. I had no idea what job I wanted to do, or was supposed to do, depending on your understanding of where freedom ends and God's sovereignty begins.

Up to this point, after eighteen years in the church, no one had ever told me what women could or could not do in the church. When Christian leaders and preachers made appeals at camp (or during worship) for people to give their lives to service, it was a universal call. We were all supposed to use our gifts, surrender our lives, join the big story God is telling. So I went by what they said, and not what I saw. What I saw were limits and roles reserved for certain genders. I saw women sing, but only men could speak. I saw women prepare the communion, but only men could march down the aisles to serve it. Women taught children and men taught adults. I knew enough to know that all of this had to do with Paul's letters to the churches. I trusted enough to see this as the way God must have wanted things to be. I hoped that somewhere in this established order I would find a place to fulfill my campfire promise.

The next step towards a life of ministry seemed to be going to a Christian college, so I ended up at Milligan College in Tennessee. Choosing a college has always seemed like far too important of a decision to leave to an eighteen-year-old but, in my case, I think I ended up exactly where I needed to be. After years in public schools, it was both strange and refreshing to learn alongside other people of faith. I loved the powerful experience of Christian community that is unique to the Christian college experience. But more than anything, I loved having a safe place to ask tough questions. We were encouraged to think about humanity and art and war and faith, and what they all had to do with each other. College is where I learned the value of asking the right questions over having all the right answers.

I loved my Bible classes. I knew many of the stories but loved learning about authorship questions and translation issues and contextualization. I loved learning about all the different hermeneutics we use without knowing we're using them. It felt like I was getting frames to put around all the great pictures the church had given me. I learned that loving the Bible meant wrestling with the things it said. Sometimes education and coming-of-age can threaten young faith, casting doubts and shadows onto Scripture. But for me, Scripture became a living, breathing choir of voices singing along to the world opening in front of me.

I learned a million things that had nothing to do with gender. But since I was trying to sort out how to serve the church with my life, several gender-related conversations held my attention. For all the Old Testament stories I had learned growing up, I couldn't remember ever hearing about Deborah or Huldah. I started to appreciate how these stories of faithful women survived in a culture that thought of women as property to be traded along with the land and the livestock.

I listened carefully to the conversations about how Jesus destroyed cultural barriers by talking to women and valuing them. I came to a new appreciation of his deep talk with the Samaritan woman at the well. I saw new layers of meaning when he healed the bleeding woman and straightened the walk of the woman living with her head bent low. In all my Easter mornings, I had never noticed that it was the women tending to his tomb who were the first to know he was back on his feet.

I learned about the communities receiving Paul's letters and how he tailored the nuances of the Gospel to their particular needs. For the freewheeling, grace-abusing church at Corinth, Paul prescribed order. For the rule-bound, grace-neglecting churches of Galatia, Paul called for freedom. I came to love how Paul always put the gospel first. When he had to decide between this new understanding of how God was reconciling the world through Christ and the traditional way of understanding law, he chose the new way. When he had to decide between his own ego and reputation or the furthering of the gospel, he never chose himself.

I learned about Paul's co-workers and paid attention to his greetings and personal admonitions at the end of his letters. I was surprised to meet Phoebe the deacon, Junia the apostle and Priscilla the teacher. I imagined them getting together with the other women who figured prominently into the early days of the church, like Lydia the bi-vocational pastor, Tabitha the mercy worker, and Philip's prophesying daughters.

With these new frames around the life of Jesus, the writings of Paul, and the picture of the early church, I felt conflicted about the church of my youth. I started to wonder if the Christian Church movement had tried so hard to be faithful to certain texts that they missed the beautiful complexity of the bigger story. It seemed like so much work was going into obeying Paul's note on keeping women from teaching but very little was said

about individuals covering their heads. When had it been decided which notes of Paul's were meant for a certain time and place and which ones were for all times and all places? I wrestled with what it means to be a part of a church tradition so bent on restoring the idyllic days of the first-century church that they sometimes forget to do what Paul actually did and translate the gospel to the world right in front of them.

And when things got really quiet, I wondered how the church could treat me so well and encourage me so much, but still set limits for how and where God could use me. I never doubted—and still don't doubt—that it's out of an attempt to be faithful to their best understanding of what God wants. But it made planning for the future a painful and confusing process. I knew all these questions and all this wrestling would eventually become intensely personal, as I tried to sort out what the calling by the campfire meant and how my gifts could or could not serve the church.

For a long time, I thought I might serve the church through urban ministry. I have always loved cities and cared about social justice. I spent an internship serving a church in south Chicago. It was a great church and I loved every minute I spent with them. But as I went on in school, I found myself more and more drawn towards writing and teaching. I just had no idea what kind of job description I fit into as a female in the church.

The first time I spoke to a large crowd was largely by accident. I had been invited to speak during chapel and had politely refused. Or at least I thought I refused. Then I saw my name on the schedule to speak. I was to deliver a "senior sermon," a tradition in the school's spring chapel lineup. Despite my reservations, I got up and said some words. I was sick the whole next week. Depending on your interpretation, it was either a virus or nerves or God's wrath.

I decided I needed more time to learn and sort out what it meant for me (or for any of us) to further the story of God in our world. I went on to pursue a master of divinity at Emmanuel Christian Seminary. As I learned and participated in the Christian community of east Tennessee, the professors and pastors, along with my friends, continued to encourage me toward teaching and preaching. With some hesitation I accepted the occasional invitation to speak in chapel or to lead a class at church. I knew that stepping into such roles came with burdens. This is true for anyone who dares to stand in front of other people and speak to the mysteries of God, but it felt particularly true as a female. For those who supported full inclusion of women into the life of the church, I wanted to represent women well. For those who did not, I struggled with creating conflict and having my girl-ness become a distraction from the greater purposes of gathering to hear from God.

All these tensions haunted me when it came time to find my first job. I still wasn't sure what kind of job description I could fit in many of our churches. I knew there was a chance I would find myself serving a church that called me the "director" of something rather than a "minister" of anything. I might only be able to teach high school kids or younger. I also knew working at a bookstore instead of a church was a very real possibility. I had watched a number of other female friends leave the Christian Church for denominations that would hire them and allow them to use all of their gifts in every area of the church. In some cases, I also saw the job search lead only to wounds and bitterness. Frozen with fear, I played an incredibly passive role in finding my first job. Professors were kind enough to recommend me to churches, and before long I was considering different options. But truth be told, I only cared about one thing and it had nothing to do with being able to preach. My only sister was dying of cancer and I knew I had to be in Ohio near my family. That was my only condition for a job.

Through very little effort on my part, I was hired at a church in Dayton, Ohio. Long before my arrival, this church had prayed and struggled through what role women would play in their young church. The critical story for them was the very first one in the garden. When they read the story, they noticed that the separation between men and women was a result of the fall, and not God's intention. They concluded that the coming of Christ was the ultimate do-over for creation and, instead of living up to the world of the fall, the church should live up to the dream of the garden. Women had already served as elders and had preached occasionally for their worship services. To be in Ohio, to stay in the Christian Church, and to be able to speak and preach seemed to be either an incredible stroke of luck or the hand of God. As a seminary student, I was hesitant to speculate on which it was but, years later, I try just to be grateful.

I have now served in this church for ten years. As the years have passed, I've played different roles in worship arts and discipleship. I serve as the preacher for our weekend services a few times a year, as well as teach classes when I'm able to. I have occasionally stepped into traditional pastoral roles, leading people

through weddings or funerals. But I have also learned that the official affirmation of church leadership does not end the struggle of being a woman in ministry. Of course, ministry in itself is a difficult life for anyone, but there are issues I face as a woman that the girl by the fire never saw coming.

Even though the church affirms me in ministry, there are still cultural barriers—perhaps even emotional barriers—for people to see me as a pastor. I see the people who get up and leave the church when they realize I am up there to preach and not just to deliver the announcements. More than once, I have had people from the church awkwardly introduce me to their friends as the “lady pastor.” I have made myself available for weddings and funerals only to be asked not to do it because they wanted a male pastor. If I get passed over for an opportunity or I’m left out of a meeting, I have to fight not to get swept up into assumptions about *de facto* sexism that wound me and everyone around me.

When I step outside of our church and take part in events involving the larger Christian Church movement, I hesitate to reveal what I really do at the church. I know my life can easily become a divisive topic. I know there are people from my home church who struggle with knowing their support led me to preaching. I suspect they feel torn, supporting me personally but not supporting me ideologically.

This tension feels like nothing compared to the turmoil I often feel inside. Something as small as filling out the “profession” line on forms at the doctor’s office becomes a struggle over identity. Writing *pastor* feels somehow loaded, defiant, more complicated than paperwork should be.

When I listen in on the conversations going on in churches or online forums about the role of women in the church, I want to mourn, battle, and sometimes hide. On my better days, I’m at least glad the conversation is happening. So often churches settle on answers without ever going through the difficult work of holding Scripture up next to the world and to their own hearts, and then letting them push on each other. On my worse days, I find myself wanting to justify my own life and ministry. I want to defend myself and my choices, to demand that people see me as worthy when the real truth is that none of us are. I want to make the case that it’s exactly the submission people prescribe for me that brought me to where I am. What do I do with the way submission brought me to leadership? What are people afraid God will do if I preach? If I sense God on the move in my life, am I just being fooled?

There are also days when I see just how much bigger this all is than me. I see how all of us are called to be conduits of the good news of Jesus in the world. I see how the gospel is written on our own lives through the work of God’s spirit and how we are all called to tell the story. It doesn’t matter whether it’s over a conversation...or in a meeting...or during a church service. Any one of us, on any given day, might be just the right person to proclaim the story of God at work in the world. We may also be just the right hindrance for a person. This is the chance God takes. To tell a perfect story through people whose only qualification is their unworthiness. This is why the broken, beautiful church is the absolute wrong and right vehicle for a message about grace.

So if this is the call of the church, what story does our view on women tell the world about who God is and how God works? More importantly, how does the life of the church reflect the reconciling work of God? Are we modeling separation where we should be modeling cooperation? What are we telling the women and the men of the world about whom God calls us all to be? Are we settling for a lesser picture of what the church can be, and ultimately a lesser kingdom than God wants to bring?

This is partly about what we should tell the young girls gathered around the fire. But it’s also about what it means for the whole world that the church is the bride of Christ.

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