

Let me set the scene for our lesson from the book of Judges today. Moses brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt in what we remember as the Exodus. He brought them within sight of the Promised Land. Joshua received the mantle of leadership from Moses and took the Hebrews into the Promise Land that we refer to as Israel. Between the time of Joshua and the rise of the kings (David, Solomon and others) the twelve tribes of Israel relied on the leadership of those called the Judges.

When things were going well the twelve tribes cared for their own day to day needs without any centralized leadership. When a threat came on the horizon the people of Israel would cry out to God. In response God would designate a person, called a judge, to take on the centralized leadership role to coordinate the efforts of the twelve tribes to repel the threat. Throughout the book of Judges the individual called to leadership was always a man with one exception in the case of Deborah.

In Israel's patriarchal society, the head of government was invariably male. Yet Deborah was so deeply respected that she was the acknowledged leader of several of Israel's tribes. The general leading Israel's forces, Barak, even refused to go into battle unless Deborah accompanied the army. Deborah seemed to break the "glass ceiling" of the patriarchal society of ancient Israel.

The term "glass ceiling" is modern in nature and first coined in March 1984 by Gay Bryant, the former editor of *Working Woman* magazine who was changing jobs to be the editor of *Family Circle*. In an *Adweek* article by Nora Frenkel, Bryant was reported as saying, "Women have reached a certain point—I call it the glass ceiling. They're in the top of middle management and they're stopping and getting stuck." Glass ceiling therefore refers to societal norms that work against an individual or group of individuals obtaining positions of leadership for which they are qualified. Deborah broke through the glass ceiling of her day and time.

That started to make me think of the people, male and female, that broke through the glass ceilings of their day. Today there are many female doctors in America. In fact, there are as many women as men in schools of medicine today. But that was not the case when a woman who served as a role model when Marjorie was thinking of careers. Marjorie's great-aunt was a family doctor in central Indiana back in the 1940's and 50's. That means her great-aunt went Med School at a time when she did not have too many, if any, female peers in the classroom. Talking about break through a glass ceiling, that lady must have had a great deal of intestinal fortitude to pursue her profession aspirations. Yet, it was her professional accomplishments that allowed Marjorie to have a role model when she was considering her professional options.

When I did some fact checking with Marjorie about her great-aunt she told me it would be good to reference Elizabeth Blackwell. "Who?" I asked. She told me that Elizabeth Blackwell was the first woman to receive a medical degree in America. I looked her up and that is quite a story.

Let me share it in part. In the 1840's when Elizabeth Blackwell's decided to study medicine she didn't realized just how difficult it would be to overcome the patriarchal barriers to her goal. However, the difficulty only cemented her resolve. She procured a job teaching music at an academy in Asheville, North Carolina, with the goal of saving up the \$3,000 necessary for her medical school expenses. While in Asheville she lodged with a Reverend John Dickson, who happened to have been a physician before he became a clergyman.

Dickson approved of Blackwell's career aspirations, and allowed her to use the medical books in his library to study. During this time, Dickson soothed her own doubts about her choice. I always like stories where the pastor is a point of support and encouragement!

Blackwell's greatest wish was to be accepted into one of the Philadelphia's medical schools. Upon reaching Philadelphia, Blackwell boarded with Dr. William Elder, and studied anatomy privately with Dr. Jonathan Allen

as she attempted to get her foot in the door at any medical school in Philadelphia. She was met with resistance almost everywhere. Most physicians recommended that she either go to Paris to study, or that she take up a disguise as a man to study medicine. The main reasons offered for her rejection were first that she was a woman and therefore intellectually inferior, and second she might actually prove equal to the task, prove to be competition, and that she could not expect them to "furnish her with a stick to break our heads with".

Out of desperation, she applied to twelve "country schools". Blackwell was finally accepted as a medical student at Geneva Medical College, now Hobart College, located in upstate New York. Her acceptance was a near-accident. The dean and faculty, usually responsible for evaluating an applicant for matriculation, were not able to make a decision due to the special nature of Blackwell's case. They put the issue up to vote by the 150 male students of the class with the stipulation that if one student objected, Blackwell would be turned away. The young men thought this request was so ludicrous that they believed it to be a joke, and responding accordingly, voted unanimously to accept her. She arrived to a less than warm welcome but was in medical school.

When Dr. James Webster, the anatomy professor, got to the reproduction section of his lectures, he asked Blackwell to absent herself, arguing that it would be too vulgar for her delicate mind. Blackwell's eloquent response not only made Webster admit her to the lecture, but also elevated the previously obscene and vulgar nature of the lectures on the topic.

Blackwell received encouragement from both professors and students. However, she experienced a lot of isolation as well. She was looked upon as an oddity by the townspeople of Geneva. In the summer between her terms at Geneva, she returned to Philadelphia, stayed with Dr. Elder, and applied for medical positions in the area to gain clinical experience. The city commission granted her permission to work at The Guardians of the Poor clinic. Blackwell slowly gained acceptance there, although some young resident physicians still would walk out and refuse to assist her in diagnosing and treating her patients. During her time here, Blackwell gained valuable clinical experience. In 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to achieve a medical degree in the United States.

She went on to develop successful practices; first in New York City and then in London and she wrote numerous medical articles as well. I think Dr. Blackwell would be delighted to see women and men alike have all options at their disposal as they consider medicine as a profession today.

Today, we are going to have a time of sharing in the midst of the sermon. I would invite to greet one another now and seat down with two or three other persons and talk about the following questions. When in your life did you experience unique challenges in your professional life or as you were pursuing a dream. Second, what people in middle-America today have special challenges as they pursue their dreams?

Thanks for sharing. Let me share a bit more now. I celebrate glass ceilings being shattered because when that happens it provides opportunities for men as well as women. Marjorie and I have experienced this freedom of choice in the raising of our children. When our children, Daryl and Mackenzie, were infants and toddlers we were fortunate to have a wonderful woman, Linda, come into our home during the day to care for them as we both worked. Linda was great but after about four years she moved. Marjorie and I thought about all our options and we decided it made the most sense for me to take a leave of absence from my work so I could stay at home with the kids until our youngest was in grade school.

I was a stay at home Dad for four years. The most enjoyable but the most demanding work I have ever done. Our kids, their friends and activities kept me going non-stop. There were many times that I pined for the quiet moments of being in a church office contemplating and writing a sermon without the scream of a child, bark of a dog, or mess on the floor to clean-up as the result of an upset stomach.

Yet, I relished the fact that I had the choice to be a stay-at-home father. When both Daryl and Mackenzie were in grade school I returned to work but served a small congregation because I continued to be the primary care

giver in our household. Marjorie always hoped to be a stay at home mother when our children became teenagers and she did take an eight year leave of absence from her medical practice when Daryl and Mackenzie were in Middle and High School. When glass ceilings are shattered they provide men and women with options that are good.

Now, back to our lesson from the Hebrew scriptures. Deborah had the gifts and skills so she became a Judge when Israel needed leadership. The Hebrew word Judge can have the sense either of ruler and military commander or arbitrator of disputes. Deborah fulfills the latter sense of judging as she sits “under the palm of Deborah” in the hill country of Ephraim and the Israelites come to her for judgment in disputes. She was a strong leader and God worked through her just as well as any man that happened to be a Judge in that era.

Deborah is a reminder that cultural traditions and stereotypes too often serve to limit God, who created both male and female in the divine image and gave dominion to both sexes according to Genesis 1:26-27. In addition, Paul proclaims in Galatians 3:28 that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” God sees and we affirm the unlimited potential in each and every person, male and female.

Finally, the shattering of glass ceilings that is reflected in scripture is embraced in the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church as the section on Women reads, in part, “We affirm women and men to be equal in every aspect of their common life. . . . We affirm the right of women to equal treatment in employment, responsibility, promotion and compensation.”

What does the message of Deborah mean for our discipleship as Christians?

It means we can dream and aspire no matter who we are. Male and female; young, middle-age, or senior; black, white or any other shade; poor, comfortable or rich are designed by God to dream and pursue those dreams.

Second, like Pastor Dickson supported and encouraged Elizabeth Blackwell to pursue her dream to become a doctor in the 1840’s we need to look around and find of the “odd duck” who might be challenged and provide them with support and encouragement.

Finally, like John Glenn and Sally Ride, the first American man and woman in space, respectfully, the sky is the limit for all of us! Amen.