To Be or Not to Be — A Pioneer

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When Dr. Lugo asked me to speak on the topic of being a pioneer, my response was immediate: I did not feel like a pioneer, so how could I speak about being one? I agreed to speak about my experiences, but the topic was left a bit undefined. A day or two later the local paper ran its usual comic strips, and one of them made me laugh and I sent a copy to Jessica. It was a strip that runs every day, including little animals who speak and interact. There is a very naïve piglet, a very cynical rat, and the wise ass on the hill who answers questions. (show cartoon).

More seriously: Jessica's request gave me the reason for thinking about what I really had learned about being a "first or only" frequently during the course of teaching, starting in the fall of 1965.

But first, some background: As an undergraduate I had attended a Presbyterian college —small, all women. From there I went directly to seminary in a huge, urban university— Boston University School of Theology. There were very few women in seminary in 1956 and I was one of the even fewer Presbyterians in a Methodist seminary. My interest was not parish ministry

but campus ministry, and that was a field a bit more open to women, and Boston University was one of the few seminaries that had such a program. Much later I realized that the fact that I was not a Methodist was really a help— the school was very ecumenical and welcomed other denominations, though there were few of us. But it meant that during the nine years that I was there— for both the M.Div. and the Ph.D degrees— they accepted very openly points at which my view was different. They thought it was because I was a Presbyterian, but years later I realized that I was free to express myself as a woman even though I also thought I differed only because of belonging to another theological tradition. In a certain sense I was protected in my difference and quite free to reach my own conclusions in a way that probably would not have been true had my only difference been that of gender. But it was strange to go from an all-women's college to an almost exclusively male seminary.

The year I entered seminary—1956— was the first year that the Presbyterians and the Methodists both began allowing women to be ordained. I was not seeking ordination at that point, but I was unaware that it had been forbidden earlier. I thought there was simply prejudice against it, but not a prohibition. I knew that women could be ministers. A cousin of

my mother's in upstate New York— the daughter of an American Baptist Minister—had been ordained in the Baptist church sometime before 1890. By the time I knew her— which would have been in the late 1930s and early 1940s— she and her husband had gone out to the Azusa Street revival and she had become part of the Four Square Gospel church. She had her own congregation which we visited, and they sent missionaries to China and Brazil. So I knew a woman could be a minister. But I also knew my mother was very opposed to what Cousin Mary was doing, mostly because Pentecostals were a strange and a rather counter-cultural reality to her. I could imagine Mary as a pioneer, but that was a little different from what I was doing.

By the time I was finishing seminary it was clear to me I wanted to teach, and so I had continued into the Ph.D. degree program. I suppose I did feel a bit like a pioneer in graduate school. I was the only woman in systematic theology and history of doctrine. I also realized that if I were to teach theology I would want to be ordained. I did not want to teach simply my own theology. I wanted to be seen as someone certified by the church as teaching what the church believed. That for me meant ordination. And so, I began the process in 1960. My accepting a call to teach and do campus ministry was the final step, and so I was ordained as I began

teaching. It was exactly 59 years ago last night that I was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church. In some ways, that was a greater oddity than teaching.

Once I began teaching and was ordained, I definitely felt like a novelty, if not a pioneer. But as I looked back preparing to speak here, there are three events that drastically changed my view both of myself and of the world around me. In that process I lost any sense that I was a pioneer. It is those three events that I would like to dwell on this morning.

The first occurred my second year of teaching. I was part of the Bible and Religion faculty at an undergraduate Methodist college in West Virginia, West Virginia Wesleyan College. (At that point there were no women teaching in accredited seminaries except in the fields of Christian education and practical theology.) I was the first woman in the department at the college, and as far as I knew one of the few women in the country in a similar situation. That is, it was a church-related school where all the faculty in that department were ordained ministers. That meant that since few denominations that had such colleges also ordained women there was little opportunity for women to join a faculty. In fact, the only other woman I knew of was

another ordained Presbyterian teaching in a Moravian college.

That spring in 1967 I was invited to attend a conference at Notre Dame University on the theology of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, which had concluded its work in December of 1965. My name had been submitted by my major professor in graduate school who was also attending and knew my interest in the subject. It was a small gathering of about 250 people, half of whom had actually attended the Council as bishops or experts advising the committees, (including a few Protestant theologians) and the rest of us were in the gallery listening to the lectures and discussions on the floor below. Very quickly it became clear I was the only Protestant woman in attendance. That is, I was the only woman not wearing the habit of a religious sister---a nun. There were several dozen nuns, all of whom I discovered had multiple degrees in theology from prestigious universities, mostly in Europe. They taught religion courses in colleges, and some were the presidents and deans of colleges run by their religious orders. They were merely the tip of the iceberg as to the number of women teaching theology and Bible in church-related colleges. The only difference was they were Roman Catholic, and I was Protestant. It was a revelation! I was not as alone as I felt I was. I simply

needed to expand my horizon beyond what I knew of the church. My immediate feeling was one of relief!! Clearly, I did not have to prove to myself or anyone else that it was quite possible for a woman to do what I was doing. There were probably hundreds if not thousands of us doing it.

So, my first learning was this: if for some reason— gender, ethnicity, language, and so forth— you feel alone, as if you are the only one or one of a very few doing something, look beyond your own circle of church life and you may find a great deal of company. Most of us, especially in the church, live in the small pond of our own denomination or other denominations like ours. But the church of Jesus Christ is far bigger than any of our limited experiences of it. If you feel alone in what you are doing, look beyond those borders. In some other church, in some other country, surely you will find someone who looks like you doing what you are doing. Simply that knowledge can make you feel less isolated and therefore less like a pioneer.

I spent five years teaching undergraduates and fully enjoyed it. And then, unexpectedly, the door opened to teach in seminary— the goal I had had from the moment I entered graduate

school. That year —the Fall of 1970— I began to teach church history at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. At the same time, another woman began to teach Old Testament at Princeton Seminary. We knew each other, but we did not know any other woman teaching in seminary in the classical seminary disciplines of theology, Bible, history and ethics. Even women who had degrees in systematic theology— if they taught in a seminary (and by then there were two or three that I knew about) were still classified as teaching practical theology or were librarians teaching research methods.

My second great surprise came after a few months at Louisville. Louisville was a radically different situation than teaching undergraduates. In West Virginia, even though I was the only woman in my department, there were other women faculty in languages, history, and so forth. There were also a lot of female students in my classes. In Louisville, there were no other women faculty at all. Nor were there many women students— probably less than five per cent. Both the faculty and the students were extremely welcoming, but even so there were times it seemed quite lonely.

And then came an invitation to a Christmas party. I need to explain something. Louisville was an old seminary with a very new campus and all new buildings. The main building had two floors. It was built into a hillside, so entering from the main quadrangle you came into the second floor. All the administrative offices were there. If you entered from the parking lot at the back, you came into the first floor, and all the faculty offices were down there. So I was the only woman on the first floor. But the offices on the second floor had many women— all the support staff for the various offices. So, this invitation was for the staff Christmas party. The men on the second floor were generally not teaching faculty but held faculty status, and therefore were not viewed as part of the staff. In another building, the librarian, a man, held faculty status, but all the other library employees were women staff. I was not aware of all of this, so I was not really sure who would be at the staff Christmas party. But I thought I would go.

When I got there, I realized I was the only faculty person invited. And when I entered, I was greeted with great applause---which shocked me! Then the President's secretary said: "Finally, one of us made it to the first floor." I was speechless. I had not realized until that moment how worried I had been about how these other women would perceive me: Did they think of me as

out of my place? Did they resent my being there? That was part of my reaction. The greater part was that I realized I had not thought of myself as “one of them” because I was faculty, and they were staff. And yet, they had thought of me as one of them— hence the invitation. Even more— they had thought of my presence in the faculty as a victory for them.

That experience made an enormous impression upon me. It meant that I had support I had not expected. It also meant I had a responsibility to think of their interests in the faculty meetings. It made me think differently about faculty wives and student wives. All these other women had been there long before me; so how could I feel like I was the first and only? If the first event back in West Virginia had taught me to look for support beyond my immediate horizon to the far wider church, this event brought me back. I needed to re-evaluate the very local context and see who was like me beyond whatever social status the context imposed.

Both churches and educational institutions have hierarchies within them, even if they try to downplay them. Faculty, staff, students— these categories and the many levels within them are powerful. Ministers, administrators, missionaries, lay leaders: all these play a role both in the

local church and in the denomination as a whole. These categories are often powerful enough for us not to see what is blindingly obvious: We all are more —and less— than the status an institution gives us. We are also part of a culture, a language group, an age group, a gender— and status tries to cover over these realities. To break through and see who else in our context is like us---that is freeing beyond words. And it can help break down the barriers that status creates and the church does not need.

I was at Louisville Seminary only three and a half years. It would happily have been more. I had just been granted tenure— but then I met Justo, and everything changed. Providence had evidently arranged things so that I met the President of Columbia Theological Seminary in the Atlanta area the day before I met Justo in March of 1973. The president was on the Louisville campus and asked to see me. He knew I was scheduled to be on sabbatical the spring of the following academic year and he wanted me to come to Columbia for that time. I would have housing, and so forth, and I only needed to teach the one course —"the Church and Women"— that he knew I was teaching at Louisville. He had no women faculty and a few very vocal women students who were not happy about the situation. I said I would consider it. The next

day I went to a meeting of a new triennium of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches in New York. I was representing the Presbyterians. Justo was there representing the Methodists. By the end of the academic year we planned to marry and the question was where we would live and where we would work. Clearly big questions. I told the president of Louisville what the plans were. Justo went three miles from Emory to see the president of Columbia whom he knew— and I had told Justo about the possibility of my at least teaching one course there the following spring. So there were some people looking for possibilities— even if it might mean commuting between Louisville and Atlanta. Then in August, the person teaching church history at Columbia notified the president he was not going to continue. So it was that I finished teaching in Louisville in December of 1973, and we were married in the chapel there during exam week. We moved into faculty housing at Columbia that day, flew to Mexico City on Christmas Eve to begin our so-called honeymoon with Justo lecturing every night, and a week later —January 2, 1974— I began teaching full time at Columbia Seminary, where I taught until I retired in 2002.

Those were surprising years— especially from 1974. Somehow the picture of an Hispanic man

married to an Anglo woman, both theologians, one Methodist, the other Presbyterian, captured the imagination of both denominations as well as the wider church. There was a constant demand for us to do lectures or Bible studies together at national or regional meetings. The audiences were largely Anglo. What we learned very quickly was that Justo was to say any of the criticisms of negative attitudes about women, and I was to say the critical words about racism or U. S. culture.

Justo was still teaching at Emory, so I now had the odd experience of being a faculty wife at one institution and faculty at another one. What I had learned at that Christmas party at Louisville was a great help at this point. (Needless to say, faculty husbands were a complete novelty, especially when that person was also faculty at another institution.) There was no other woman on the faculty at Columbia for ten years, none at Emory during that time, nor back at Louisville had there been another. The great change in seminary faculty would not occur until the late 1980s and into the 1990s. By now, many seminaries —except for those of very conservative denominations— have about equal numbers, and there is no issue. What made an even greater difference was that many of the young men who came to teach had themselves been trained by

women faculty in seminary and graduate school.

Obviously, gender is but one issue in regard to seminaries, but it was in many respects the easiest. The traditional seminaries had been created by the denominations that required a certain education for ordination. Often the faculty were all or mostly ordained members of that denomination. The women students who entered, and later the women faculty who joined, were part of the same denomination. They had grown up in the same churches, they knew what church life was like, what the ministry was to do, what was the character of the worship, and so forth. The assimilation of women students and faculty could be relatively seamless, although that does not mean women might not bring something different to the table both in interpretation and in leadership styles.

While I was teaching at Columbia a third event occurred. It is a little harder to explain this one, but let me try. I was asked to be part of a dissertation committee for a woman who was working on a Th. D. degree that was joint between Emory and Columbia. This degree was only in the field of clinical pastoral care, a very difficult field that prepared supervisors of clinical education

for pastors, generally in hospital situations. She was a Southern Baptist —ordained— which meant she was part of a group of Southern Baptist churches that had formed its own association and allowed for women to be ordained.

Her dissertation was on women in the Southern Baptist Church who had developed forms of hospital chaplaincy, pastoral counseling, whatever it could be called before the actual field of "pastoral counseling" with its credentialing national associations had come into being in the late 1940s and 1950s. She had found many such women, had learned their biographies, their influence on others, their actual creation of positions they held— all without being ordained, without seminary degrees, simply because they saw a need and felt called to fill it.

Many were pastor's wives, others were leaders in their congregations, some had secular training that helped. These women had helped create a field of ministry in which they could not be credentialed when such national groups began the process. Ordination was required, and these women were not ordained. Later that requirement would be changed and certain seminary degrees substitute and then it was discovered that many Catholic nuns who were

carrying out such work— wished to have the certification. It was considered perfectly normal for nuns to do spiritual counseling!

But what affected me so much was not simply these biographies, impressive as they were. It was the fact that without exception, the women were joyful in what they did. They knew they had found the opening for developing their vocation. That was enough. They did not seem to notice the barriers. They simply figured ways around them. They saw human need and they found ways to respond to it. Whether it was children in a hospital ward or parents grieving the loss of a hospitalized child or someone grieving in their home or a family struggling with a child involved with the law— these women found ways to respond in such a way that nurses and doctors, funeral home directors and juvenile courts began asking for their help, or pastors knew who to call on to help a grieving family. And from that, positions developed that needed to be filled when that pioneer left or when another hospital or church saw what could happen with such a person on the staff.

These women did not see limitations; they saw opportunities. And because they had an

opportunity to carry out the vocation God had given them, they were content, even as they worked for change. They were more than content: they were satisfied. What seemed like "pioneering" on the outside as others looked at them, on the inside was sheer joy that there was an opening, however slight, to do what they felt called by God to do. They took the opportunity and developed it beyond what anyone thought possible. That was what I learned from her dissertation.

That history had two clear effects on me: first, it helped me understand what I had experienced; and second, beyond that, it made me look back at the church history I was teaching to see where women in my field of theology were able to carve out for themselves ways to carry out their vocation in spite of the limitations the society imposed, even though the world around them would not say they were teaching theology. That is, where could I have found myself had I been born centuries ago and yet with the same sense of vocation. And I found such places. So I discovered companionship in the past in ways I could never have imagined. It changed my teaching.

There was another event that it some ways ties all of these together. The summer of the first year we were married —that is, summer 1974— we were in Ecuador for a meeting of the division on the ministry of CELAM— the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Latin America. Justo was there to give a paper on Protestant understandings of ministry. The enormous shortage of priests in Latin America was a major theme running through the conference, and the issue of women clergy in Protestant churches came up. There was openness to ordaining women among the Latin American bishops, but it was not based on the right of women to be ordained, as was typical in this country. It was based on the right of the people to have pastors.

That is the bottom line. God calls and equips people for various ministries within the life of the church and its mission in the world. The institutions of the church often are not ready to see and encourage the candidates that could come forward. Yet that does not mean they will not find a way to do what needs to be done. They may challenge the system directly, although that is usually not a beginning point. They will find ways that are very local, that do not reach the notice of the church at large, and yet it creates a ministry. It begins something that cannot be stopped. In that sense, God is the ultimate pioneer; the one who opens doors that seem to be

closed; the one who pushed people to do things they had not imagined possible. And for that, I am devoutly thankful.