

The Power of Girls

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

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Has anyone purchased Girl Scout cookies this season? I bought eight boxes and didn't eat one cookie. There was a time when I called our neighbor, a Girl Scout, my dealer. Just a tiny habit. I'm elated to say I've liberated myself from the cookie. I recently received a letter from the Girl Scouts of Gulfcoast Florida. The letter was asking if I would consider offering our space for Girl Scout Troop meetings. Before I could answer I needed to do a little research. They passed the LGBT test. They passed the gender identity test. They passed the dogma test. They passed the reproductive justice test. It turns out that the Girl Scouts is a cool organization. What struck me most was the empowerment of girls which means the empowerment of women. They use the slogan, "Believe in the power of G.I.R.L." G is for go-getter, I is for innovator, R is for risk-taker, and L is for leader. I easily responded that yes, we would like to be part of the empowerment of girls by opening our doors, offering a place for the scouts to meet, and making sure all girls have access to the Girl Scouts. We will recognize the power of girls.

The theme for my messages this month is liberation. I've delivered a message of our congregation being a place of liberation, I invited two guest speakers to talk to us about racial and transgender liberation, and I plan on, later this month, offering a message on threats to liberation. I discovered that I hadn't considered the liberation of women. Joyce Ramay asked if I would someday offer a message related to women's rights. I agreed I would. But it wasn't until the University of Georgia students were here and Marsha Bates introduced herself as woman who is a scientist did I feel the importance of writing a message, this message today, related to women's liberation. In hindsight I thought, "Of course!"

It's easy for me to talk about the need for the liberation of girls and women because I've witnessed the struggle and some successes. I am also called by Unitarian Universalism to seek such liberation. The women in my family were strong. Very strong. They had opinions, were direct, and didn't allow the men in our family to exclude them or not give them influence and power. My grandmother got divorced and literally told the Catholic church to go to hell in 1969. Heck, we even watched Maude as a family. Do you remember that tv series? Maude starred Bea Arthur as Maude, an outspoken, middle-aged, politically liberal woman living in suburban Tuckahoe, Westchester County, New York?. Maude embraced the tenets of women's liberation, always voted for Democratic Party candidates, and advocated for civil rights and racial and gender equality. However, her overbearing and sometimes domineering personality often got her into trouble when speaking about these issues.

It didn't matter if the women in my life were strong or that we watched Maude because society and culture outside the doors of our homes kept women down, relegated them to roles and jobs just as it has been for centuries. I'm on the board of a few community based organizations and just the other day I gave feedback regarding an organization's by-laws. Within their by-laws he

and his were used throughout. I know sometimes when we refer to humanity we may use “man”, “mans”, or “men” but in this situation it was wrong and exclusive. No one noticed. So, it’s easy to say that we may be blind to the lack of women’s liberation.

In the ancient, classical and medieval world, women's rights differed somewhat from culture to culture. Some of these differences were: whether women were considered full citizens or were considered the equivalent of slaves or minors under the authority of husbands or fathers, whether women could move around freely or were confined largely to the home, whether women could freely choose or refuse marriage partners, or end a marriage, whether women had custody of children, especially after a divorce or in a dispute with the children's father, whether women could dress as they liked, whether women could own property or run businesses and control their own wages, income and wealth, which trades, occupations or professions were closed to women or more difficult for women than men to enter, whether women could be educated at all, or to the same level as men were, whether and how women had a voice in the public sphere, including voting or otherwise influencing the government and helping select those governing, whether women could represent themselves or others in legal proceedings, such as lawsuits and court actions, whether women could inherit the right to titles and rulership.

Some hear what I just told you about the rights of women in our history and say look how far we’ve come. Sure, some things have changed for women and girls, but in 2019 women are faced still with lack of opportunity, lack of fair and equal compensation, are pushed back by attitudes and beliefs that are ancient and still hold women back in the present. The way a person experiences the world and the way she is taught to understand the world has a great deal to do with the possibilities she sees in the world for herself and for others. An interesting confluence, isn’t it?

The U.S. Constitution prohibits discrimination based on race but not gender. Women’s equality is dependent on legislation which can be repealed or diminished with a pen stroke; women’s rights are at the whim of elected officials. It is our foundational document and it sends a powerful message. Women are over half of this country and should never have been excluded in the first place. The 14th amendment promises “equal protection of the law” but was passed after the Civil War with no intent or instance of including gender. It doesn’t protect women from pay discrimination, pregnancy discrimination, or gender-based violence. It’s discouraging because America would rather be led by a man who calls its women pigs than bring a woman to power themselves. It would rather vote for a man who brags about sexual assault and unapologetically objectifies other people, rather than be led by a woman who has spent her life trying to convince her country, and the world, that “women’s rights are human rights.

Let’s ask the question – what do women want? And to answer it, let me offer a somewhat silly story inspired by Arthurian legend. According to this story, young King Arthur was ambushed and imprisoned by the queen of a neighboring kingdom. The queen offered Arthur his freedom on condition that he give the correct answer to one question: “What do women really want?” Arthur would have a year in which to figure out the answer. But, on his honor, he must return in a year and answer the question correctly. If he could not answer he would be put to death. Of

course, honor was very important to King Arthur, and he promised to return with the correct answer.

Such a question might perplex many men, and to young Arthur it seemed impossible. He returned to Camelot and began to ask everyone. The bishop said, "Women want salvation, of course" but that didn't seem right to Arthur. Merlin said he didn't understand women at all, and what his wife wanted was a divorce. Lancelot said, "Kisses." Guinevere said, "Romantic love." That seemed insufficient to Arthur, but it was better than any of the other advice he had received.

Arthur wasn't satisfied by any of the answers they gave him. If you were giving advice to King Arthur, what would you say to him? What do women really want? (Ask for answers from the congregation at this point.) What in the end, did King Arthur's say? He finally came up with this answer: "What women really want is to be in charge of their own lives." How well do you think he did? Should the queen let him live?

The best hope for improving the lot of all women, and for closing the gender gap is to work for women to be in charge of their own lives and to simply be in charge. Only when women wield power in sufficient numbers will we create a society that genuinely works for all women. That will be a society that works for everyone. Justice for women goes beyond any revolution. It's not just a call to action. It's a demand for results. It's not just in the streets and at the ballot boxes, it's in the laws our representatives create and the truth we expect to be told.

All Faiths will open our doors to girls. Let us open our hearts and our minds and act. Let us do something about the liberation of women.

May it be so.