***The Story of the Liberal Ladies Sewing Society***

**A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

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It is my practice to honor Unitarian Universalist women on Mother’s Day. Today we honor several women who were leaders within Unitarianism. But first I want us to reflect on the church of our childhood and young adulthood. Where were the women? What were the women doing? I was raised Catholic which is a faith that does not ordain women, my one, of few, criticisms of the Pope. Whether the Catholic church knew it or liked it the women, mostly nuns, were the movers and the shakers in the church. They were the people doing most of the important and tough work. I wonder if you, too, witnessed the women of the church caring for the sick, feeding the poor, teaching the children, lovingly and authentically ministering to the congregation. When I was a child my mother would invite my teachers, nuns, to dinner a few times a year, and they came! I remember feeling like I had gotten a full dose of Sister Elizabeth Ann and Sister Donna Jean during the day and didn’t want them to ruin my evening too. I wondered, “Are nuns even allowed out at night? Surely there is a rule that can save me from these dinners! There must be a Saint to pray to prevent a visitation. There are vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. There must be a vow of mandatory evening house arrest.’ One thing you should also know is that a priest never stepped foot in my house.

Later in life I realized that women in the church were heroes and made the magic happen. I was a chaplain in a Forensic Unit at a state hospital alongside a Catholic nun who was also a chaplain. I learned that she was bending and breaking the rules by giving people the ministry they needed and never waited for the priest, the man, to show up to do the work. As chaplains we both gave last rites and provided comfort until death waiting for a priest willing to show up. It was this experience that taught me the behind the scenes roles and work of religious women. Women truly impacted their faith by their unnoticed contributions, their silent power, and quiet ministries.

Catholic women aren’t the only women making an impact. Take for example the Unitarian women who were part of the Liberal Ladies Sewing Society of Portland, Oregon. They created and formed a Unitarian congregation in the mid nineteenth century. Before I tell you their story, let us go further back in history, the Ancient Near East, to reflect on roles of women. A major consensus among scholars and students of ancient studies is that women in ancient times were second class, oppressed, and subservient to men. Though women of this time, in our view, may have not treated justly, I ask you to consider the role women did have in their communities during this time. Women mostly were confined to household roles. Most of us were taught that this was oppressive. But consider changing your thinking. These perspectives reflect the viewpoint that male dominance in a society inevitably indicates female inferiority and subservience. But is that assumption, so pervasive within the study of women in ancient times, accurate? Is there another way to view ancient society?

A decade ago I was a member of the Women’s United Nations Human Rights Network as part of my studies. I became more and more interested in feminist biblical scholarship. While in seminary I studied the Old Testament far beyond my requirements. While reading the text of the Hebrew Bible I found myself asking, “Who are the women not named but are definitely there in the shadows of the stories in the Bible?” and naming the impact and strength of Ruth, Naomi, Esther, Sarah, Athaliah, Bathsheba, Hagar, Dinah, and Deborah, the only female judge in Israel. Most influential to me was feminist biblical scholar Carol Meyer. She was then Professor of Religious Studies at Duke University. Meyer’s ideas present a very different picture than most scholarly research on the ancient world which tends to view ancient history from two main assumptions: first, a woman was confined to home doing less important things than a man; and second, if a woman was part of a family with a man at the head, she was automatically oppressed. But are these assumptions correct? Were women as a rule isolated, confined, and subservient in the ancient world? Her study attempts to find answers to these questions by examining Hebrew and other ancient Near Eastern laws from the standpoint that the laws of a society reveal its values. These laws yield strong evidences that women in ancient society may not have been universally viewed or treated in that manner, but instead were seen as an integral and valued part of the family and community. Let us keep this in mind as we learn about our mid nineteenth century Unitarian sisters of Portland, Oregon.

As told by Heather Doyle in the *UU World* magazine, In 1865, Portland, Oregon was a frontier town. More than 5,000 Portland inhabitants lived on the frontier, where drinking, gambling, and disorder was major. Perhaps such goings-on created fertile ground for piety, as Portland also boasted “more than the usual proportion of Christian people” for a frontier town, according to Earl Morse Wilbur’s History of the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, 1867–1892, published in 1893. Christians attended young Portland’s five Protestant churches and one Catholic church. A dispersed group of Unitarians also attended the “orthodox” Christian churches (today’s mainline Protestant denominations), since there was no Unitarian church. In fact, many didn’t realize there were other Unitarians in town.

During this period, Unitarianism was not a creedless denomination; rather, along with Universalism, it represented the liberal vanguard of Protestant Christianity. Unitarians saw Jesus as a powerful role model but rejected his divinity. At the time, the Christian orthodoxy really resented Unitarians for calling themselves Christian. A battle began. In Portland, the battle intensified in 1865 when the Congregational minister used several Sunday sermons to launch “a violent attack upon the Unitarian faith. In the pews were Mary E. Frazar and Sarah J. Burrage. Though the friends had longed for a Unitarian home of their own—in fact, Frazar and her husband offered Unitarian services at their farm—it took this flare-up of anti-Unitarianism to rouse them to action.

“They were mad as hell,” says Cynthia Grant Tucker, professor emerita of English at the University of Memphis and the author of several UU history books, including Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier. “They were worshipping at other denominations, and they were being insulted,” she says. “Those women were not going to be referred to as heretics.”

In December of 1865, Frazar, Burrage, and five other women founded the Ladies’ Sewing Society to raise funds to establish a Unitarian church in Portland. In their first year, their weekly sewing sessions earned $400. They also organized events, becoming “the center of organized life among the liberal Christians” in Portland, Wilbur writes. By late 1867, Portland’s Unitarians had bought land and built a chapel largely funded by the sewing proceeds and called their first minister. Though focused, organized, and aspirational, the Ladies’ Sewing Society was not a revolutionary band of early feminists. Rather, its members acted in line with the day’s expectations of women’s “role as moral authorities” in the family following the gradual expansion of that role into the public sphere. Not unlike what we hear in Carol Meyer’s scholarship.

From the beginning, community service took center stage, as the Ladies’ Sewing Society supported the poor and reached out to Portland’s other vulnerable groups, with a watchful eye on women and children. This brand of service mirrored the era’s Anglo-Saxon ideology of creating a “purer” society, as defined by financially privileged whites. Nonetheless, a lasting tone was established: community outreach is still one of the group’s—and the church’s—core values.

The Ladies’ Sewing Society’s particular blend of financial support and humanitarianism has evolved with the times. In 1902, the group’s fundraising saved First Church from financial ruin, while women’s suffrage divided members. Decades later, Oregon feminist movement founder and UU Women’s Federation representative Eleanor Davis was a member of the by-then-renamed Women’s Alliance. Today, the Ladies’ Sewing Society lives on as the Alliance. The group’s original ideals, “fellowship, lifelong learning, spiritual growth, and service are the core principles of who they are today. The group raises several thousand dollars each year with its annual Greens Sale, a wintertime sale of greens such as wreaths. The proceeds go to Portland-area nonprofits and to meet unmet needs in the church. Moreover, the Alliance provides support and community for its own members.

One hundred and fifty-three years after the Ladies’ Sewing Society brought “liberal Christianity to this rough-and-tumble frontier town. “We come from good stock where women’s contributions were valued.”

Let us now praise famous women,

our ancestors in their generations.

There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,

and made a name for themselves by their valor;

those who gave counsel because they were intelligent;

those who spoke in prophetic oracles;

those who led the people by their counsels

and by their knowledge of the people’s lore…

those who composed musical tunes,

or put verses in writing…

Some of them have left behind a name,

so that others declare their praise.

But of others there is no memory;

they have perished as though they had never existed…

But these were women

whose righteous deeds [need not be] forgotten;

[We,] their descendants, stand by their covenants…

and their glory will never be blotted out.

[Through us,] their names live on

generation after generation.

[Let] us declare their wisdom,

And the congregation proclaim their praise.

Adapted from Sirach (Eclesiasticus) 44:1-1 5

Today, this Mother’s Day, Let us honor these women, all women, for their mothering spirits.

May it be so.