

Reflection from Sunday, March 8, International Women's Day

By Rebekah Hill, Providence Heights Liturgist

When Father Greg asked me to give the reflection today we talked about the choice of Gospels. There was the option of using the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, the Gospel we usually hear during the Year A cycle or when we have candidates for the sacraments of initiation. There was also the choice to stay with the Gospel we heard today: Jesus cleansing the temple. Today is International Women's Day, a day of celebrating the achievements of women throughout the world while recognizing the need for equality for women at work, at home and as citizens.

You are probably thinking, "How does this Gospel relate to this day for women?" When we dig into the text, we find that Jesus was angry because those selling animals and changing money were taking advantage of the pilgrims coming to pray in the temple. Jewish law required every man to make a sacrifice of two doves or pigeons and a monetary donation. When the pilgrims journeyed from afar, it was more difficult to carry animals with them so the sellers came on the scene and charged ridiculous prices for the birds. Monetary donations had to be made with Jewish currency, a half shekel, but the money used in daily life was the Roman coin. The money changers offered the exchange but also charged a convenience fee. Jesus saw these dishonest men taking advantage of people who were poor and decided to change the "status quo" by throwing all of the sellers and money-changers out of the temple. Nothing should block those who seek to pray from doing so.

This is also true of women throughout the world. Nothing should block any woman from reaching her true potential. I could talk to you today about wage inequality, government policies that bar women from an education or the right to vote, or the lack of opportunities for women to advance in their field of choice. What I want to talk about is something I have seen throughout my own life and continue to see today, something that saddens me deeply. I want to talk about how women and girls, through word and action, can treat other women and girls so poorly. I want to share some of my journey.

When I was in junior high school, I was attending a Catholic school in Pittsburgh. I was a good student and had begun to work more seriously on my musical pursuits. In my case, getting good grades led to many girls in my class being jealous and sometimes just plain mean. I did not have many friends and was cornered in the girls' restroom on one occasion where several girls bullied me through the use of hateful words. Some girls thought that because my mother worked as the school's librarian that I received special treatment. This was definitely not the case. My mom often told me that we both had jobs when we went to school: she was the librarian and I was a student. This did not mean that I could not tell her (or my dad) about my experiences with bullies, and I did, but when we were home. They both told me that it was important to stand up for myself and to know that I was fine just how I was: a smart young woman with a musical talent. At school, I learned to use my own words to shut down the bullies in my class. I did not

provoke them, but would often say, “I’m sorry you feel that way” and walk away from the situation. I was also able to rely on music as a comfort and release, and I had a great music teacher who encouraged me in my piano studies and singing. I know it is not that easy for girls today, especially when the mean words can also be sent via phone texts or posted on services like Snapchat. This is why it is so important to listen to the girls in your life when they are troubled. My mom was a great listener and now that I have two nieces I try to be a good listener too.

I was grateful to leave junior high school behind, I must admit. High school was better and college was great. In college, I pursued my music studies and was excited about a career as an accompanist for chamber musicians and singers. Once I began taking auditions for positions and playing for recitals and opera productions as a professional pianist, I discovered how hard it could be for a woman in my field. Sometimes it was quite obvious. I went to Chicago to audition for a summer opera program and as soon as I walked in the room and saw the panel of men who would make the decision, I knew I would not be the pianist chosen. I was right: a man was hired for the job. Sometimes, it was not so obvious but once I recognized the issue it actually made me angrier than losing a job to a man. I really enjoyed, and still do, playing recitals with singers. In school, you were often paired with fellow students so you did not really choose the musicians to work with for a project. In the “real” world, you could be hired to play for anyone and I began to notice how often women singers would choose a man to be their accompanists. Why? It was not because men played better than women. I observed that women did not hire other women because they did not want the attention pulled away from them onstage. These singers felt so insecure that hiring a man seemed a safer option. I never understood this since it should be about the music, but I guess some women felt that my dress would be prettier, that my smile might be nicer, or something like that. Women were reducing other women to objects.

Now that I have been working as a professional pianist for over 25 years I see this type of behavior diminishing, but it is still there. I am grateful that I have found wonderful colleagues with whom I work on a regular basis. We are true collaborators, equals in creating music. One such person is Kathryn Barnard, the artistic director for the Pittsburgh School for the Choral Arts. I am so proud to be the pianist for 3 girl choir ensembles with PSCA. I have such a fulfilling musical experience in the work I do with them and I also see how an environment that celebrates young women is so important. In a recent article talking about the 10-year anniversary of the organization, Kathryn was quoted, “I tell them, ‘if you want to look at the most important person in the choir, look at the person next to you and then look in the mirror.’” That is a powerful message. I have also found great joy working for and among the Sisters of Divine Providence. Not only do I have the privilege of celebrating liturgies with them but I also get to hear about their lives as women who live with great passion and have wonderful stories about their work as teachers, nurses, psychologists, lawyers, social workers, physical therapists and a myriad of other careers. They are amazing women.

Amazing is an adjective I would also use to describe women who are mothers. Though my path in life has not included that role, and I do feel fulfilled as a woman without having children, I admire and respect women who are mothers. I am very lucky that I was raised by a great mom and also had two grandmothers who had a large impact on who I am today. It often saddens me that many women who are mothers in today's society are not respected in the role they have in raising children. In addition, I observe some mothers who feel they are in competition with other mothers. They can be very catty and judge how fellow mothers raise their children. I have seen how this affects my sister, Leah, the mother of two daughters.

As a recently divorced woman she is quite sensitive about her evolving role as a mom without a husband. I know she has been hurt by other women who feel that they are doing a "better" job as a mom. This is so far from the truth. My sister is a great mom. How do I know? I see how my nieces are developing as smart, strong and sensitive women. Last month, we celebrated World Marriage Day in the Catholic Church. In our own chapel we asked married couples to renew their commitment to one another and blessed them. Last year at my sister's parish, married couples, widows, and widowers were asked to stand at the end of the liturgy to receive a blessing. Leah did not stand as she is no longer married. My older niece looked over to her and noticed that she seemed sad and uncomfortable, perhaps left out of the picture as a divorced parent. At that moment my niece took her mom's hand and whispered, "That's ok, Mom. You don't need a husband because you are awesome without one." I think that speaks volumes for the kind of mother my sister is and is true for other divorced moms, widowed moms and single moms.

The theme for this International Women's Day 2015 is "Make It Happen." I really believe this not only means advocating for change for women throughout the world- giving them more opportunities in employment, education, voting rights- but also encouraging women to empower one another. The status quo has to change. Just as Jesus threw the unjust sellers and money-changers out of the temple, women need to throw out the unjust words and actions that are used as weapons against each other. Women should celebrate one another and honor the Spirit God that is inside them. By supporting one another, women can then be powerful advocates for the women in their neighborhood, country and throughout the world. If our words and actions can be rooted in love, encouragement and sisterhood the lives of women today and tomorrow will be changed. It is my hope that every woman- young and old- can look in the mirror every day and say, "Nothing will stop me from reaching my potential." Make it happen!