

**PHENOMENAL WOMEN  
WIM CONFERENCE 2008**

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**Leviticus 19:18:** “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the **LORD**.”

**John 1:1-4; John 21:24-25; I John 1:1-4**

**John 1:1-4:** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

**John 21:24-25:** <sup>24</sup>This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. <sup>25</sup>But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

**I John 1:1-4:** We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—<sup>2</sup>this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—<sup>3</sup>we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

One of my favorite poets is T. S. Eliot, whom I usually think of as very British, very Anglican, and in his erudite eloquence very distant from our everyday reality. It turns out that he was born and grew up not far from here in St. Louis, born in the year of our Lord 1888, just 120 years ago. His life as are all human lives was imprinted by the ambiguities of changing times, both the legacy of his outspoken grandfather, the Rev. Greenleaf Eliot, Jr., a well-known advocate of women's rights, and Eliot's own experiences with transforming opportunities for women. One of his poems speaks to those ambiguities of changing times and expectations for women as he describes a "Miss Nancy" who "strode across the hills and broke them, who rode to hounds over the cow pasture, who smoked and danced all the modern dances" – "and her aunts were not sure how they felt about it, but they knew that it was modern."

Not everyone is prepared to go with the times as they are a-changin' – we know that all too well, do we not?

As I reflected upon our days together here in Eliot's hometown, some of his most famous words kept coming to mind. The source is the poem at the end of the "Four Quartets," "Little Gidding," named for a site in England where a religious community had been established in 1626 to live out the love of God in the particularities of their lives together in that place and time. He wrote these words during transformative change in his own life shortly after he became a British citizen and an Anglican, and during world transformative change as

the nations careened between the two great wars in the first half of the last century.

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from...

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

Quick now, here, now, always—  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.

In those words do you hear echoes of John, both gospel and letters? Jesus who came in human flesh to dwell among us was with God from the beginning, and was God. He came into time from eternity and at the end of his time on earth the whole world could not contain all the books it would take to tell his story. Eternal reality is enacted within time and its vicissitudes; time cannot encompass the heights and depths of eternity's story; but the essence conveyed in this one

brief life is sufficient to draw us into a life of exploration that is here, now, always, toward God's ending. Through the Alpha and the Omega the profound shines in the simplicity of a story that from start to finish echoes with eternity and is all about love. The "crowned knot of fire" symbolizes fire that becomes ever stronger in its burning, reaching out from eternity into the timeless now, reaching out from the fullness of Triune fellowship to encompass all creation and you and me, enjoining us and empowering us to love one another for the sake of the end of the story when "all manner of thing shall be well," or, as we might join Paul in saying, when God shall be all in all.

A condition of complete simplicity (Costing not less than everything)...

Which brings us to what we are all about as women called within the particularities of our time and places to mediate the good news of the gospel: relationships are the heart and soul of what we do as pastoral leaders, and relationships are our strength.

- Relationships are our most valuable creations even beyond the eloquent words we seek to craft.
- In fact, relationships are God's means to stop humanity on our headlong journey through life and change our direction to bring us back to the persons we were created to be together.
- And in the particularities of human life as we experience it, enduring relationships sooner or later exact a price.

Is that not what God has done in Jesus Christ, coming from eternity into time to create relationships with us, paying a price not less than everything to reconcile us into authentic relationship and therefore abundant life -- such a beautiful picture that our hearts yearn to be embraced by it and enter into it?

A picture can never depict the fullness of reality but nevertheless truly is worth a thousand words. In fact, we preachers who value words highly and seek to shape them meticulously as the tools of our trade really get it that a picture's power is beyond all our well-turned phrases to paint truth. The whole world cannot contain enough words for ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ to convey such wondrous love of God for this entire benighted, beloved assortment of humanity.

I thought about all this the other day as I was sorting through my collection of photographs in the never-ending process of preparing to retire and move from Paoli, Pennsylvania to Tellico, Tennessee. The journey through the piles of pictures was a journey through the past three decades of ministry. Each one has unbelievable power to conjure up not just the events imaged but all the emotions of those high holy days as well as those mundane moments of ministry, the preaching and the teaching, the weddings and the funerals, the picnics and the potlucks, the endless hours of meetings with committees and the endless hours with books and at the computer, or even way back when at the typewriter.

But most of all, the photos bring to mind the relationships at the heart of ministry, some easy and natural, many requiring difficult work, all of them beautiful because they play a role in the journey of real human beings toward God's vision of what shall surely someday be. It may not surprise you that some of my most traumatic relational experiences in ministry have risen through seeking wholeness of the denominational body in the midst of our conflict over issues. It may, however, surprise you that I do not regret one single second of that work, even the most painful. On the journey toward that day when God shall be all in all, God has called us to hold on to our sisters and brothers as we wrestle with the gospel and its meaning for our time. Relationships.

A condition of complete simplicity (Costing not less than everything)...

Back in the day when I was frequently talking about Jubilee, back well before the Millennium shift into the year 2000, when it seemed that our American Baptist way forward was through embracing the Leviticus 25 vision of a new day made possible by a millennial Jubilee letting go of all the debts we have incurred against one another so that the field of our common life would be renewed through healed relationships to receive the seed of God's new thing—

Back in that day, a friend with a very different biblical hermeneutic from mine said to me, "You might know that this hopeful passage you keep talking about would have to be in the book of Leviticus."

In other words, the very book that presents the Holiness Code with all the issues and interpretations tearing our relationships apart, in that very same book we find the reason we needed (and still do need) the possibilities of Jubilee to set us free from the debts we hold against one another that sunder our relationships.

And now the 2008 Women in Ministry Conference planners have chosen another text from Leviticus (6:9b-13), a book about rituals and practices of worship and holiness, where maintaining the flame on the altar is key to faithfulness. By now you are all well aware as this conference nears its end that the central word in the theme text is FIRE. Four times the text speaks of FIRE, and indeed fire lies at the heart of its message.

Now what do we know about fire?

- We know from mythology that Greeks perceived fire as stolen by Prometheus from Zeus and given to the primitive mortals on the earth, for which Zeus punished not Prometheus alone but the entire world for the rebellion of this disobedient god. Zeus believed that human beings could not be trusted with fire. For all its blessings of warmth and energy and security, fire also can be used for the curses of destruction. Fire consumes.
- We know from science that fire is not a substance, nor the fuel that keeps it alive, nor the heat and light it generates, but rather

a chemical reaction in the relationship between fuel and warmth.

- We know from the Bible that God spoke to Moses through fire from a bush and led the Israelites by fire from bondage in Egypt and touched the lips of Isaiah with fire so that he might prophesy and burned by fire the altar of a false god when Elijah prayed and fell in tongues of fire upon the believers in Jerusalem. We know that Jesus said, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”

Fire can be blessing or curse, and sometimes we get to choose which it will be. Fire can stir energy, passion, hope – and also destroy. What is our intent to do with the fire that our God, unlike Zeus, has seen fit to entrust to us? Which brings us to yet another text also from Leviticus (19:18): “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the **LORD**.”

You see, there is a connection between keeping God’s flame alive and not bearing a grudge but in fact loving your neighbor. That is the fundamental, foundational truth Jesus came to convey, and in fact the central motif of the Bible from start to finish that tells over and over a story about siblinghood rather than a story about “God and me.” Think about all the stories that begin, “A certain man had two sons:” Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his many brothers, the prodigal and the older brother. Of course in our

day we would sometimes tell those stories about a mother and daughters and sisters. Learning to love our siblings on the face of this earth is the true task of time.

The powerful song “I Need You to Survive” was first given to me by a member of the Together in Ministry Steering Committee as we launched the Ministers Council project to form collegial covenant groups to keep pastoral leaders burning with God’s passion instead of burning out. Intentional relationships with our sisters and brothers in the ministry are the core and key practice to fan into flame the gifts of pastoral leaders.

You know how the song goes:

I'll pray for you

You pray for me

I love you

I need you to survive

I won't harm You

With words from my mouth...

And Valentine has added words for this day:

My heart’s renewed, by your care for me,

I love you, I need you to survive.

With hearts aflame, these words to you,

I love you, I need you to survive...

You are a sister to me, I need you to survive.

Let me tell you about another sister, another favorite poet who hails from these parts, Maya Angelou, born in St. Louis on April 4, 1928. That date means she has just crossed the threshold into octogenarianhood, in other words she has lived on this earth for 80 long years and has just celebrated that birthday. As a child Maya was raped by her mother's boyfriend, and after she told on him he was in rapid sequence thrown into jail, released and murdered. For five years after that trauma she was mostly mute, out of fear that the words from her mouth would harm, speaking only occasionally to her brother. The cauldron of that plus other life experiences became for her a crucible of transformation, out of which passionate eloquence was birthed. In that fire she experienced Isaiah's truth: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

It was in her grandmother's home town of Stamps, Arkansas that a woman named Mrs. Flowers recognized the love for poetry developing within Maya's soul and convinced her that poetry is music for the voice and must be spoken aloud. She has not stopped speaking aloud since, much of it the short and sweet speech that comes through in a spiritedly sassy tone.

- She said, "Lord, if you want me to say it, put it in my mouth."
- She said, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain."

- She said, “You may encounter many defeats but you must not be defeated.”
- She said, “Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. But anger is like fire. It burns it all clean.”
- She said, “Being a woman is hard work.”
- She said, “The sadness of the women’s movement is that they don’t allow the necessity of love. See, I don’t personally trust any revolution where love is not allowed.”
- She said, “The most called-upon prerequisite of a friend is an accessible ear.”
- She said, “Lying, thinking

Last night

How to find my soul a home

Where water is not thirsty

And bread loaf is not stone

I came up with one thing

And I don’t believe I’m wrong

That nobody,

But nobody

Can make it out here alone.”

Just before her eightieth birthday party Maya Angelou declared that after that day of celebration she would “go into a kind of religious school and study, not to become a preacher, but to see if there’s another way, a more direct way into the soul’s search.” In this

octogenarian year she ponders the future this way: "I don't know how long I'm going to live, but I still see my life as an adventure."

Works of great power she has penned, but some of the most pungent are in this poem:

Now you understand  
Just why my head's not bowed.  
I don't shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It's in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
the palm of my hand,  
The need of my care,  
'Cause I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

...I say,  
It's the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I'm a woman

Phenomenally  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

To each one of you this day I say: YOU are a PHENOMENAL WOMAN.

Now a phenomenon is literally any occurrence that is observable:

- In physics a phenomenon is the subject of observation.
- In philosophy a phenomenon refers to an event perceived either through senses or with the mind.
- In popular usage, a phenomenon often refers to an extraordinary event.
- When you look up “phenomenon” on Wikipedia the screen shows a match aflame with the words: “The combustion of this match is an observable occurrence, or event, and therefore a phenomenon.”

Right where you live and move and have your being, each one of you is God’s phenomenon in every sense of that word.

- You are God’s word of life to the persons around you, what they hear with the hearing of their ears and see with their eyes look at and touch with their hands.
- You are the summons to caring relationships with one another and with God the Creator and Jesus Christ simply by how you live your life.

- You are the extraordinary in the ordinary of human flesh, God's Spirit ablaze in a phenomenal woman, so that divine and human joy may be complete and God shall be all in all and all manner of thing shall be well.

Sometimes as God's phenomenal woman you do pass through the fire, you do pay the price, because that is what it takes to live as God's woman and reconcile relationships and embody eternal truth in time.

A condition of complete simplicity (Costing not less than everything)...

Eternal reality cannot be contained in one human lifespan, but glimpses of the divine love blaze through you, in the phenomenon of love that is like the phenomenon of fire.

- Fire is the visible, tangible side effect of matter's transformation into heat and light through a chemical reaction that occurs when something heats fuel to ignition temperature until it combines with oxygen and releases heat and light.
- God's love is the visible, tangible result when God's catalyst (you!) enters into human relationships and warms them up into transformation so that the breath of the Spirit enters into human flesh until tongues of flame are set loose and God's fire is kindled upon the earth.
- All shall be and is most well when the flamed tongues of Spirit flow through the Pentecostal web of human relationships in-folded into the crowned knot of fire that burns ever and ever

more strongly as you live into your calling as God's phenomenally phenomenal woman in ministry.

That is your destiny. And if you are to be all that, to survive and thrive in the ministry to which God has called you:

First, remember that nobody, but nobody, can make it out there alone. You need each other.

Second, we all need God's blessing. Let us join hands together in prayer for the journey back home

Spirit of God, who came and who comes to kindle eternal fire within time and space, here, now, always – whenever and wherever we live and move and have our being: stir up in the hearts of these phenomenal women your flame of sacred love for one another and this whole world; let your glory blaze with a fire that cannot be extinguished.

Teach them to love you as your angels love, one holy passion filling all their frames; the kindling of the heaven descended Dove, their hearts an altar, and your love the flame.

Until there shall be an open road between you and them, and your angels may go up and down among them, so that they may be in heaven even while here on your earth.

And command your angels concerning these women to guard them in all their ways. On angels' hands bear them up, so that they will not dash their foot against a stone.

Baptize them with your Spirit and fire that they may live as heirs of all your promises in a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything yet more fulfilling than any other life the heart could long for.

We make this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, who came and lived and loved and taught and died and rose again, that it shall be so. Amen.