

## Using the 'F' Word in Church

I don't exactly remember the first time I heard the "F" word used. But I certainly noticed the power of the word, the strong reactions it inspired. I've seen how some are afraid of it, avoiding it, if possible, but, if forced to say it, whispering it like some hidden shame offered up in confession. And I've seen how others revel in it, saying it right out loud no matter who might hear, brandishing it like a Colt .45, marking their linguistic territory like wild wolves. Oh, I've noticed the power of this word.

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Of course the word I'm talking about is feminism. Feminism. What? You look surprised...were you thinking something else?

I've always had kind feelings towards feminism. Part of this comes from growing up with a single mother who, like every single mom out there, worked her tail off day in and day out just to keep food on the table and the bank off our back. And it's always saddened me how feminism has become such an 'F' word in our world. There's hardly a person I know who would own up to it. I hear things all the time like, "Well, I believe in equality, but I'm NOT a feminist!" No, my goodness, NOT that. What an awful thought...

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Do you know the first theology class I ever had was Feminist Theology? I studied feminist theology with Cindy Rigby at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

while I was still an undergrad at the University of Texas (go horns). I knew I was headed to seminary, so I enrolled as a special student and was allowed to audit the class. They warned me away from it- saying I should go for something more basic, like first year systematic theology, for instance, but Cindy's class was the only one I could fit in my schedule. And I figured whatever it would be- it would probably be interesting.

No surprise, I wound up being one of only two guys in the class. (Melis, who graduated with an engineering degree and spent her entire undergraduate education as one of the only women in all her classes, thinks this was only fair and probably a good experience for me.)

Well, I had no idea what to expect. Was it OK for me to do this? Would I be welcome? Would I be turned into some kind of scapegoat for every stupid thing men have done in the last ten thousand years?

Well, whatever fears I might have had never, ever came to pass. Not even close. Not only was I welcomed, but in short order I was made to feel a part of a very special circle. Now, I know that a lot of us have had different experiences with and opinions of feminism- some of us are still proud of the word and some of us are deeply suspicious of it. All I can tell you is what I heard in that circle. There, although we often heard painful stories- I heard more laughter than anger. And rather than people interested in pinning blame for past wrongs, I heard women dream about a better future. My experience of feminism in that class had nothing to do with bra burning and everything to do with learning to listen for voices that are tuned out, and people that are overlooked. Feminism

for me was mostly about listening for voices that are often tuned out and learning to see people that are often overlooked.

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And if this is what feminism is about- Luke's Gospel fits right in. See, Luke is famous for an ability to see and honor folks that most people in Christ's day would just as soon forget. Luke makes casting decisions no other Gospel writer makes. He puts lepers, tax collectors, and Samaritan (Samaritans no less!) on center stage. And in Luke's hand these figures aren't just pitiful examples of sad wretches showcasing how nice Jesus is- in Luke's hands they become active heroes in their own stories, following after the way of Jesus when the usual suspects, the religious leaders, the guys like me wearing the black robes, miss the boat time and time again. But of all the people overlooked in Christ's day- Luke lavishes the most attention upon women.

Luke alone tells us the women take center stage in the infancy narrative. Joseph is a cipher; Zechariah is struck mute- Elizabeth and Mary have all the best lines.

Luke alone goes behind the scenes to tell us it wasn't just Jesus and the twelve running around all by themselves, but they traveled with women like Joanna, Susanna, and Mary Magdalene. And these women not only supported the ministry with prayers- they bankrolled it, too.

Luke alone remembers Jesus visiting Mary and Martha and Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, something only students, only *disciples* do with teachers in the ancient world. And when Martha complains that Mary has forgotten her place- Jesus doesn't hit himself on

the head like he should have had a V8 and tell Mary to get those shoes off and get back into the kitchen. He praises Mary's thirst for learning- telling the world she hasn't done a thing wrong. Indeed, she has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.

Luke alone paints a picture of Christ's eagle eyes in the synagogue looking past all of the guys strolling up there throwing their big wads down in the offering plate to an old ghost of a widow plunking down that pathetic couple of pennies. I mean what's the point- it took more time to count them than they were worth? But Jesus says how dare we think that? How dare we think that? All of those strutting peacocks were giving the little they could spare; she was giving everything she had. Whenever I worship and the offering plate comes my way I think about her when, even though I don't even bat an eyelash at plunking down Mr. Jackson on Avatar or a bottle of wine, I find myself eyeing the ten or the five instead of the twenty when I'm in church. (My only hope is that even though Paul tells us God loves a cheerful giver- that God will accept a reluctant one, too.)

Luke alone reminds us that it was the women who stayed to watch the crucifixion; that it was the women who ran to the tomb in the morning; that it was the women who went and told the men, the men who sneered at them calling their good news nothing but an idle tale.

Luke alone, time after time after time, sees and lifts up these women, all but telling us that without them, without the women, that none of us would even be sitting here this morning, gathered around this old, old tale that is anything but idle.

And hear me well- I don't believe Luke is telling us that women are better than the men. Luke also recounts men like Peter and Paul who literally put their lives on the line to follow after Jesus and without them we wouldn't be sitting here either. Luke isn't saying the women are better than the men- but he is saying they are no worse. He is saying they are no worse. And if we fail to hear their voices- we risk missing the Gospel itself.

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Now honestly, to me this doesn't seem like such a crazy thing to say, but the history that hangs heavy upon us is one in which Orthodox Jewish men still give thanks in morning prayer every morning that they weren't born a gentile, a slave, or a women, and where nearly every Christian denomination says that when it comes to serving the church, God, *Almighty* God, is somehow only able to work through Kens but not through Kellys; Nicks but not through Nicoles.

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Do you know the most surprising thing to me about feminism? The most surprising thing I've learned is it isn't just helpful to women. Of course, on one level feminism is about learning to listen for and honor *women's* voices that are so often overlooked. But you know, a funny thing happens when you start learning to hear better- when you start learning to listen for these voices and see these overlooked people. Whether you're a man or a woman when you start to hear better, you start hearing more

sides of your own story, too, you start hearing the God given, God breathed aspects of your own life that may have sat neglected or even lay hidden for a long, long time.

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When I really started to learn how to lead worship I was a summer intern in Wharton, New Jersey. The pastor was on maternity leave. And I had absolutely NO idea what I was doing. I had learned really what NOT to be from my worship classes- I was told never to be personal, you might distract from the Gospel, never to be funny, that would DEFINITELY distract from the Gospel. Basically I was absolutely rock solid on what NOT to be- but I had no idea who I was, what I was allowed to say anymore.

One day after worship, this kind older man named Gerry came up to me. And after the niceties, he said he wondered if I would consider something. Inwardly I groan but say sure. And he wondered if I might consider opening worship saying, “Good morning” instead of the stilted scripture verse I normally used. Now, Wharton was a little mining town in the hills of Northern Jersey. These people were solid, blue collar folks- salt of the earth. Being real was WAY more important to them than being theologically correct. But I had been told specifically that I MUST open worship with the Bible- that people could hear “Good morning” anywhere, but only in the church could they hear the good news of Jesus Christ. And so I proceeded to lecture this kind man, to *lecture* him, on why it would be quite impossible for me to say this small thing that in hindsight would obviously had gone a long way to show them I was actually a human being and actually cared about them.

You there are times when you can have the “right” answer- and be completely, absolutely, dead wrong. I still shudder when I remember that- and when I recall those first painful attempts sermons- SO careful, so correct, and so far from the weirder, sillier, edgier, but far more authentic voice God actually gave me. I was so miserable giving them- I can’t even imagine what it must have been like on the receiving end. (And if you don’t believe me, ask Melissa- she won’t say anything mean, but her face will tell you everything you need to know. ☺)

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Today I’m proud to say that the seeds of discovering and listening for the voice God gave me, the voice neglected and hidden away by a thousand shoulds; I’m proud to say these seeds were planted by women- by women like Cindy. Women who had to learn the hard way to claim these God given voices others often wish could be muted, and were bold enough to share their journey with me. And more fundamentally these seeds were sown by the women in Luke’s Gospel. Women like Mary who sang like a bird when she no doubt *should* have been keeping her head down in the kitchen, women like the Joanna and Susanna who told everyone about the empty tomb even when all the men were telling them to just shut up. See, whenever anyone begins to trust in the voice God has given them and let’s that voice rip- I tell you it makes even the hardest stone heart want to sing.

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One night Melissa went in to Miller Chapel in Princeton to hear one of the most famous feminist theologians around, a woman named Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz give a

lecture. She entered into Miller Chapel- this austere, plain sanctuary that would even make Calvin long for some detail here or there. And the place was packed, mainly women, mainly older. And then, after Isasi-Diaz was introduced she launched into her lecture. And she lectured just like you do at Princeton- head down, almost as if the lecturer is the only one there. Suddenly, Melis heard behind her the sound of a little one crying out, and the loud scuffle of shoes on old wood as the young mom was hurrying to get out. The looks on the faces of the women who were turning around to glare at this unwelcome, wailing voice could have burned holes through those uncomfortable pews. Suddenly, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz breaks from her lecture, something you do NOT do at Princeton. And she joined those sour women staring up into the balcony- only her face wasn't angry, but insistent. "Stop right there!" she commanded. "Stop right there. Please sit down. Make room for her. Please sit down. You being here- this is what we are all about." And Melis could hear, not see, but hear the shuffle of feet and bodies as the row must have made room for this young mom right where she was. And, it started out slow, but grew- the audience, now congregation, erupted in applause.

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I wonder what it would be like if, instead of saying the things we know will please everyone around us all the time, our families, our friends, our spouses even, I wonder what it would be like if we spoke the words we believe would please God instead. What would happen- if we let these voices of ours rip?

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of  
us all. Amen.**