

FOR ALL THE FAITHFUL WOMEN

Isaiah 65:17-25

Presbyterian Women Sunday, Nov. 13, 2016

Sunrise Presbyterian Church

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A long time ago, when every bride registered at the jewelry store instead online - wedding gifts were attractively laid out in the living room for guests to visit and admire. I'll never forget one such guest picking up one of my glass plates from the display table and remarking a bit derisively, "Well that looks like a Circle Meeting plate!" I added quite defensively that I had indeed selected those plates so that I would have appropriate plates on which to serve cake at future Circle Meetings! And these have been used at many a meeting - I still have them!

I grew up knowing about Circle Meetings. My mother attended regularly, and when she hosted the meeting, I helped serve the ladies cake and coffee. As a child, Circles seemed part of my life. I've attended all my life except for a stretch of years in my early adulthood when I did not attend church. However during that time, I did send my oldest son to Presbyterian pre-school - and I prayed fervently that one of the ladies at the church would invite me to circle. No one ever did. No matter, ever since I was ordained in 1991, I've gone to monthly circle meetings. I enjoy them - I rarely miss. I like visiting over refreshments - I like catching up with people I may not have seen for a few weeks - I enjoy the Bible studies - but most of all, Circle meetings reminds me of the great host of faithful women who have prayed and led - who have washed dishes and baked - who have nursed babies and taught children - who have brought the pennies in their purses - their offerings - and have dreamed together about how we might make God's vision a reality all over the world.

I learned about mission from Circle meetings. Circles take an offering every month called the Least Coin. Every month women offer their small change - which adds up from the many groups across the country. Countless literacy and reconciliation projects been funded from the worldwide ecumenical Fellowship of the Least Coin. That offering alone shows the power of these faithful women. But Presbyterian Women also give to their congregations - yes - our PW gives to Sunrise and many projects here in Salina and across the globe - they give to the presbytery and to General Assembly. PW takes two very special offerings - the Birthday Offering and the Thank Offering. Today, we extend the Thank Offering to the entire congregation. It is a wonderful opportunity for us to help Presbyterian Women.

It's also a wonderful opportunity for me to tell the story of the time I wrote a Thank Offering grant. In the early 90s my Dallas congregation was a member of an ecumenical mission consortium - the East Dallas Cooperative Parish - a group of Methodist churches with 2 Presbyterian Churches and one Christian Church. Together we ran around 20 not-for-profit organizations in our neighborhood, old East Dallas. Most of us had grand, old churches, because the neighborhood had at one time been among the best addresses in Dallas, but by the early nineties, crime, poverty, blight, and immigrants from many countries filled the streets of East Dallas. Our ministries provided food, clothing, health care and education to the people in our neighborhood.

Two Presbyterian Women - one from each of the churches started talking at a gathering. One, a newly retired librarian, had long had a dream of opening a school to teach English to these immigrants. She had learned the Laubach method of teaching language, which did not require teachers to know another language - she told the other woman about it. Soon, they had gathered enough of our collective church members to form a governing Board for our little language school. We called it the English Language Ministry - or ELM for short. We heard stories from mothers who could not read the prescription labels on their children's medicines. We learned about moms who really wanted to help teach their children a new language - every day we learned more about women from all over the world who needed to learn English.

Our venture was so successful that we needed to hire a director, and we had no money. Somehow it fell to me to raise the money for ELM. At the time, I had no idea how to write grants or where to go for money - but I did have faith that God was with us. I went through phone numbers for PCUSA offices in Louisville that are in the back of the Presbyterian calendar - and soon discovered help in our Hunger Ministries Office. Our first \$5000 came from One Great Hour of Sharing Funds, and the first grant I wrote was to Presbyterian Women for a Thank Offering Grant. We received another \$5000. We felt gloriously blessed to have our larger church supporting our mission, and it was more than comforting to know that the faithful of Presbyterian Women had endorsed our mission.

And what a mission it was! Presbyterian Women from our churches trained to teach immigrant women English. Many of our students came from Mexico and Central America, but others came from Somalia or Asia. ELM met in a church within walking distance of many of their homes. Classes met in the morning while the men were away at work. It was not long before we added free child care. ELM became a bustling, happy school. We loved graduation day at the end of every semester. We watched as women gained more self-esteem and more self-

confidence. One older immigrant woman actually appeared to stand taller and straighter as she gained more language skills each year. Graduation always brought me to tears - and our students would celebrate with us as they prepared a wonderful pot-luck ethnic meal. ELM was full of the Holy Spirit.

And yet, I was most moved by something I had not anticipated. The ladies in my congregation were mostly retired, and they had been fearful of the new immigrants - they did not want to drive the mile into the inner city to the school. It was not uncommon to hear them speak derisively of our immigrant neighbors -- many of whom were undocumented. The congregational women did not know the immigrant women - know about the ELM students' needs - in fact, they really did not want to know much about these people who spoke another language and had different customs, backgrounds and feelings.

But, yet, after ELM had been in session a few months, I began to hear stories about children's birthday parties these skeptical ladies had attended. They had grown to love these ELM students - had met their children - had learned about their families and extended families - and had joined them for family celebrations. Before long, they were making prayer requests for students who had to cross the border for a mother's illness or a father's death. The ELM students had learned a new language - but the women in my congregation had learned about women and families from other places - and they had all become very close friends. They all stopped seeing differences and had begun to enjoy each other!

It's been over 20 years since we received that initial Thank Offering - and ELM is still going strong - and I am still very grateful to Presbyterian Women for their support of our fledging mission. Our little school had few resources - we really just had hope and a prayer - and wonder of wonders - an offering like the one we are taking today brought grace and mercy to our lives. It was an overflowing bounty.

I'm sure the projects selected for this year's Thank Offering are equally as worthy as ELM. I'm also certain that our gifts will not only help those in need of justice and care - but will also open the eyes and hearts of those whose hands and hearts reach out to care and to give. I've learned this from the faithful women at Circle Meetings.

We often protest that we have so little - we often see ourselves weak and unable to address the ills of the world. I've heard ladies say both things about themselves while sitting in that Circle. Today's offering celebrates those women - the ones who in spite of their doubts are now part of the great communion of saints - as well as the ones who cannot participate - today's offering honors their faithfulness. God calls us to give - to care - to open our hearts and minds that

others might know the very real, concrete evidence of *God's* overflowing bounty. In honor of so many faithful women - let us give generously and us open our hearts to those we might help. Alleluia. Amen.