

CELEBRATE THE GIFTS OF WOMEN SUNDAY MARCH 7, 2021

In 2021, on Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday, we are invited to honor women who work for transformative change and seek to end poverty and injustice. Though Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday is March 7, 2021, your congregation or women's groups may use this resource on any day you choose.



God Disrupts Us with Love

Matthew 25:35–36

BY JENNIFER L. LORD

Our ancestors in the faith include many bold women who disrupted systemic poverty. As Hannah before her, Mary, the mother of our God, sang out and proclaimed God who overturns the bonds of poverty. The lesser-known five daughters of Zelophehad—Malah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah—negotiated with Moses for release from their destiny of poverty. Tabitha (Dorcas) witnessed to and worked for others' freedom from poverty. Each of these women in her own way recognized and challenged the status quo of wealth and power.¹ These stories document that women disrupting systemic poverty is not a new thing.

What does it take to disrupt? It is more than making a bold statement in order to gain a following. These women did more than make a scene to draw attention to themselves. We follow their examples and think instead in terms of *effective disruption*. Effective disruption is disruption that has a lasting impact on a situation or condition. It is an intervention and requires planning and commitment. Like adopting a new exercise regime, effective disruption requires doing something repeatedly to integrate a new pattern of behavior.

Some call exercise miracle medicine for our bodies. It changes us to the core, transforming us at the cellular level. All of our bodies' systems are impacted by this pattern of behavior. The same is true with effective disruption: it must address a whole system. This is why we think about disrupting *systemic* poverty. Poverty is not one thing unto itself; it is wrapped up with other systems including gender, race and ethnicity. Effective disruption takes the whole tangle of systems into account.

Our gospel reading for this celebration, familiar to us as the sheep and the goats passage, recognizes this tangle of systems. Do you see it? In Matthew 25:35–36, we hear not only that Christ was poor but rather that he was many things: he was the one who was thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned. Poverty is most often the tangle of those very things. The persons imprisoned are more often those who are poor; the persons hungry are those who are poor; the persons needing shelter, clothing, and welcome are those who are poor. To effectively disrupt poverty means we intervene in this tangle of systems. The one who is Alpha and Omega, surrounded by angels and sitting on the throne of glory, calls us to disrupt.

For decades Marian Wright Edelman, founder and now president emerita of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), has been disrupting the disgraceful fact that children in the United States remain the poorest age group in

our nation. Under her guidance the CDF champions children's and youth's health and education, and protection from gun violence, abuse, and criminalization. Reflecting on the CDF's logo of small boats and wide seas, Edelman says: "Help us now to give all our children the anchors of faith and love, the rudders of purpose and hope, the sails of health and education, and the paddles of family and community to keep them safe and strong when life's seas get rough."²

The Reverend Liz Theoharis, a pastor in the PC(USA), focuses her ministry around effective disruption. She serves as co-chair of The Poor People's Campaign, which aims to eradicate poverty. Their intervention deals with racism, standard of living, health, the right to work with dignity, and reprioritizing national resources.³ They know they must disrupt entire systems to address economic oppression.

And we must not overlook the local actions of women disrupting poverty in our own communities. Appleseed Outreach is such a ministry in the southside of Syracuse, New York, which is one of the neighborhoods with the highest concentration of poverty in our nation.⁴ The Reverend Beth DuBois, minister and mission developer in the PC(USA), shares oversight of a regular hot meal, worship, a food pantry, and housing projects including Tiny Homes for Good (giving tiny homes to formerly homeless individuals) and Responsive to Our Community (teaching veterans to rehabilitate abandoned city apartment buildings for survivors of domestic violence).

As we celebrate women who disrupt systemic poverty we reflect on our own work, too. Every day we stand before the throne of God, the one who disrupts the tangles of the world with the kingdom. God's kingdom come, which is our life in God here and now, is a disruption, too. God's kingdom means our citizenship includes loving the least of these.

A Service for the Worship of God

Opening Sentences

Psalm 146, adapted

Leader: I will praise the Lord as long as I live.

All: I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

Leader: Happy are they whose hope is in the Lord their God; who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps promises forever;

All: Who gives justice to those who are oppressed and food to those who hunger. The Lord sets the captive free.

Leader: The Lord cares for the stranger; the Lord sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.

All: The Lord shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, through all generations!

Gathering Prayer

O God most mighty, O God most merciful, all creation sings your praises. You formed all things in your goodness and sustain everything by your compassion. Assure us again of your steadfast watchfulness over heaven and earth and the seas. Fashion us anew as caretakers in your dominion that we may tend to the neediest in our midst. And turn our hearts to praise you in song, word and deed this day and forevermore. Amen.

Call to Confession

Scripture tells us that every nation and all peoples will stand before the throne of glory of our Alpha and Omega, Jesus Christ, shepherd of all. Seeking mercy, let us boldly come before the throne of grace. Let us confess our sins against God and neighbor.

Confession of Sin

God of glory and righteousness, we confess that we do not live as citizens of your kingdom. We give allegiance to worldly thrones. We ignore the neediest in our midst. We discount our own worth. We forsake your just rule and the rules of your kingdom. Take from us the spirit of isolation, greed, lust for power and false pride. Give us instead the spirit of interdependency, generosity, humility and love. In all things grant us time for amendment of life that we may serve you all the length of our days. Through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Beloved in Christ, you are blessed by God to inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. By the power of the Holy Spirit you are refashioned every day to live according to God's reign, in the freedom of Christ Jesus. Friends, know that you are forgiven and be at peace.

Suggested Hymns and Songs

"Will You Let Me Be Your Servant" (GtG 727)⁵

"When the Poor Ones"/"Cuando el Pobre" (GtG 762)

"Come Now, You Blessed, Eat at My Table" (GtG 186)

"The Church of Christ in Every Age" (GtG 320)

"Sound a Mystic Bamboo Song" (GtG 323)

"Lord, We Thank You for This Food" (GtG 660)

Prayer for Illumination

Shepherding God, you seek us out in our scattered places and bring us again to the rich and good pastures of your holy scripture. By your governing Spirit, feed us now with your word of life and lead us in all truth and obedience, for you alone are our protector and sure hope. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Psalms 95:1–7a

Ephesians 1:15–23

Matthew 25:31–46

Sermon Starter

Our focal scripture is Matthew 25: 35–36, but the preacher will discover a common thread running through the passages listed above about rulers who are just and who care for the neediest ones in their charge. What does this rulership look like? The preacher might first identify examples of historic or contemporary rulers who pursue self-gain and aggrandizement rather than godly care of those who are vulnerable and needy. The preacher may then ask how the scriptural images of rulership challenge those deceptive standards. The preacher can work with one or all of these texts together, finding examples of God's just and loving actions on behalf of all God's sheep.

It is good to give specific examples and tell stories about contemporary leaders, too, especially women in positions of power and oversight who disrupt systemic poverty and the tangles of oppressive systems related to race, gender and ethnicity. It is also good to emphasize what the texts proclaim about the living God who is present and acting in our midst and in our world, now. The preacher can help us renew our faith and action according to God's disruptive rule of love, which intervenes everywhere at all times. Do we recognize it? The preacher can point to current instances of God's disrupting, intervening Spirit.

A Litany for Women Who Disrupt Systemic Poverty

Leader: Holy and loving God, author of life and giver of every good gift, you visit us with your glory and set us on paths of justice and compassion. Receive our thanks and praise! Hear especially our gratitude for women who have kept your

commandments in caring for the least among us. For Mary and Hannah's proclamation of your righteousness and for all who continue this praise and declaration

All: We give you thanks.

Leader: For Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah's insistence on their worth and for all who challenge the economics of patriarchy,

All: We give you thanks.

Leader: For Esther who negotiated with power and for all who strategize on behalf of the powerless,

All: We give you thanks.

Leader: For Lydia's just use of wealth and for all who use their influence for good,

All: We give you thanks.

Leader: For Tabitha's care for the well-being of others and for all who are turned outward with compassionate care,

All: We give you thanks.

Leader: For the woman at the well who risked speaking to you and who shared good news, for all who speak up and speak out,

All: We give you thanks.

Leader: For women who organize themselves, increasing power by numbers;

For women who dance, paint, sing, all artists who expand our vision of justice;

For young women crying out against all manner of evil;

For women with length of days who teach by experience;

For women who educate, propose new policies, legislate and activate;

All: We give you thanks.

Leader: For whom else shall we give thanks?
(Pause for others to voice prayers)

Hear our thanks and praise, O God. For we pray in the name of the one who dwells in our midst and calls us to serve, Christ our God. Amen.

Hymn

See suggestions on previous page.

Benediction

Spiritual Practices for Disrupting Poverty

1. Teach young people about money. A friend gives her grandnephews and grandnieces a check on their birthdays and instructs them to divide up the money three ways: a third for spending, a third for savings, and a third for a charitable contribution. She asks them to report back to her about the spending so that she can learn more about who they are and to report on their selection for charitable giving to find out how they chose to give the money away. She teaches them about possessions and stewardship, which are motivating factors in the systemic work of disrupting poverty (Ps. 24:1). Adults give our tithes, offerings and alms, and it is up to us to teach our children about these faithful uses of money. How might you teach?
2. Learn your family history of poverty or wealth. What kept family members in poverty? What enabled family members' wealth? What were the contributing factors? How did race, ethnicity and gender impact the poverty or wealth levels of family members? Ask your familial elders and record the stories. Learn from your family history.

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Notes

1. See 1 Samuel 2:1–10; Luke 1:46–55; Numbers 27:1–11; and Acts 9:36–42.
2. "Our Logo," www.childrensdefense.org/home-2/logo-story/; accessed October 1, 2020.
3. "A Moral Policy Agenda to Heal and Transform America: The Poor People's Jubilee Platform," www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/jubilee-platform; accessed October 1, 2020.
4. Alana Semuels, "How to Decimate a City," *The Atlantic*, November 20, 2015, www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/11/syracuse-slums/416892/; accessed October 1, 2020.
5. GtG indicates *Glory to God! The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013).