

# We Are Plants Growing in the Desert

Soomee Kimm

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax collector booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. (Matt. 9:9)

Each time I read the stories of Jesus calling his disciples, I come away with a feeling of amazement at the kinds of people Jesus chose to spread his gospel in the world. These were people that today's corporate heads would reject right away: tax collectors, religious zealots, and common fishermen. These were not people with impressive credentials recognized widely. Nonetheless, God called these individuals into service, and they served God and the faith community faithfully and well without exception. It is easy to forget that the most important credential in Christian ministry is God's calling: not past experience, education, or economic capacity. When God calls, the called have to ignore cultural, economic, and even political barriers in order to serve. In many ethnic communities (including the Korean American community) God has called women into ordained and commissioned ministry even when it is contrary to the traditions and heritage of the community. Many courageous and able sisters in Christ dared to rise and follow Christ despite enormous social pressure and even acts of oppression. I am one of these sisters called by God to lead and serve in the name of Christ who dared to get up and follow Christ.

To the Canaanite woman who begged Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus answered: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (from Matt. 15: 21-28)



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The faith and courage of this nameless Canaanite woman gives hope to many Korean American clergywomen. She is our role model and inspiration. Even when Jesus was not quite ready to share the bread of healing beyond the lost sheep of the house of Israel, she insisted on receiving crumbs off the table for her daughter. Ultimately the wish of the one who had been compared to dogs was granted, and her daughter experienced the power of Christ's healing touch.

Before the end of chapter 15, we read about another miracle of Jesus, when he blessed and multiplied seven loaves of bread and a few small fish and fed four thousand men, besides women and children. The text doesn't specify who participated in this banquet. I'm sure there were all kinds of men, women, and children, not just the lost sheep of Israel. Is it possible that this woman had opened the door for Jesus' ministry to expand to the larger world, outside that of the Israelites?

How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! (Ps. 133:1)

I am an elder in full connection in the California-Pacific Annual Conference. The journey as a Korean American clergy woman so far has been filled with wonderful and exciting adventures. Connectionalism, in combination with the itinerant system of The United Methodist Church, allowed me to experience a life and ministry beyond my wildest imagination. The church has offered opportunities that have both blessed and challenged me in the last thirteen years of my life as a clergywoman. I have started an English language ministry as associate pastor at a Korean American church, served at a predominantly Anglo American church in an upper middle-class neighborhood as an associate pastor, pastored a declining Anglo American church in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood as the pastor in charge, served as a general secretariat of a United Methodist agency, and now I am serving as an interim dean at a United Methodist seminary.

I have used the verb "to serve" when describing my appoint-

ments, but in reality, these assignments were gifts I have received—gifts that challenged me, gifts that stretched me, gifts that strengthened and affirmed me. Some of those appointments I have received at the wisdom of the resident bishop and the cabinet, others I have sought and been given. I owe it to many women, both clergy and laity, who have paved the way before me. They have blazed the trail and proved themselves as worthy servants of Christ in pastoral roles, which in turn made it easier for those of us who came after them. I hope and pray I have added a few cobblestones to the pavement for the women who come after me. I also pray that my success stories will allow other doors to open for Korean American women in the future.

I am grateful for the opportunities to serve in The United Methodist Church. I am sure many Korean American clergywomen will echo my sentiment as well. These women are mostly serving in cross-racial, cross-cultural appointments or in general agencies. Unfortunately, many of them face considerable obstacles when it comes to pastoring at predominantly Korean American churches. We hear painful stories of failures and heartbreaking incidents of discrimination. And yet, we wish to work with all who are in ministry. And we dare to hope that someday, the high walls that surround many Korean American churches will be broken, making them more accepting of all clergy, including women.

I once had a chance to visit and tour Taliesin West, the winter home and architectural studio of Frank Lloyd Wright near Scottsdale, Arizona. The fact that he started building this architectural school after he turned seventy was inspirational enough, but there was something else that caught my attention while touring the facility. On the top of a stone wall, scorched by a massive fire that consumed the whole building, grew a green plant filled with life and resilience.

To explain: the walls at Taliesin West are done in a form of construction called “desert masonry.” These walls are made up of stones stacked up on top of another, the gaps between filled with concrete. There is no soil in which a root could hold and the blackened wall still bears the trace of fire. To make matters more difficult, the entire structure is located in the middle of Arizona desert. How did the plant start to grow to begin with, and how could it sustain life in that environment?

If God could let this small plant grow and sustain life in such an inhospitable place, God will surely see to it that we Korean American clergywomen will not only sustain ourselves, but thrive and be effective in what we are called to be. We refuse to be the victims of a tradition that discriminates. We are trail blazers and survivors. We are plants growing in the desert.

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Give me O God to sing that thought,  
 Give me, give him or her I love this quenchless faith,  
 In Thy ensemble, whatever else withheld  
 Withhold not from us,  
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 Health, peace, salvation universal.  
 Is it a dream?  
 Nay but the lack of it the dream,  
 And failing it life's lore and wealth a dream,  
 And all the world a dream. □