

A Prayer for Progeny

John 17:6-19

Nancy Hastings Sehested, who will grace our pulpit next Sunday morning, is a mother of two grown daughters and the spiritual mother for many progeny—male and female alike. She didn't give birth to most who have sought her wisdom and counsel or admired her pioneering spirit in the Baptist world (at least the part that discriminates against women in ministry), though she has nurtured them spiritually. There is an entire generation of female leaders who have followed in her wake and many, many others who have listened to her spell-binding oration and insights over the years.

To briefly highlight part of her story, in the fall of 1987, Nancy made headlines across the country when she faced down the all-male Shelby County Baptist Association in Memphis, Tennessee, who as Southern Baptists would not accept or tolerate the call she received to pastor Prescott Memorial Baptist Church. Women were not entitled to have authority over men, according to their biblical hermeneutic. So when Nancy stood up during the discussion when the vote was cast to disfellowship the church from the association and convention, several attempted to shut her down and close off debate. But Nancy is not a timid person; she challenged her hostile critics with these memorable words:

I am Nancy Hastings Sehested, messenger from Prescott Memorial Church, pastor of Prescott Memorial Church, and servant of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am a full-blooded Southern Baptist. My mother is a Southern Baptist deacon. My grandfather was a Southern Baptist minister for 70 of his 93 years. My dad is a retired Southern Baptist minister for 50 years of ordained ministry. My four siblings were the creative ones in our family, choosing creative careers. But me? No. I decided to follow in my dad's and granddad's footsteps and become a pastor.

By what authority do I preach? That question you ask of me. It is not a new question. It is a question that was asked of our Lord Jesus Christ on a number of

occasions. He had not the authority of the religious establishment, not the authority of the state. By what authority did he minister? By the authority of none other than the Holy Spirit that moved in his midst. And so by what authority do I preach and bear witness to my faith? By the authority of the Southern Baptist Convention? By the authority of the Shelby County Baptist Association? By the authority of Prescott Memorial Baptist Church? No. No, my brothers and sister. By the authority of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, becoming a servant. And following in his footsteps, as a servant of Jesus Christ, who took the towel and basin of water and exemplified the kind of servanthood that each one of us is called to live under, I found a towel with my name on it. And each one of us has a towel with our name on it.¹

Bill Moyers, the wise, old owl among journalists, followed Nancy's story, publicly citing her courage and admiring her iconoclastic tenacity in his 1988 PBS documentary, "Battle for the Bible."² When Moyers asked her about the resolution by the SBC to disallow the ordination of women, Nancy responded:

The resolution was really against all women, so it was a tragic statement against women, not just women as ministers. And I saw it as another sign of sexism and wanting to keep women down...I think the pain for me, speaking personally, is the pain of seeing...us not even asking the right questions and not being willing to struggle with the real challenge of the gospel...which is to be with the broken and disenfranchised, and to offer a word of hope and healing; and we are too much interested in our own individual happiness to think corporately...of a new humanity...This is a convention of wanting to erect barriers and keep them there.³

I remember hearing my friend share her compelling story at the American Baptist "Faith Faces Issues" conference in Boston two years later in what I still claim is the best sermon I have ever heard. She is remarkably powerful as a prophetic proclaimer.

Yet, here we are thirty years later and most things haven't changed as much as we might believe. The rigidly conservative end of the evangelical movement (that garners an inordinate amount of media attention in this

¹Pam Durso, "By What Authority Do I Preach: The Words of Nancy Sehested," Baptist Women in Ministry.

²Moyers interviewed her for his documentary, "Battle for the Bible," broadcast on PBS stations in 1988.

³ Bill Moyers, "Battle for the Bible" documentary transcript.

country) remains nearly as entrenched in a sexist and hierarchical paradigm as it was in 1987, still erecting barriers for women, in Nancy's words. Except the barriers today are not insurmountable and certainly are more porous. And some of these same fundamentalist leaders in the SBC are no longer the authoritative gateways to God they once claimed to be, as recently they've been taken to task for their relentless misogynous comments and behavior.

This past week, over 2500 Southern Baptist women signed an open letter charging Paige Patterson, President of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and one of the prominent fundamentalist leaders, with "unbiblical teaching regarding womanhood, sexuality, and domestic violence."⁴ Apparently, Patterson had to issue an apology for comments made in videotaped speeches where he crudely jokes about the sexual appeal of an underage girl and remarks where he counsels women to remain with their abusive spouses for their salvation—in effect, to take a hit or two for Jesus.⁵

Then there's Judge Paul Pressler, another leading character in the SBC, who is currently embroiled in several lawsuits alleging sexual harassment and misconduct against young men. This follows the resignation in March of Frank Page (then SBC president and CEO) for an "inappropriate relationship in the recent past." These are only some of the recent grievances.

Even though the Southern Baptist Convention is still the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S., their patriarchal kingdom seems to be

⁴ Ed Kilgore, "#MeToo in the Pews: A Backlash to the Southern Baptist Patriarchy," *New York*, May 9, 2018.

⁵ Patterson tells the story of a woman who had two black eyes from her husband's abuse after he counseled to remain with him. According to many accounts, Patterson tells the story in this way:

She said: "I hope you're happy."...And I said, "Yes...I'm very happy" because her husband had heard her prayers and come to church for the first time the next day."

in trouble. After a generation of imposing “biblical standards” that suppress women while demanding respect for hierarchy and religious authority, a version of the #MeToo movement is beginning to unravel the fabric of male dominance that has cloaked what seems to be a great deal of misconduct, hypocrisy, oppression, and deceit among its leaders. The issue isn’t about being “male”; it’s about the abuses of power in a world set up to benefit men.

This isn’t peculiar to conservative Protestant religious circles by any means, as we know. Wherever there are male figures in authority (or a “good ol’ boys” culture in place), it’s not uncommon to find various abuses, where women are frequently viewed as inferior to their male counterparts and often reduced to objects to manipulate, sexually or otherwise. We’ve seen many prominent political and cultural figures around this country be called out by the #MeToo movement—the latest accusations leveled against a liberal advocate, i.e., former New York State Attorney General, Eric Schneiderman, who ironically was prosecuting Howard Weinstein and others for their sexual abuse and misconduct. For many women in our society, it is about time that men are called into account and that traditional patriarchal, sexist views that objectify and demean women are abandoned forever, so that a new humanity can be created (as Nancy so eloquently put it) which protects the dignity and value of all.

Frankly, in my humble opinion, if there is to be biblical fundamentalism of any type, it should be about human equality and dignity, first and foremost. This isn’t my 21st century view imposed upon a first century world. This is very much in keeping with what Christianity has been from its earliest beginnings, and what is envisioned in the realm of God in how “right relations” are meant to be characterized. As Paul said in

Galatians in reference to social hierarchies: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Everyone has equal standing before God.

Paul was being generous, I believe. As Jesus himself put it more pointedly: in God’s realm there’s a reversal of value—the last become first and the first become last. It was a turning of the tables—a #MeToo moment, in effect! This is likely the meaning behind Jesus’ claim that he was not of this world. What he was saying is, he didn’t belong to this world because he didn’t buy into its customs, norms and beliefs. He didn’t accept its social stereotypes, characterizations or values, its presumed hierarchies of human worth and implied sexual politics, or its manner of conducting business and characterizing gender roles. If you don’t buy into it, then you are not a part of it.

So, in turn, Jesus’ followers are not to be of this world, either. It’s not because our heads are stuck in heaven, but because our values don’t reflect what’s common on earth. Two thousand years later, we still are called to make necessary distinctions between the values that Jesus prescribed and those we see evident in the world around us. We are to call out like prophets those who should be held accountable for injustice and to help facilitate a remaking of the world into the image of God’s beloved community, where the last become first in terms of social priority, where the conditions of the poor are more important to us than the ambitions of the rich, and where the meek (not the bullies) inherit the earth. And where women are not subject to indignity, harassment or abuse.

The hope and commission Jesus placed upon his disciples reflects this desire, as we can see from our text today, where upon his departure, they were to take up the mantle for saving the world from its own evil, as he

did: to right the wrongs, to protect the poor and call into account the powerful, to bring about justice and peace and right relations between all people, for healing the nations, and for binding up the broken and broken-hearted. The prophet's mantle that had been on John the Baptizer and then placed upon Jesus of Nazareth was then placed on those who followed in his way—beginning with the Apostles to our present generation.

Yet, this mantle was not (and is not) easy to bear. Jesus seemed to know what those who followed would face—much like the criticism and resistance directed toward him—much like the hostility Nancy faced as a woman claiming spiritual authority in a patriarchal church. So, in our reading for today, like a mother worried for her children, Jesus earnestly prayed for his disciples who would become the church—the community of believers who navigated the turbulent waters of their world following Jesus' way, truth, and life. He prayed that they, too, would reflect his influence: 1) to become bold proclaimers of this divine truth and message; 2) to be unified in spirit and to bear witness to what is right and just in relationships, and 3) to be protected from the things in life which corrupt, manipulate, oppress, and selfishly undermine the vision of a new humanity—the new creation (II Cor. 5:16ff).

In some ways, Jesus' prayer sounds like what a parent might express for children—similar to the hopes and dreams and worries any parent senses when they let go of their child to pursue a life outside of the family “nest”, where they can nurture and protect them on a daily basis. It's a prayer for progeny—for those who embody and represent our family, our values, and our character into the next generation.

Parents, as a rule, don't want their influence to be lost or forgotten or compromised by reckless behavior, greed, hypocrisy, deceit, or corruption.

Instead, our common hopes are this: may our progeny be strong and good, let them be filled with love for their own and for others, let them find courage and truth so they may fulfill their goals and calling as children of God. It was Jesus' prayer; it is often what's uttered from our lips, as well.

When my daughters were but wee babes, I recall holding them as a young dad and silently offering a prayer for them and for their lives yet to unfold—hoping that all would be well and that I, as their parent, would provide loving support and a good example for them to draw from and follow. Of course, there were no guarantees; there are no promises in life. I sensed what they might encounter at various stages, especially growing up in a world different than mine was when I was but a child. The unknown often sparks fear and concern in a parent; but in many ways, it should not.

Why? Because despite the differences between generations, there always is something very good that can be found and affirmed. The youth of today have grown up in a world less pretentious in terms of social class and, certainly, less hierarchical than it used to be. In my view, my own children have also found good partners—genuine love, safe and mutually-enhancing relationships; they have been able to follow their dreams professionally without any apparent barriers or discrimination; they have found fulfillment in their lives which for some will include childbearing and for others not.

It's a different world for women than it used to be—roles and relationships are not predetermined by tradition or conventional mores. There is still a way to go in this transformation, but the trend is positive. They, like many of their peers, have been liberated from the traditionalist roles of patriarchal order that have limited so many because of gender, sexual orientation, or race from being all they can be. The white,

patriarchal, systemic bias of cultural dominance still needs to be called out in this society and deliberately transformed into a truly interdependent, multi-racial, multi-cultural, mutually-respectful and empowering society of people on so many remaining levels of daily life, so that their children will be even freer of anything that prevents their development, while protecting their wellbeing. In my humble opinion, that is a spirit consistent with the gospel, despite the crusty old religious views that claim to represent Jesus, yet still obstruct the world's social progress and transformation. I prefer to look forward to what we can be, not to pine for what the world once used to be.

Yes, Nancy Hastings Sehested is the mother of two grown daughters and the spiritual mother of many, many others who have learned from her life and benefitted from her testimony and witness of the gospel, including inmates at the maximum-security prison in North Carolina where she was a chaplain for many years, along with being part of the pastoral team at Circle of Mercy in Asheville. I recall a prayer that she composed and published as a reflection upon Mary's Magnificat—a text from Luke 2, common to our reading during the season of Advent.

This is a prayer that looks forward to the future for what a child can yet be, and for all children being born from the womb who will help make it be, if we help them along the right and righteous path. This prayer for Mary's progeny—that being Jesus himself, her firstborn son—is still our prayer for our children, and perhaps even Jesus' prayer for each of us as we find ourselves following in his way:

I'm overflowing with thanks to God.

I'm dancing to the song of God.

God chose me, of all people.

I'm blessed beyond words.

God has done great things for me. Just look at me!

God's mercy is endless.
I hope my baby knows such mercy.
 I hope my [child] knows a world full of God's creating,
Where the high and mighty and proud are put in their place
 —a place right alongside all of us.
I hope my baby knows a world where tyrants and terrorists become harmless,
 and those whose lives never mattered, all matter.
I hope my [child] knows a world where the hungry have a taste of plenty,
 and the over-stuffed know the gnaw of hunger.
I hope my [progeny] know a world where mercies pile higher than cruelties,
 and where the promise of peace cascades through every generation.⁶

This reflects Mary of Nazareth's prayer for her firstborn son, Jesus. That is like Jesus' prayer for his own, who followed his way and took up his prophetic mantle. It is also Nancy's prayer—this Baptist preaching woman—based on Mary's hope and on Jesus' truth, for all who share her vision that the gospel with each passing generation will lead us closer to a world which reflects and fulfills the most fundamental aspirations of God.

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⁶ Nancy Sehested, "All's Wild with the World," www.prayer&politiks.org, Dec. 7, 2016.