“You Have Stept Out of Your Place”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
November 16, 2014

Weeks and weeks ago in mid-August, I chose to preach this week on feminism. I knew it would be on my mind this week because I’m headed off on Friday to spend the weekend in San Diego at the American Academy of Religion—the national conference of scholars of religion. While there, I will participate in a number of meetings for the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* as a member of their editorial board. These colleagues who wrestle with the intersections of religion and feminism are my primary scholarly community. I’m also honored to be a part of a UU Scholars and Friends panel celebrating the work of the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker—former president of Starr King Seminary (one of 2 UU seminaries) as well as a colleague in feminist scholarship. So, feminism is on my mind in a big way this week.

But, apparently, there are some who would have the very word *feminism* erased from our vocabulary. If you missed it, there was a bit of a controversy this last week over a TIME magazine poll that asked, “Which word should be banned in 2015?” Among the contenders was the word *feminism.* In explaining why feminism made the list of options, the poll explains:

> “**feminist:** You have nothing against feminism itself, but when did it become a thing that every celebrity had to state their position on whether this word applies to them, like some politician declaring a party? Let’s stick to the issues and quit throwing this label around like ticker tape at a Susan B. Anthony parade.”

Well, TIME is right about one thing—there have been a number of young women, leaders in popular culture, who have identified as feminists this last year. Most prominently was Beyoncé who performed at the MTV Video Music Awards in front of screen with the word “FEMINISM” emblazoned in giant, glittery letters as the words of Nigerian poet and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s were woven into the song.

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Feminism indeed has been out front in popular culture this year. Yet, when the TIME poll suggested that feminism may be a word that "If you hear that word one more time, you will definitely cringe," they opened up a huge controversy online. On the one hand, anti-feminist sites drove users to the poll to vote to ban the word feminism, which placed it in the lead for most of the week. On the other hand, feminist sites across the web began criticizing TIME for the poll so effectively that TIME issued an apology last night.

So, it would seem that both feminism and anti-feminism are alive and well in our culture. But, of course, these are in no way *new* ideas in our culture. The sermon title today comes from a quote of a 17th century man espousing what we might today call "anti-feminist" sentiments.

It all began in January of 1637 when Anne Hutchinson went on trial in Boston for her role in creating theological discord within the fledgling Massachusetts colony. Since arriving in the newborn Boston a few years earlier, Hutchinson had been holding meetings, leading discussions, and in many other ways expressing her own religious viewpoints—including her opinions about the various clergy in Boston and surrounding towns.

While her many supporters included the prominent Puritan minister John Cotton,many others opposed her and the controversy split the colony. Convicted in 1637 by the civil court for being a danger to the state, she then faced another trial by her church, which led to her excommunication for heresy. One of Hutchinson's opponents in this trial, Hugh Peters, recorded his critique of her:

> "You have stept out of your place, you have rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject."[1]

[1] Quoted in *You Have Stept Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America* by Susan Hill Lindley, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p.5.

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In other words, Woman, don't forget that your place is to be subservient to your husband; to listen and learn about religion—*not* to speak up with your own ideas or point of view; and to simply follow the laws,don't try to change them.
Feminism, in short, is a loud refusal of Mr. Hugh Peter's point of view.

No, Mr. Peters, a woman's place is not to simply follow her husband,to simply believe what she has been told about religion and life's purpose, or to accept laws that are fundamentally unjust.

No, Mr. Peters, a woman does not step out of her place when she speaks up about her own point of view,her own experiences and her own ideas.

No, Mr. Peters, a woman's place is not to be second-class or shut away from leadership in her family, her religion, or her government.

No, a woman's place *is* to speak up, to speak out: to help lead and direct the care and education of children; to name and to claim the values that matter to her and what to her makes life valuable, meaningful, and holy.

A woman's place *is* to participate in the ongoing processes of government and structuring the best ways for how to live together in a shared society. Feminism rejects Mr. Hugh Peters' view that gender—simply being a woman—should determine what a person can or cannot do with her life.

I'm a feminist. Are you?

I became a feminist, somewhat by accident, in college. It was my freshman year and I was still trying to figure out what to get involved in for extracurricular activity. One day I walked into the student center and saw a table with a banner "Christians for Biblical Equality." I signed up. Being a very small group on a religiously and socially conservative campus, I soon became vice-president and was assigned the task of

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arranging a panel discussion on inclusive language. I had to look up what that meant. *Inclusive language??* After a bit of research, I decided that I was on board with the idea of replacing gender specific language like *man* with more inclusive and gender neutral language like *human.*

I don't recall much about the panel itself, but I have clear picture in my head of a follow-up discussion with one of the panelists, a theology professor, Dr. Yarbrough. We ran into each other in the campus dining hall. He was standing there with a tray beside the salad bar with a pile of lettuce on his plate. I was holding a bowl in my hand—most likely some ice cream from the soft-serve machine. What I remember most clearly is his caution that the use of inclusive language like humanity was "a slippery slope" that would lead to arguments for inclusive language for God, which just wasn't biblical. I remember being somehow intrigued, confused, and aghast all at once. I wasn't sure whether to be frightened as he intended me to be or curious about where this path that I seemed to have started upon might lead.

About this same time, a male friend of mine—an older, wiser *sophomore*—sat me down and warned me that my involvement with the panel and Christians for Biblical Equality had some people on campus calling me [pause] a *feminist!!!*

And so, it turns out I had indeed become a feminist. The path that I had been warned about . . . well, I slipped far and fast down that slope of feminism. During and after college, I began reading women's literature as well as books on feminist theology. In seminary, I began asking questions about intersections of gender, marital status, and Christianity. I learned how these intersections promoted narrow definitions of family that reinforced social inequalities of gender, race, class, and sexuality. I then began my doctoral work in Religion, Gender, and Culture at Harvard Divinity School. In addition to writing a dissertation using a feminist framework, I also worked as a teaching fellow for feminist courses and in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality department. Finally, after graduation, I spent a year teaching "Introduction to Feminisms" at Boston College.

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I am a feminist. Those feminist questions about equality and inclusivity led me to more and more liberal understandings of Christianity and then here to Unitarian Universalism. Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists have long been at the leading edge of women's rights in society and in religion. In 1863, Olympia Brown, was the first women to be ordained a minister by a denominational body—the Univeralists. And in 1871, Celia Burleigh became the first female Unitarian minister. Both Brown and Burleigh were also active reformers—popular lecturers on issues of women's rights and participants in various Women's Conventions.

A number of other Unitarian and Universalist women were also prominent leaders in the movement for reform of women's rights. This fact was brought home to me anew a couple of summers agowhen I was doing research in the archives of a Unitarian minister, William Channing Gannett. As I flipped through the various files, I stopped as I came across a letter from Susan B. Anthony—the prominent activist for women's suffrage. Although raised a Quaker, Anthony regularly attended Gannet's congregation and the letter was simply a note to her minister.

Here at First Parish in Wayland we have our own connection to a prominent abolitionist and advocate of women's rights—Lydia Maria Child who lived up the road and attended services here to hear her friend, the Rev. Sears, preach. Unlike Anthony, Burleigh, and Brown, Child was known primarily as an author and abolitionist rather than as a women's right reformer. Yet, in the life that she *led*, she was a trailblazer for women by speaking out and writing her mind and by working as one of the first female journalists—during which she had what one historian refers to as an "early commuter marriage."

You may have noticed that when referring to these 19th century women, I did not use the term "feminist." The term feminist actually has an early 20th century origin—crossing the Atlantic from the French word *feminisme.* Here in the U.S., we simply had a "woman question" in the 19th century and reforms sought to address this question while addressing the rights and equality of women. I note this because I think that its

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important to remember that questions about the role of women in society have been around a very, very long time.

Of course, there has been much variety and shifts in *what* the "questions", problems, and issues *are.* Within various historical eras, places, and socio-economic contexts, the particular concerns and issues for women can differ. Moreover, there has also been a tremendous variety of *answers* and approaches to *how* to address these various issues. And I'm not just talking about two camps "pro" and "con" or "feminist" and "anti-feminist". There are a wide range of analyses and responses *within* all those working to address the myriad challenges and issues still facing women today. There are liberal feminists, socialist feminists, maternal feminists, Black feminists, womanists, mujerista feminists, queer theory, and many more approaches to feminism—as well as those who reject the label, but engage in the work. Given all these different approaches, the course I taught at Boston College, was entitled *Introduction to Feminisms*—in the plural.

Why do these discussions within feminism matter to you, the congregation gathered here today at First Parish? It matters because feminism still matters—because there are still too many examples of inequality, injustice, and violence against women.

For example, for months and months there have been repeated stories about sexual assault of young women on college campuses and in the military. Such stories point to a systematic disrespect for the value of women's bodies, sexuality, and their right to choose what does and *does not* happen to them. Even the White House has stepped in, pressuring colleges to come clean about the problem and launching an "It's On Us" campaign as a call for action and accountability by persons of *all* genders.

When I planned for this sermon, I didn't set out to talk about any particular issue facing women today. Rather, I simply knew there would be *something* happening in the news . . . because there almost always is. Feminism remains a controversial word because feminism remains as a powerful challenge to ongoing practices of violence, inequality, and injustice facing women in many different ways, places, and contexts. As Unitarian

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Universalists, we stand in a long line of women *and* men who have been engaged in advocating for a society, a religion, and a system of laws that *fully* recognize the inherent worth and dignity of women.
Yes, there has been tremendous progress in many ways towards full equality for women—from 19th century laws allowing married women to own property, to women's suffrage in the U.S. in 1920, to the ongoing spread of the ability of women to marry the women they love.

But, in no way do we live in a time and a place where we no longer need feminism. We still need to stand up to the anti-feminist Hugh Peters of our time who would have us think that the only "woman problem" is women who speak up when they should be silent, or who challenge injustice when they should accept the world the way it is.

Not me. I'm a feminist. And, I'm a Unitarian Universalist. And I believe that we can do better. I believe that it is "on us" to get involved, to not stand by and watch, but rather to notice what's going on around us. I believe that we need to learn to see, name, and speak out about the ongoing issues and problems facing women today—from sexual assault, to income inequality, to access to women's health care. I also believe that as a straight, white woman living in an affluent community that I do not adequately see or understand the issues facing women of color, gay women, immigrant women, poor women, and others whose life situation is so different than my own.

And so, I remain committed to learning, listening, and seeking ways to speak out not only for my own welfare and dignity as a woman, but also for all the women *and* men who face violence, injustice, and degradation of their inherent worth and dignity.

I invite you today to renew your own commitment to the ongoing struggles against injustice and inequality—whether it be racial, economic, or gender-based. May we all believe that we *can* continue to make a difference in the ongoing struggles for more love, more light, and more justice in our shared world.

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