

This past Friday people around the world marked International Women's Day, a day to celebrate the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. It is also a day that marks a call to action to accelerate gender parity. This week I've thought a lot about two women who helped reshape our denomination and the place of women in ministry and leadership.

In 1923 after being the first woman to complete theological training from a Canadian Presbyterian theological school Lydia Grouchy applied for ordination. There was a problem. The church didn't ordain women. Many in the church argued that Biblically women had no place in ministry, that because she was the only woman pressing for ordination she couldn't possibly be representing other women, that ordination would take away from women's God-given role as wife and mother, that women were not equipped for ministry the way men were. Ordaining women would make it harder to attract men to ministry.

For 13 years Lydia Grouchy said no. She said no to each rejection. She said no to the church's limiting her call to ordained ministry. She said no to the societal pressures that limited the place of women. She said no to the temptation to give up. Every two years for 13 years Grouchy applied for ordination, her presbytery joined her, and then finally in 1934 Saskatchewan Conference forced General Council to make a ruling on the ordination of Women by saying that unless they objected they were ordaining Lydia. In 1936 Lydia Grouchy became the first ordained woman in the United Church of Canada.

But the story didn't end with her. Women continued to have to fight for their place in their church often facing discrimination, exclusion, sabotage, ridicule, and rejection. While women could be ordained, married women were not welcome in ministry. Letting married women serve in churches, many argued, would take away from their God-given duty to husband and children. It would ruin homes, society, and the church. Women fought hard to have their call to ministry respected. In 1954 Elinor Leard, a brilliant, well educated, very experienced church leader, became the first married woman to be ordained. She said no to the church's limiting her call to ordained ministry. She said no to the societal pressures that limited the place of women. She said no to the temptation to give up.

In their saying no, women like the Rev. Lydia Grouchy and the Rev. Elinor Leard said yes to God's call to ordination and to help heal and transform the church and their society.

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The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness where life is stripped of comfort and security. It is the place of searching, testing, journeying. In the desert Jesus goes deep into his life and it is there that temptation strikes. I believe the character of the devil is simply and powerfully a symbolic image of Jesus going deep within his own self, his own struggles and wrestling. What does it mean to live as the Child of God, the Messiah, the one who proclaims and articulates in his life the dominion of God lived right here and right now? Will he lead as one who strives first for comfort and material gain? Jesus says no. Will he be a flashy Messiah one who through great spectacles and marvels wows people into following him? Jesus says no.

Will he make the whole world submit to him, even if it means giving up on the core of faith- life centred in God's love and justice? Jesus says no. And because he says no he finds the space to say yes to the ministry God has called him to live.

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What comes to your mind when you hear the word "no." Somewhere deep within me I think of the word "no" as a limit and rejection. But Rev. David Jagger, in reflecting on today's scripture, invites us to look at saying "no" as a spiritual practice of stewardship. Stewardship reminds us that all that we are and all that we have are gifts from God. He writes:

"As those who follow Jesus, each of us, constantly, gets to choose "No" or "Yes." How will I use the time and resources I have been given? That's a Stewardship question."

Rev. Jagger goes on to invite us into the spiritual practice of saying "no":  
"Early this week, maybe tomorrow," he invites us, "I want you to make a list of three things, three Christian values, to which you have said "Yes."  
Maybe they are similar to the three that Jesus relies on in the Bible story:

"Yes, I will trust God to provide what I really need."

"Yes, I will trust God to care for me."

"Yes, I will serve and worship God alone.

Maybe they're broader:

"Yes, I value faithfulness."

"Yes, I value kindness."

"Yes, I value generosity.

Think about and pray about it and write down three things, three Christian values, to which you have said “Yes.” Carry that list with you as a reminder. Make a copy or two and put it in places where you will keep running into it. Then, through the rest of the week, whenever a choice presents itself, say “No” when it contradicts your list-those Christian values to which you have said “Yes.”

Rev. Dave Jagger reminds me that saying no is a holy act of stewardship. When we say no to the things that hold us back from living the life God calls us to live, when we say no to the temptations that block our relationships with God, our self, and others it is then that we find the space to say yes - yes to God’s call for us. And when our No and our Yes become acts of stewardship, when they become spiritual practices, then we rediscover like Jesus and like the Rev. Lydia Grouchy and the Rev. Elinor Leard that God is at work in our lives and we are part of God’s holy story of healing and transformation.

So friends, in this holy wilderness season of Lent may God bless us as we practice good stewardship and learn the holy art of saying no for we are part of God’s holy story. Thanks be to God. Amen.