

Are Middle-Aged Women Overlooked in Church?

My sister's husband recently graduated from university. Between working full-time and being a wonderful father to my two little nieces, it was a busy and arduous road to complete his education. We're very proud of his perseverance. Among all of the young people, I felt rather middle-aged at his convocation.

I got married one week after my own university graduation, quite convinced of my maturity, and yet these kids looked like they belonged in junior high to me. Babies! in caps and gowns! Setting off on adventures, no doubt.

In a sea of shiny young people, I suddenly found tears in my eyes for the older ones among them. I don't mean to take anything away from the young ones, not at all. I remember those days with tenderness.

But they wore their youth and bright future so carelessly, and I found myself applauding until my palms tingled for the men and women like my brother-in-law who had to battle through school with so many other demands on their attention, for the women older than my mother who have finally finished their degree long after their nests emptied, the middle-aged men with a circle of whiskers on their shining bald heads. I whooped when someone with gray hair under their black cap and tassel climbed the stairs for their diploma. I high-fived several grandmothers on their way up the aisle.

A few months ago, I requested stories or anecdotes about how it feels to be a woman in the church. I was more than a little overwhelmed by the responses, both the sheer number and the content, but I did my best to respond to each one. Women filled my inbox with stories—beautiful and horrible, hurtful

and empowering—about their experiences within the institutions of Christianity.

After all my research, I thought I knew what to expect. And sure enough, there were the stories about women feeling marginalized because they are not married or do not/ cannot have children; stories about women who had men turn their backs when they stood up to preach their first sermon; stories about women who stayed in abusive marriages because of their church's teachings; a lot of affirming women who found their voice and healing within church.

But one theme emerged that I hadn't looked for, over and over: women in the middle of their lives who felt invisible and ignored by the church, the same way they feel invisible or ignored in our culture.

These are women of my mother's generation perhaps, maybe 10 or even 20 years on either side. And I heard their hurt and sorrow and stoicism.

I used to scan conference platforms and church staff listings, music festivals and seminary rosters for women and visible minorities. Now I find I'm scanning for older women, as well. And you know what? They were right. They aren't there.

One woman told me about how she had led worship at her church for years. But when a new young pastor was hired, he wanted a cooler band to get more young people, and the first thing to go were the older women. "No one wanted to see old women on stage," she wrote candidly without bitterness, and so she was replaced with young women in their late teens and early 20s. She misses leading worship.

Another woman told me about the sting of being passed over continually. She had very high levels of education, a seminary degree, a long history of teaching with many beloved students, but every teacher at her church's education program was a young, charismatic man with half her education, let alone

experience, despite their position of welcoming women in ministry.

In practice, it wasn't actually happening. She believed now that it was because she did not fit the expected look or personality or gender of their education program.

Another woman shared about how she has welcomed and celebrated the shift in the churches of her context towards women in leadership and ministry. Yet she has noticed that they are all young and beautiful women with identical outgoing and big-smiling personalities. The glass ceiling remains for her because she doesn't fit the standard or "target audience," so she cheers on these young women, the age of her grandchildren, with a selflessness that amazed me.

Women told me about how hard it is to be middle-aged or to be considered unbeautiful in a church culture that values youth and energy and talent. In a sea of hipsters and motivated young people with self-promotion apparently engrained into their DNA, they feel invisible and overlooked, slow and ignored.

Ever since I read their emails, I've been haunted by their stories. I asked older women in my life and found the same was true. Once a woman reaches a certain age or if a woman is not considered beautiful or outgoing or charming, she often disappears in the eyes of her community. She still has a rich and meaningful life, don't get me wrong, but they all said, sadly, that yes, they are well-educated or experienced or wise, and yet they are never asked, they are never invited, they are rarely noticed. Many of them told me that they were "back-stage" while the beautiful and young were celebrated from the front, so they worked and they served in beautiful obscurity, and they found that God was faithful there, too.

It's bothered me because, of course, I believe that God looks at the heart, not at the outward appearance. I long for our

communities to be a tangible representation, a sign along the road, of what it looks like when men and women of all ages, nations, experiences, intellectual abilities, socio-economic backgrounds all gather together to glorify God.

It's an idealist view, a dreamer's dream, but if there is one place where women of a certain age or women who do not fit the cultural expectations of "beauty" should feel valued and affirmed, celebrated and acknowledged, honored and even just seen, oh, my goodness, let it be within the body of Christ!

So I'm thinking of you a lot now, ladies. I'm thinking of the women 20, 30, 40, 50 years older than me.

I'm thinking of you and I'm wanting, somehow, to repent for how we've shunted you to the side, bought into our culture's insane standards of beauty and aging, to ask for your forgiveness. I'm thinking of you when I sit in church, and I'm looking for you when I'm preaching from the stage now, and I'm thinking of you watching the rest of us run around striving, and I'm not sure how to fix it. But I'm sorry. And I'm watching for you now. I won't make this mistake again, and I want to be a better listener, and I want to be a noticer. You aren't invisible to me, not at all. I want to give honor where honor is due. When I talk about not waiting for permission anymore, about being loved and free, about not waiting for a seat at the Table, I'm thinking about you.

I am thinking in particular of the tremendous beauty and strength of this generation of women. I'm thinking of how much I have to learn, of how much passion and laughter, anger and goodness, stories and sermons, resources and energy they carry within them. Can you imagine, friends? Can you imagine what would happen if we made a little room for their voices and experiences in our communities?

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