FEMINISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

Choose to learn and have compassion for difference. Find and embrace similarities.

The pace of social change is slow and often disheartening, yet, we are always moving forward.

In Mary Oliver’s poem, “Sunrise,” she writes:

You can die for it—an idea, or the world. People have done so, brilliantly,

Over the centuries, women have died for the idea of equality, for the need and human right of freedom. And they have died from the lack of equality, from the lack of freedom, from the lack of choice and human dignity.

We struggle still for the right of reproductive choice. We struggle still for pay equity, and economic opportunity. We struggle still for recognition of women’s worth and dignity. We struggle still to protect girls from abduction, from sexual abuse, from physical and psychological violence, from poverty.

The word “feminism” has a stale sound to it. It is one of those 1960’s and 1970’s words that cause younger generations to roll their eyes.
But I know that the work of feminism - fairness and rights for women equal to men - is not done. It’s not done in our country, not done in Europe, and only beginning in many countries around the globe.

Women are seeking identity and empowerment while also holding to their faith.

I love the Paper Bag Princess story of the courage of a girl to save herself, to foil the dragon and to rescue the prince. I love the song from Frozen...the story of another princess who learns feminist lessons. Elsa learns that she must “let go” of being nice, of being a good girl, of fulfilling the wishes of others. She must “let it go” and make her own choices.

As I began to think about the victories of the feminist movement and the progress of women’s rights and equality in America, I realized that the struggle today for freedom and dignity is most acute for our sisters in the Muslim world.

Mary Oliver’s poem goes on:

*I thought of China, and India and Europe*  
*I thought of China, and India and Europe*  
*And how the sun blazing for everyone just*  
*As it rises under the lashes of my own eyes.*

We are learning to move forward in a global world and so we try to understand the context and perspective of other lives, of other cultures, of other religions.
In my sermon next Sunday, I’ll return to the empowerment of women in America and the challenges we face here at home. For today, I offer the stories of some Muslim women risking their lives for their feminist ideas.

*Sisters in War: a Story of Love, Family and Survival in the New Iraq,* by Christina Asquith, was published in 2009 and tells of two sisters raised in a modern, fairly secular family in Baghdad.

As things worsened under the Saddam Hussein regime and the American invasion was imminent, in 2002, the women of the family were sent to live outside the city with relatives.

One sister, Nunu, was in college and the other, Zia, held a job, drove a car, and did the bookkeeping for her uncle’s business. Neither wore the hijab. The long Iraq war changed their lives. They returned to live with their parents in Baghdad, but economic sanctions had brought inflation and loss of jobs. The bombing of Baghdad caused destruction of businesses and infrastructure. Zia’s job ended and attending college was a risk.

Islamic terrorist bombings and the presence of young Iraqi militia made the city unsafe for women and girls. Muslim women were not allowed to venture out without a father, brother, or male cousin accompanying them.

A woman alone was a target for violence. A woman in western clothes was a target for violence. A woman without a veil was a target for violence.
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Because she spoke English, Zia eventually got a job in the Green Zone, the American military compound, but had to risk her life traveling to and from her home each day.

Nunu stayed at home watching television most of the day. And like so many other young Iraqi girls, she dreamed of becoming a model or competing on a reality show, like American Idol.

As always, the first casualties of war were women’s freedom and security.

As the Iraq war went on, young women like Nunu suffered isolation, depression, and the prospect of a life without a husband.

Women like Zia, women who worked for the Americans, suffered phone threats, the risk of abduction and rape, car bombs or being shot.

Because of the economic poverty of wartime, poor families in tribal regions gave their daughters in marriage at younger and younger ages. Often these marriages were abusive, sometimes the girls were sold into prostitution.
And through these years, the Islamist conservative influence grew and the elections of 2005 brought Islamic Theocracy to power. Conservative interpretations of the Quran took hold.

Those of us who hold liberal understandings of our faith, those of us who are comfortably secular, must stretch to understand the dilemma of those men and women in every country who hold their religious beliefs as a core identity.

The legacy of war and terror and dictatorship in Iraq has caused widespread family tragedy. Young women confined at home and denied their freedom and dignity have suffered as much as young soldiers sent to war.

*Sisters in War* also tells the story of Manal Omar, an American Muslim, activist, and Arabic speaker, who went to Iraq to help in the delivery of aid. She was instrumental in setting up women’s shelters and centers to teach women new skills, to teach them how to set up small businesses, to help provide medical care, to encourage education for girls and teach them about women’s rights.

Much of the work of these women’s centers was underground work. It was very dangerous work in a culture that oppressed and threatened women in so many ways.

Manal left Iraq in late 2004 because her life was at risk. She knew of at least fourteen women who’d been murdered during the 18 months she’d been in Iraq. Some were aid workers,
some were lawyers, some journalists and reporters, some translators, some were businesswomen.

Many of these murders were unreported. Such deaths rarely made the news, but they formed a pattern: women were being executed for standing up and speaking out, for working and refusing to veil.

The pace of social change is slow and, it seems, there must always be martyrs. And yet, we are always moving forward.

I reflect on the suffering of Muslim women during the Iraq war (though I could speak of Muslim women’s suffering in Pakistan and Egypt and Africa, as well). I reflect on the patriarchal aspects of Islam, not to critique an ancient and growing world faith, but to help us understand that the time of patriarchy is past. Everywhere, the time of patriarchy is past.

The good news of Islam almost everywhere is that women are stepping forward, pushing for the rethinking of past interpretations of their faith and demanding new public roles, new sacred and secular identities.

Professor Amina Wadud, professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, has written a book titled, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from Women’s Perspectives.*
I read books like this in seminary...about reclaiming Christian and Hebrew texts from a woman’s perspective.

Regarding the words written down by the Prophet, Professor Wadud writes:

“Patriarchy was one way of survival, but it’s time has ended, we need a more cooperative framework”...in a postmodern world.

For Islam to be a living reality, it must take a shape that fits its context, its historical time and place.

Patriarchy was one manifestation of Islam, but not the only one. Women are stepping up to participate in the creation of a new manifestation of Islam.

Religious scholar Karen Armstrong writes:

“In Islam, Muslims have looked for God in history. The Quran gave them the mission to create a just community in which all members, even the most weak and vulnerable were treated with absolute respect.”

Obviously, the atrocities of wartime, the oppressions of patriarchy do not fit this mission.

Islam, like all religions, is not homogeneous; there are many interpretations and practices across time and geography.
An interpretation that posits absolute truths is a fundamentalist stance in any religion. Times are changing within the Muslim world, and women are in the forefront of that change. It is the work of a generation to see new possibilities, to risk challenging the status quo, to step out to ask the hard questions.

The pace of social change is slow and there must always be martyrs, and yet, we are always moving forward.

Choose to learn and have compassion for difference. Find and embrace similarities.

Let me end with Mary Oliver’s poem.

Sunrise

You can die for it-
An idea, or the world.

People have done so brilliantly,
Letting their small bodies be bound
To the stake,
Creating an unforgettable fury of light.

But this morning,
Climbing the familiar hills,
In the familiar fabric of dawn,
I thought of China, and India and Europe,
And I thought how the sun
Blazes for everyone just
As joyfully as it rises under the lashes of my own eyes,

And I thought
I am so many!
What is my name?

What is the name
Of the deep breath I would take
Over and over for all of us?

Call it whatever you want, it is happiness,
It is another one of the ways to enter the fire.

AMEN