

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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JUSTICE ISSUE: GENDER EQUALITY

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE/ LECTIONARY WEEK:	Judges 4:1–7
SOCIAL PRINCIPLES/ BOOK OF RESOLUTIONS REFERENCES:	Book of Resolutions #3260
OBJECTIVE:	Participants will be able to defend the importance of studying Judges 4–5 in youth settings.
SUPPLIES NEEDED:	Small votive candle w/match or lighter Or a battery votive candle, device to play music from YouTube/ Spotify/Apple Music, a way to display/project a prompt, writing supplies (paper, pens), crafting supplies (magazines that can be discarded, construction paper, glue, scissors, markers/colored pencils), poster/ sign making supplies (poster board, thick sharpies in multiple colors), various 6”x6” squares of paper of differing colors, bibles for the youth, pull quotes from Resolution 3260 on index cards to be scattered throughout the space (handout)

LESSON PLAN STRUCTURE (1 HOUR)

CENTERING MOMENT (5 MINUTES)

Part 1: Candle of Hidden Light and Breath Prayer

(Light a candle)

Say: Today we will explore a story that often remains in the shadows of scripture. Yet God’s light cannot stay hidden. Sometimes the people God chooses surprise us. To-day’s story reminds us that God speaks through voices that are too often overlooked.

(Pause for moment of silence.)

(Guide the group through the following breath prayer three or four times.)

INHALE: God speaks through women.

EXHALE: I will listen and learn.

NOTES

Supplies: Small candle/battery-operated candle, journal/paper, pens/pencils

To add an auditory component to this centering moment, find a recording of the Overture from Handel’s *Deborah*, HWV 51, Pt. 1.
(eg: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wk9Xw4dSFvg&list=RDWk9Xw4dS-Fvg&start_radio=1)

This centering moment is in three parts, and so is the overture, so you can use the change in the music to cue the start of the different parts (in the above link, the three parts are as follows:

Grave: 0:00 – 2:18

Allegro: 2:20 – 4:56

Minuet: 4:48 – 5:56

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Invite the youth to repeat that breath prayer, repeating the phrases as needed.

Part 2: Silent Sentence Completion

Display the following prompt:

It is important to study stories about women in scripture because...

Invite the youth to silently reflect on or journal/free write answers to the prompt.

Part 3: Repeat the Breath Prayer

INHALE: God speaks through women.

EXHALE: I will listen and learn.

SCRIPTURE STUDY (25 MIN.)

Say: Before we begin, let's see which bible characters we are most familiar with.

(Read each name aloud)

(Ask students to give a thumbs up if they know who the person is and a thumbs down if they don't)

- Noah
- Deborah
- David
- Jael
- Joseph
- Phoebe
- Paul
- Bathsheba

NOTES

Context for Judges 4-5

Judges is part of a larger *meta-narrative* of the bible that scholars and commentators call “the Deuteronomistic History” (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings), which tell the overarching story of:

1. How the Israelites came into the land;
2. How the Israelites came to take possession of the land;
3. How the Israelites lived and governed themselves while in the land; and, ultimately
4. How the Israelites came to lose the land

Judges is part of that second and third part, telling the story of a series of generations of Israelites before the establishment of the monarchy and how God calls up individual leaders to be Judges over the people for a time. The whole book follows a rather predictable cycle:

1. The Israelites do “what is evil” in the sight of God
2. God hands the Israelites over to a regional enemy to oppress them
3. The Israelites cry out to God for help
4. God’s Spirit falls on a member of the community to serve as a *charismatic* (that is, Spirit-filled) leader/judge
5. The Judge defeats the Israelites’ enemies
6. There is rest in the land
7. The Israelites again do “what is evil” in the sight of God, and the cycle repeats

Throughout the book, this cycle slowly starts to unravel, until the very end of the book, which states: “In those days, there was no king in Israel; all the

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Say: Many of us learned stories like Noah, David, and Paul when we were young. But many churches spend less time exploring women in scripture. Today we will read about Deborah and Jael, two women whose courage changed the course of Israel's history. This story includes violence because it takes place during a time of war. Like other difficult stories in Scripture, it invites us to think carefully about leadership, justice, courage, and God's work through ordinary people.

(Read Judges 4 in three sections, after each section, pause and ask the following questions.)

- vv. 1 – 10
- vv. 11 – 16
- vv. 17 – 22

Section Questions:

- What characters are present?
- How are the characters related to each other?
- Who is in control?
- Who did what to who?

(Encourage students to summarize the story in their own words.)

Discussion questions:

- How do Deborah and Jael defy expectations?
- Why might some people feel uncomfortable with this story?
- Why should we, as youth and as a church, study this story?
- What do we learn about God by paying attention to the women in this story?

Say: The United Methodist Church affirms that God's vision includes the full participation and leadership of women in both church and society. Reading stories like

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people did what was right in their own eyes", which leads right into the introduction of the character of Samuel in 1 Samuel (Christian tradition inserts the Book of Ruth first), who is the Judge that will establish the monarchy in Israel.

The Revised Common Lectionary for this week only prescribes reading Judges 4:1-7, which provides the identity of Deborah, but doesn't offer up any depiction of her actions and leaves Jael out completely.

Judges 5, the Song of Deborah and Jael, is widely considered to be one of the oldest pieces of literature in the whole Bible.

This story has a lot of names—often times a stumbling block for reading aloud (for youth and adults!). Remember, yourself, and remind your youth that the English names on the page are *transliterations* of Hebrew names that, in many cases, we don't actually know the true pronunciation of with 100% certainty. The best practice for reading names in the bible aloud is, whatever you end up saying, say it confidently, and no one will think you said it wrong (because they don't know how to say it either).

Note that Zebulun and Naphtali are not *individuals* in this story, but rather the descendants of Zebulun and Naphtali, two of Jacob's sons.

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Deborah's and Jael's helps us recognize gifts and leadership that have sometimes been overlooked. Now let's respond creatively to what we've heard.

GROUP ACTIVITY (25 MIN.)

Say: Deborah and Jael didn't simply witness God's work, they participated in it. Now you have an opportunity to respond creatively to their story.

(Invite students to choose one activity)

Choose Your Own Creative Adventure (15-20 min)

Option 1: Rewrite Judges 5 (The Song of Deborah and Jael) using your own language.

Having just read Judges 4, show your youth that Judges 5 is retells the story of Judges 4 in poetry rather than narrative prose. Look at what's similar and what's different in the two versions. Write your own Song of Justice in the same vein as the Song of Deborah and Jael for a contemporary audience. It can be whatever kind of poetic/lyrical form you want.

Option 2: Write a short dramatic monologue from the perspective of one of the characters in the story (Deborah, Jael, Barak, Sisera, etc).

Option 3: Build a collage from magazine clippings focused on gender equality in the church and in society or that honors women leaders in scripture and today.

Option 4: Cut out shapes from colored construction paper and paste them together to depict a scene from Judges 4

Option 5: Create a short benediction or liturgical element inspired by the themes of Judges 4 and 5 and issues of gender justice

Option 6: Justice Meme Gallery. Make memes using Judges 4-5 characters and gender justice themes. Encourage wit, clarity, and good-natured humor.

Option 7: Prophetic Poster-Making. Design protest-style posters using powerful quotes or words inspired by Deborah and Jael's courage and modern-day gender justice issues.

Option 8: Justice Quilt Square. Design a 6x6" paper "quilt square" using symbols,

NOTES

Resolution 3260 affirms both the biblical and theological conviction that all people, regardless of gender, are called by God into full participation in the life and leadership of the Church.

Drawing on Galatians 3:27–28 and the inclusive practices of Jesus, the resolution names persistent barriers faced by women—such as underrepresentation in teaching, preaching, ordained ministry, and leadership roles. It calls for intentional action to dismantle institutional and cultural obstacles by promoting equitable policies, amplifying women's voices in worship and decision-making, ensuring fair hiring and appointment practices, and offering new educational and mentorship opportunities. Grounded in a vision of the Church as a community where “there is neither male nor female,” the resolution challenges United Methodists at all levels—individuals, congregations, and conferences—to remove every barrier to the full embrace, empowerment, and flourishing of women in church and society.

Before your lesson begins, have index cards with pull quotes from Resolution 3260 on them distributed scattered throughout your space.

A full copy of Resolution 3260 can be found on Resource UMC at <https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-resolutions-every-barrier-down-toward-full-embrace-of-all-women-in-church-and-society>

Find a playlist of lo-fi hymns on YouTube/Spotify/Apple Music and play it while youth are creating (e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDpH-WEZITOk&list=RDRDpHWEZITOk&start_radio=1)

This activity offers many options for creative outlets. Feel free to not consider options that won't work for your context (or imagine other options that will work for your context!)

If you have a lead team (either other adults or youth) encourage them to participate and choose an option too. You can also choose an option to be creative or you can float around and check in on youth to see what they're

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words, and images to represent gender equity in the Church.

Option 9: Write a letter from Deborah or Jael to the Church today, explaining why their story still matters and why it needs to be heard.

(After 15-20 minutes invite the students back to the group. Invite volunteers to share their work.)

CLOSING MOMENT (5 MIN.)

(Relight or gesture toward the candle)

Say: We began today remembering that God still speaks through voices that have sometimes been overlooked. That invitation doesn't end here. Every day we have opportunities to notice, listen, and encourage gifts in people whose voices are too often ignored.

(Lead the breath prayer once more)

Inhale: God speaks through women

Exhale: I will listen and learn

(Invite students to turn to one partner and complete this sentence)

Say: We need stories like Deborah and Jael because...

(Allow both partners to share. Invite several volunteers to share with the entire group. Close with the following prayer.)

Prayer:

When leaders lead, and people offer themselves, bless the Lord.

When the mighty fall, and the forgotten rise, bless the Lord.

When women speak truth and act in courage, bless the Lord.

When justice does not wait for permission, bless the Lord.

When the song of one becomes the song of many, bless the Lord.

O God of Deborah and Jael,

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creating. Encourage these leaders to model vulnerability by sharing what they created when the time for sharing comes in a manner that invites others to share what they created too

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teach us to rise when the world says sit,
to speak when silence is easier,
to act when others delay.

May we, too, be bringers of peace,
builders of justice,
singers of freedom.

We go with your Spirit,
and we go in song.

INHALE: God speaks through women

EXHALE: I will listen and learn

Amen

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LESSON HANDOUT

Judges 4:1-10

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help, for he had nine hundred chariots of iron and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

At that time Deborah, a prophet, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Position yourself at Mount Tabor, taking ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand.’ ” Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” And she said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, and ten thousand warriors went up behind him, and Deborah went up with him.

Judges 4:11-16

Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh.

When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon. Then Deborah said to Barak, “Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand.

Has not the Lord gone out before you?” So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him. And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; not one was left.

Judges 4:17-22

Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. Jael came out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’ ” But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died. Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him and said to him, “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.” So he went into her tent, and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

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Pulled-quotes from Resolution 3260

Twenty-seven percent of United Methodist pastors in local churches today are women, compared with less than one in 100 in 1972.

Of the 55 active United Methodist bishops around the connection, 20 are women; 18 in the US jurisdictions, one in the Africa Central Conference, and one in the Philippines Central Conference. Of the US women bishops, seven are Black, three are Latina, and eight are white. No other US racial-ethnic group is represented among women bishops. In 2005 the first woman bishop was elected to serve in Europe; in 2012 the first woman bishop was elected to serve in Africa; and in 2022 the first woman bishop was elected to serve in the Philippines.

The United Methodist Church gave to the world the first African American (Leontine T. C. Kelly, 1984) and first Latina (Minerva Carcaño, 2004) bishops in mainline Christianity.

Women comprise half of all students enrolled in United Methodist seminaries and seeking ordination.

United Women in Faith (formerly United Methodist Women) is the largest and most prolific mission working entity on behalf of women, children, and youth in our denomination, with ministries of education, discipleship, economic and social development, health care, advocacy, and empowerment in over 120 nations around the world.

A number of United Methodist congregations in 2007 still flatly refuse to accept a woman as senior pastor and are especially opposed to receiving a woman in a cross-racial clergy appointment. In 2006, a racial-ethnic clergywoman assigned to an Anglo church was allegedly menaced by members to dissuade her acceptance of the appointment. In another instance, laity threatened to leave the congregation unless the woman pastor wore a dress instead of slacks to prove she was “a real lady”.

In a 2007 survey of local United Methodist congregations, 18 percent said they do not have women serving as ushers (an increase over 2004), and local church chairpersons of the church council, finance, and trustees are still overwhelmingly men and not women.

United Methodist membership in the US is declining among young women (and men) and people of color, particularly among those in low-income communities.

According to the “Clergy Age Trends in The United Methodist Church 2014” report from the Lewis Center, the number of female elders under the age of 35 has increased from 38 percent in 2013 to 39 percent in 2014.

A number of lay and clergy respondents to a survey on sexual harassment in the church mandated by the 2004 General Conference dismissed any ministries related to empowering women and addressing sexism as “political crap,” which “has nothing to do with spreading the good news of Jesus Christ”.

A woman district superintendent reportedly was called a “bitch” when she disagreed with a male colleague during a meeting of the conference cabinet.

Several prominent Church leaders—including bishops—have joined with secular society in decrying “the tyranny of diversity” and retreating from the work of undoing racism and sexism.

Such things as: “We need to stop worrying about politics and focus on the gospel . . .” (that is, as long as the gospel is interpreted in a way that continues to privilege North Americans, white people, and males); and “We’ll accept a woman or person of color as long as she’s qualified” (Could this infer that white men are automatically assumed to be qualified and that women and people of color get their jobs because of some other criteria, not because of their gifts and talents?)

Complaints of alleged sexual abuse of women by lay and clergy leaders in church settings are on the rise, according to the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women.

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Women comprise 54 percent of total members of our denomination, yet account for less than 30 percent of ordained ministers, and only 27 percent of the top-paying offices in US annual conferences (treasurers, chancellors, and directors of connec-tional ministry).

Of 15 active bishops who oversee the work of the church in Europe, Africa, and the Philippines, only two are women.

The experiences of racial-ethnic women in the United States and women from The United Methodist Church in Africa and the Philippines mirror the parables and other Gospel stories of triumph over obstacles, being strangers in a strange land, rein-terpreting familiar stories for new disciples, and bringing our talk about love and justice in line with our walk, especially as the Church also exists in a society that is still racist and sexist. We ask the general agencies to create evangelistic tools, programs, educational materials, networks, and opportunities to empower women in the church and society, including specific resources for and leadership opportu-nities offered to women under 35, racial-ethnic women in the United States, women from nations beyond the United States, women in recovery from addiction, divorced women, professional women, farm women, and skeptical-about-the-church wom-en. We further urge church growth teams to include women from these groups in order to help the Church focus more on being a vibrant movement in people's lives instead of just a religious institution. In our leadership development at all levels, the Church must put energy, resources, skill and prayerful action into engaging new women in lay and clergy leadership.

Our largely Western-focused denomination must witness in our giving and our living to the power of agapé by working actively for the well-being of all people. This is particularly critical in our work with women around the world who, with their chil-dren, are more likely than any other demographic group to live in poverty; to lack access to adequate health care, housing, and education; and to lack political power sufficient to transform systems. The United Methodist Church must lead the way by valuing the comparable work and worth of women in our churches, agencies, and related entities, and by championing such things as affordable child care and health

care, pay equity, financial aid, and educational support for single women in Africa and the Philippines. Each agency and annual conference should report to the next General Conference on how they have engaged women, including women of color, women from Africa and the Philippines, and women under 35.

In recent years, some church pundits have claimed that Christian churches have become “too feminized,” and therefore irrelevant and unappealing to men. However, these same observers fail to consider that even with decades of male-only leader-ship among churches, and even in the face of narrow and misogynist misreading of the Bible to exclude and blame them for human sin, many women have continued to stay actively and joyfully involved in the life of the institutional Church. We challenge general agencies and annual conferences to include in church growth and new discipleship strategies efforts to reach women of color, young women, poor wom-en, career women, teen girls, older women, immigrant women, women survivors of violence, women in prison, women leaving prison, women seeking, women rearing children on limited incomes, etc.

According to some estimates by denominational advocates and legal experts, The United Methodist Church has paid more than \$50 million from 2000 to 2004 in legal fees, counseling, mediation, and reparations related to sexual misconduct and abuse in church settings committed by lay and clergy. While sexual misconduct can impact anyone and be perpetrated by anyone, most cases involve men as offenders and women and children as victims. If women cannot trust the Church to believe them, protect them from abuse, and offer them clear justice when abuse happens, it again calls into question the authenticity of the Church's witness. It could suggest to them that the Church—and, by extension, God—does not care about, want, or value the participation of women. We call on the Council of Bishops to collaborate with the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women to continue to develop and enforce effective policies, laws, and practices and consistent application of those policies and practices to reduce risk of misconduct and offer swift and just recom-pense and remediation for victims when abuse happens.

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There is no one women's perspective or women's theology or women's view of Christianity. What is common among many women in The United Methodist Church, however, is that their participation in theological discourse is typically treated as "in addition to" the "classical" biblical and theological teachings. Feminist/womanist/mujerista perspectives are often considered subversive and treated as suspect. Discussions of gender-inclusive language, reading the Hebrew and Greek text through women's eyes, and liberation theology—especially as discussed by women—are regarded by many as a threat to the Christian faith, instead of new and perhaps even more authentic perspectives on it. Further, laywomen and clergywomen in local parishes often do not see themselves as theologians, with as much right to explore Scripture, to embrace the gospel anew, and to offer their learnings to the wider Church. We urge the denomination to affirm the importance of women's perspectives in theological discussions in the denomination.