

Korean Women Search for the Silver Coin

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AN ANCIENT Korean proverb says, "Three men determine the fate of every woman." They are her father, her husband and her son. This Confucian tradition has been the ironclad rule in Korean society for centuries. A woman is valued if she is obedient, quiet and subservient to her men, who give her meaning, identity and a place in society. They are her lawgivers and her saviors. By tradition men may treat women with contempt, belittle them and in many cases beat them to remind them of their subordination. Especially for the woman in poverty, the unwed mother, the widow—all unprotected by family ties to a significant male—this tradition is oppressive.

Today this tradition is being challenged, and in the front ranks of the resisters is Young Kim, a Methodist minister in Seoul. She believes her society has suffered enough by trading away the gifts and value of its women, its "silver coin" (Luke 15), for order.

Young Kim saw the recent celebration of a century of Protestant Christianity in Korea as a reminder of the initial joy that the gospel brought to the Korean people, who were impoverished by the excesses of corrupt governments, humiliated by repeated foreign invasion and enslaved by rigid class hierarchy. Central to that gospel is the liberating message of the dignity and worth of each person in God's love and real hope for an alternate future. However, Kim also saw that the Korean Christian churches had a different message for women.

Kim did not grow up in a Christian family. Her lineage is that of the *Yangban*, the aristocrats. Her father, a nationally renowned Confucian scholar and heir to vast feudal landholdings, was one of the scholarly nobility at the top of the social ladder. As one of the *Yangban*, her status was secure. Some early childhood experiences with other children planted the seeds of the hermeneutics of suspicion, yet she did not act upon those first challenges to her privilege status. Her father's firm No to the Christian faith was hers as well.

Appreciative of her intellectual gifts, her father provided her with a superior education in classical Korean culture and Western academics. But when she left home to attend Seoul's famous Ehwa Women's University, she met Christians whose witness was compelling. She began to explore Scripture for herself, and finally received Christian baptism while still a student. Her early excitement about the faith led her to enroll in a Presbyterian theological seminary in the nation's capital. There she met fellow seminarian Kenneth (Keun Soo) Hong, whom she married in 1964. Reconciliation with her family was difficult. Her eldest brother, next in line to her father in the Confucian hierarchy, once asked whether a Christian minister's status was "as good as *Yangban*." "Even better," she told him.

Later when Kenneth was ordained and started serving a Presbyterian congregation, Kim began to experience the second-class status that Korean women—even in the church—had to endure. She accumulated firsthand experience to correlate with the theological movement germinating in those days in Korea, *minjung* theology.

The *minjung* are those at the bottom of the Korean social ladder. The teachers at the seminary where Kim and Kenneth studied had pioneered the *minjung* theology movement, Korea's indigenous form of liberation theology. Arising out of centuries of crushing oppression and consequent suffering (*han*) of the people of low status, this theology is informed by the everyday experiences of the *minjung*, their daily terrors of want, powerlessness and subjugation.

Kim did not rest content with her role as a housewife, or even minister's wife. When Kenneth came to the states to study a few years later, she came along with three young children in tow and a determination to continue studying theology herself. After completing a doctoral degree, Kenneth assumed the pastorate of a Korean congregation in Boston. That gave Kim the opportunity to enroll in the theology program of Boston University. Eventually ordained as a Methodist pastor, she began pastoring a Methodist congregation in the Boston suburbs and then started a doctoral degree at BU.

Three years ago Kenneth accepted the call to pastor Hyang-Rin Presbyterian church in Seoul. Having completed her course work and exams, Kim returned to Seoul shortly thereafter. But standard rules in both the Presbyterian and Methodist structures in Korea blocked her from assuming a normal pastorate. After a ten-year absence from the Korean church scene, she was stunned by the denominational divisions that had developed. As in other periods of Christian history in Korea, it appeared that many had become more absorbed in their internal struggles for turf than in mission to the Korean people and proclaiming the gospel. Kim believed they were missing the point.

Out of young Kim's experience and nearly nonstop conversations with other Korean Christians, both men and women, has emerged Women Church of Korea. Formally organized last summer, Women Church has called Kim to be its first pastor. The community is by no means her creation, and she is not its only leader. In the style of other basic Christian communities, all participants help shape what Women Church is and does.

But Kim is the called pastor. She preaches the Christ who liberates the oppressed and loves the poor. She tells the women of Korea that they need not ask only "Who are we?" but "**Whose** are we?" Recalling the prayer of one Korean woman, "Please use me as a tool of my husband for peace in my home," she says that Korean women need to understand that they are first God's tool before they are their husbands'.

Women Church actively seeks out the oppressed women in Korea, the *joohoo* (housewife), *pachulhoo* (housework woman), *maechoonboon* (prostitute), *mehonmo* (unmarried mother) and *samonmim* (pastor's wife), often going to their houses to give pastoral care and provide worship services. The community's own formal church services are held one morning and one evening a

week to accommodate the schedules of working and nonworking women and to avoid conflict with regular Sunday church schedules.

Women Church is ecumenical and incorporates into its liturgies themes from Scripture that particularly address women and their contemporary issues. For example, the liturgy of salt endows each woman with the knowledge that she is the salt of the earth; the liturgy of perfume celebrates the woman who anointed Jesus; and with the lighting of a candle in the liturgy of light the members celebrate their calling to be the light of the world. Bible study and support groups follow every service. Some groups only pray, another focuses on the outcasts: prostitutes, prisoners, exploited workers. Another group wrestles with the World Council of Churches' theme of justice, peace and integrity of creation.

Christ's parable in Luke 15 of the woman searching by candlelight for the lost silver coin is a fundamental text for Women Church. The church, according to Kim, must light the candle by "teaching the good news." But it must not stop there. Like the woman and the coin, the church must search diligently for "women at every corner still living in darkness." Until all the coins are found, the church cannot rest. Kim reminds us that the coin represents not only the lost women of Korea but also what Korean women have lost: God's image in themselves, the mother image in God, their confidence to speak for themselves. Added to that are the matters of their health, peace, identity and place in the church. All of these gifts have not yet been reclaimed after one century of Protestant evangelization. One tragic loss for Korean women, Kim says, is the loss of true laughter. Theirs is "the laughter of bitterness more than the laughter of happiness. In the heart of the oppressed there can be no true laughter." Regaining that joy is the goal of Women Church. When the lost coin is found, "our joy will be God's joy."

In a recent interview published in a widely read secular magazine for women, Kim reflected on what Women Church might someday be for the whole Christian church in Korea: "a light shining to all of Christianity as we search by candlelight for women lost in Korean society, women who are God's silver coins." Women Church members envision the Korean church reformed, and through it a Korean society transformed to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. To signal this they celebrate the ancient church's Agape Meal, participating in the reality that this liturgy symbolizes. Here Korean women share rice and chilled ginger tea with one another "in remembrance of Jesus' eating and drinking with the poor, the lowly and the sinners at their tables."

Had Jesus stepped into Korea rather than Judea, would he not have shared the same meal with these women? They are the silver coins of their society, the very ones Jesus searched for and found. Sitting with him at the low table, sipping tea and eating rice, they hear Jesus retell the story of the woman and the lost coin. They hear him urging them to keep searching for Korea's lost women and for what women have lost, so that these unique gifts may be reclaimed for the life of the world.

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