

Set free

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

Perpetua, Macrina, Theodora, Sara, Syncletica, Melania the Younger and Melania the Elder, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Ávila—I didn't hear about any of these great women of faith when I was growing up. It's not that teachers withheld knowledge of them from us. Rather, I think they themselves hadn't heard of most these women.

The absence of their stories is not only a travesty of the gospel, but also a terrible injustice. Why weren't women's contributions valued enough to be noted through all those centuries? Was it because women couldn't think, except for the few who "thought like a man"? Was it, as common wisdom had it, that women's lives were too taken up with the "trivial stuff," like pregnancy and childbirth, and that therefore whatever we produced was trivial? Why else were our work, our concerns and our stories not considered worthy of being preserved within the larger history of the Christian tradition?

Of course, it is better for women now, and women can be ordained in many churches. Still, it's often painfully hard to be a woman in ministry, at least in the South.

One response to the difficulties and the hurt is to "play the game" cynically. But this costs us our integrity. It also leads to withdrawing emotionally from the people to whom we would minister. We end up taking out our depression and cynicism on ourselves.

Or maybe we can just get good and mad—not briefly, while we work through our feelings (we all have to do this), but permanently. But permanent anger destroys us and everyone around us. We can't stay mad forever. And the God who created us and called us to God's ministry called us not to ongoing anger but to love. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . and your neighbor as yourself." The God of love has set us free. If we are to remain free, we will have to grow into the love which is at the heart of God's gospel.

How, in the suffering of our own hurts as well as those of the women to whom we are linked, can we love those responsible for doing the hurting? Let me offer suggestions gleaned from Syncletica, the fifth-century Mother associated with the Egyptian desert, and from 13th-century theologian Julian of Norwich.

Syncletica reminds us, first, not to expect it to be easy to overcome the obstacles to love in ourselves or our communities. Growth in the context of the Christian life includes the struggle of learning to forgive what is past and to stand firm in our calling to ministry.

In the beginning, there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing toward God and afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire; at first they are choked by the smoke and cry, and in this way obtain what they seek . . . so we also must kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work.

The love Jesus summons us to is radical and disruptive. Achieving it individually or as a community is a long process.

Second, Syncletica reminds us of the gift and virtue of humility for moving us toward our goal. "Just as one cannot build a ship without some nails," she says, "so it is impossible to be saved without humility." Humility includes a deep understanding both that all of us are beloved of God and that all of us are limited and vulnerable.

In the view of the desert teachers, we don't recognize ourselves as sinners so that we can throw ourselves before God and grovel. Rather, knowing ourselves to be sinners gives us a way to see that, however different we are from others, we are more like them than unlike them. In a world of hurts, none of us is an innocent victim. As women we have been sinned against, and yet every day we too pass judgment on, criticize, gossip about, disregard and wound the people with whom we share our world.

We all sin. This good news liberates us from our need to blame and defend. When we accept our status as sinners, we can face up to what we are doing to each other right now. We can repent and learn new ways to relate, to be community together, to honor each other for exactly who we are in spite of the presence of sin. In short, we can love each other.

But how can we do this in such a broken world? Impossible as it may seem, scripture promises that the time will come when all things will be set right in God, even we human beings. Though we cannot ultimately know how this will happen, we know that God will complete what God has begun.

God's loving goodness is more powerful than sin, says Julian, and feel it or not, that loving goodness is not far off from us.

In God, our present and ancient sin, grief and loss are not the final word. In God no life is lost. Rather, each memory is preserved, each person held in love.

The world is God's, Julian reminds us, and because God is good and loves us infinitely, God will not leave broken what God has made. Julian reports that God answers our questions about sin and all our doubts:

Saying most comfortingly: I may make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well; and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well.

If we are faithful, love will be the outcome. All will be well.