This is a story about the way God’s power is changing the world.

I begin with a question: can you name a person who is leading the struggle for equal rights for women? Can you name a person who is alive today who has advocated for honoring the leadership and contributions of women on an equal basis with those of men? Raise your hand if you can give me an example of someone who is leading this work today.

(Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Kristin Gillibrand, Hillary Clinton, Malala Yousafzai, Gloria Steinem, Marian Wright Edelman, Kamala Harris, Sonja Sotomayor, Michelle Obama, Barack Obama) Today there are thousands, maybe even millions of people leading the struggle for equal respect, equal opportunity, equal rights for women. It has not always been this way.

In Jesus’ time, in most places, women were not even supposed to talk to men who were not members of their families. In Jesus’ time woman did not have status on her own. A woman’s status was always connected to a man: to a husband or her father or sometimes a brother. This is why it is significant that the word ‘widow’ comes up so much in the Bible. When Jesus and the prophets put a widow in the center of the story they were making a point: this woman who had no honor in the world outside the Bible was in the center of God’s story.

In Jesus’ time the struggle for equal rights for women was just beginning. Thinking about Jesus’ time, can you name any of the early leaders in the long, slow work of honoring and respecting women as equal in the eyes of God? (Jesus, Mary, St. Paul)

It is difficult for us to know the whole story, but we can be pretty sure there were not thousands of people leading the struggle for equal rights for women during Jesus’ time. The long, steady struggle for equal rights for women began several thousand years ago with just one or two prophetic voices. If I had to name just one person I would name Jesus of Nazareth.

Especially when you read the Gospel of John from beginning to end, the equal, in some ways even greater, role of women in understanding and proclaiming the revelation of God’s truth is powerful. The Samaritan woman was the first person to preach the good news that Jesus was the Messiah. Martha, sister of the often favored Mary, was the first person to recognize that Jesus was the Lord. Mary Magdelene was the first of the disciples to speak with the risen Christ.

All of the Gospels contain these sorts of examples. Take just one example from the Gospel of Mark. A woman who has been suffering a hemorrhage of blood for 12 years touches Jesus’ robe and is healed. Instead of claiming power for himself Jesus recognizes that the power was in the woman’s faith. He says, ‘Your faith has made you well.’ This was a radical challenge to the rules and customs of Jesus’ time. All of the other men around Jesus would have avoided this woman or even condemned her for touching him. It’s not just that she was sick, or bleeding or that she was a woman. According to their laws this woman was ritually unclean and had defiled Jesus. But for Jesus, she is not an example of contamination; she is an example of salvation. The Gospels are full of examples like this.

Today, if you ask someone to name the first thing they think of when they hear the name Jesus, they might say: Jesus was born in a manger, Jesus was crucified, Jesus healed the sick, Jesus was the Son of God. How many people would say this first: Jesus was the one who revealed that all people, women and men, have equal gifts, equal honor in the eyes of God. The fact that the first thing people think about when they hear the name of Jesus is not that he honored women and men as equal is a testament to the desperation with which the church and our tribal value system have resisted the revelation of God in Christ Jesus.

The power of Divine Love is changing the world. This is the way God’s power is changing the world: one by one, two by two. God’s truth breaks into the world through the voice of one or two prophetic servants. Slowly but steadily the power of truth takes hold in the hearts of the people, first just a few, then a few dozen.
Over decades and centuries the struggle continues. Those who only care about their own power work with savage violence to crush the power of God’s love and God’s truth in our lives. They will never succeed. Courageous women and men carry God’s truth in their hearts and share it with others. In this way, the struggle for equal rights and respect for the gifts and leadership of women has grown to where we are today. Today millions of women and men hold this truth in the center of their lives. Just remember where the struggle began.

This is the way God’s power is changing the world: slowly and steadily. The slow, steady spread of God’s power is part of the message of the book of Isaiah. The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn.

Who is the speaker, who is the ‘me’ in Isaiah 61? These verses are poetry. Who was the poet? We do not know. Based on clues we can guess that the voice belonged to a prophet who spoke to the people of Israel 500 years before the time of Jesus.

The poet brings good news to the oppressed, freedom for those who have been unjustly imprisoned and comfort for those who mourn. This is a message of reversal. The message is the opposite of the way people tend to think.

For many people, might makes right. One person recently expressed this dominant world view as he talked about one of our greatest war veterans, Senator John McCain. Referring to the fact that Senator McCain is honored because he refused to abandon the men who were imprisoned with him during the Vietnam War, this person said, “I like people who weren’t captured.” That is not Isaiah’s point of view.

Isaiah proclaims a reversal for those who have been harmed. Isaiah says there will be justice for those who have been oppressed. Those who have suffered will be honored, not disrespected. Isaiah does not say, ‘I the Lord love winners’. Isaiah says, I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and cheating. I will faithfully repay them for the injustice done to those who have been hurt and will make an everlasting covenant with them.

For those of us who read Isaiah as Holy Scripture, these ideas sound almost normal to us. But these ideas were not normal when the words were first spoken and they are still not normal for many people today. In Isaiah’s time and today most people give honor to the winners, not to the losers. This is similar to the way Jesus’ activity of healing women, listening to women, empowering women seems normal today, but it was not normal in Jesus’ time.

The idea of justice for the oppressed, of comfort for those who mourn, is not just an idea; it is the revelation of God’s love for the world. 2500 years ago this revelation was spoken into the world by one or two prophetic voices. One by one, two by two, the healing power of God’s love and justice for those who have been oppressed and for those who mourn has taken hold in the hearts of people.

Over decades and centuries the struggle has continued. Those who only care about their own power work with savage violence to attempt crush the power of God’s love and God’s justice for those who are oppressed. They will never succeed, because the love that comforts those who mourn, the truth that brings justice to the oppressed, comes from the one whose love and truth will never end.

Jesus gave voice to the truth of the equal gifts of women in the eyes of God. That truth is now spoken by millions of people. In the same way, Isaiah gave voice to God’s justice and love for those who have been hurt. That truth must also be spoken by millions of followers of the way of divine love. Just remember how the struggle began.

If you want to be strong, read these words from Isaiah every day. The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn. When you read these words understand the Spirit of the Lord is trying to be upon you. If you have been baptized you have been anointed, anointed to carry God’s love to the people you meet. You have been sent to give good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom to those who have been held captive, and to comfort those who mourn.