

PASSAGES I LOVE TO HATE: “WOMEN SHOULD BE SILENT IN THE CHURCHES”

First sermon in the series “Passages I Love to Hate”

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Prayer

Startle us, O God, with the beauty of the world and of each individual you have created and called your own. Startle us with your truth and goodness and grace, and remind us in your word of the blessing of being your church, in this time, in this place. Amen.

I Corinthians 14:26-40

26 What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. 27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. 28 But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. 29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. 30 If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. 31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. 32 And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, 33 for God is a God not of disorder but of peace. (As in all the churches of the saints, 34 women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. 35 If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. 36 Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?) 37 Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. 38 Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized. 39 So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; 40 but all things should be done decently and in order.

I Timothy 2:8-15

8 I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; 9 also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, 10 but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. 11 Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. 12 I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve; 14 and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. 15 Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

“I believe the Bible is the word of God,” she said in a shaking voice, “and this is against the word of God.”

As we in the South often say, “Bless her heart.” For there were a couple of verses in the Bible that seemed to support her position, and she had obviously been led by her pastor to take these few verses out and lift them up as Gospel. And I had the sense that for anyone to begin to work with her to go a little deeper into the meaning of the text, her whole faith would crumble like a stack of cards if a single card were removed.

Maybe that’s why some are more content just to have their philosophy on a bumper sticker: “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” Bless their hearts.

We Presbyterians, I hope, take the Bible more seriously than that. We take its authority seriously, which means that we use the best resources we have available to help us hear and understand what God is saying through these biblical passages. There are guidelines that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has developed to help us as we read and interpret scripture in ways that maintain fidelity to God’s word. Among these are to recognize that Jesus Christ is the central focus of the biblical story, and that all interpretations be in accord with the “rule of love.” In other words, if our interpretation leads us to actions that are destructive of or harmful to others, then there is something wrong about what we believe is right.

In addition, we need to focus on the plain text of scripture, to study the context, the settings and the social customs of the day; and to understand something of the languages in order to catch the nuances and meanings of words. (That’s why Presbyterians are the only denomination to mandate that all clergy learn Hebrew and Greek. But please, don’t quiz me on it!) And we are to interpret biblical passages in light of the entire Bible; for there are parts that clearly contradict other parts. What are the larger biblical themes that might shed light on a particular passage?¹

And of course we depend upon prayer and the Holy Spirit as well as people with other perspectives and backgrounds and experiences to help guide us. And so when there are particularly difficult passages, passages that we would just as soon not be there, we can pretend they are not there (the committee that put together the lectionary has done that. Neither of today’s passages are in the three year cycle we use!); or we could take them at face value like many do, or we can take a deeper look at them, a fresh look and perhaps find meaning for today.

And so today I’d like to take a fresh look at these passages which have had harmful consequences through the years for women. And before we Presbyterians boast that we have written into our confessions our conviction that the Spirit calls woman and men to all ministries of the church, there is plenty of discrimination against women still in our churches. There was a woman that came to me when I was in Atlanta who said that her pastor (Presbyterian), likened men to “hammers ... goal directed, task oriented,” and women he likened to “thermometers ... feeling, reactive.”

Now this woman was a leading business person in her city, highly accomplished. And she began to question the very authority of scripture because she began to wonder if indeed the Bible had given

women a certain place and God meant for them to stay in it. In addition, think of how easily that imagery could be used to justify violence against women. No, we still have our work cut out for us.

The passages from I Timothy and from I Corinthians that I read earlier, advising us that women should keep silent in the churches, sounds out of place and inappropriate to our ears these days, especially when we at Idlewild have been blessed for decades with women who are leaders in our worship and session and diaconate. But these admonitions are there.

So let's start with some Biblical perspectives on women. From late Judaism onward, women were prevented from reading scripture or prophesying, and were relegated to the outer court of the temple. To this day, in Orthodox Judaism, women sit separately from men and are not permitted to read scripture or to lead in services. Jewish friends have told me that this dates to the Levitical codes which prohibited women from making sacrifices during their monthly menstrual cycle, a factor which would render the sacrifices unclean. Since men might never know when the menstrual cycle would occur, it developed that women never approached the Torah scrolls.

It must be noted, however, that scriptures let us know that some women did indeed participate in the social, economic, political and military life of ancient Israel. And though women could not serve as priests, Miriam and Deborah served as prophets.

But with the coming of Christianity, women began to play a different role within the community of faith. In Paul's own letters, we find that Phoebe, a deacon in the church at Cenchreae, just six miles from Corinth, is praised and commended as Paul's patron. (Rom. 16:1-2) Eudonia and Syntyche have "struggled alongside" Paul in the gospel and it appears that their names are in the "book of life" in Philippians. (Phil 4:2-3). Apphia is one of the persons addressed in the book of Philemon (chapter 2). Prisca, dubbed a "fellow worker" (Rom 16:3) and over a half-dozen other women are singled out for greetings to the church at Rome. Apart from this passage in I Corinthians, *no passage in the undisputed letters from Paul suggest any limitation on the roles or functions of women in the Pauline early churches.*²

Not only that, but Paul's more radical theology emerged in his letter to the Galatians when he wrote that within the Christian community "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28) Paul knew that baptism sets us free to be a community of people who would love and support one another without regard to worldly distinctions.

But Paul was also limited, as we all are, by his culture, and we even see him upholding the institution of slavery, with no moral qualms at all. He is, 2,000 years later, a mixed bag with regard to our contemporary views of social structures and human relationships. One thing becomes clear, is that here, when he said that "women should be silent in the churches," Paul was addressing himself to a specific situation with limited contours and not intended to be universally applicable. We need to realize that Paul was not writing "the Bible," as we know it today. He was simply writing a pastoral letter to a church that he loved.

Now, there are more and more scholars who agree that Paul is actually not the author of these 3 verses in question. My own NRSV has them in parentheses. They feel, and I agree with them, that this paragraph was added a generation later by an editor, because they are antithetical to everything else he wrote. And that might be all well and good, but these passages are still there, and all the scholarly tap dancing we do around them does not remove them.

Some speculate that this addition was written a bit later, about the same time of some of the pastoral epistles like the passage from I Timothy as the church began to spread and catch the attention of pagan rulers and others outside the church and rumors began to spread about the immoral things going on among Christians, like women appearing without a head covering, or standing up and reading scriptures and leading worship!. And the sad thing is even today there are some Presbyterian churches that do not ordain women as elders and deacons because of these two passages prohibiting women from speaking in church.

So what are we to do with them? First, we need to be aware and emphasize that these letters were written when there were particular issues that had arisen within a local congregation. Those of us who have spent a little time in the church know that every church has its own characters, issues, idiosyncrasies, members who push the envelope and test the limits of the church's tolerance. We don't know all the specifics of this particular congregation in Corinth, but we can state that this letter's injunction against free speech for women in the church is not meant to be for all time and all places. It is specific to the Corinthian church.

And we need to be honest, call a spade a spade.: Paul's view of women was shaped by the patriarchal culture and faith of his day. He had been a Pharisee. He was not a trailblazer for feminist issues. But you contrast these one or two passages with some of the larger themes of his letters, like when he said that in the Christian church there should be neither male nor female; or when he said that "... just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman ... and all things come from God." (I Cor. 11:12); or when he advised Timothy to "let women learn" the faith and when he commended to Timothy his fellow workers Eudocia and Syntyche.

But we also put them up against what we would understand Jesus' will to be in the matter of the role of women in the church. Remember when I said that Jesus was the central focus of scripture?

Jesus in every way, shape and form, broke the mold in his relationships, and especially in his appreciation of the unique and special character of each woman whom he encountered:

- Meeting the woman at the well, and having the longest recorded dialogue that he ever had with anyone, astounding her by speaking with her about everything she ever did, causing her to be the very first to go out and tell others about Jesus, even leaving her water jar behind.
- Or in his compassionate meeting with the woman taken in adultery where he exposed the hypocrisy of those men who would stone her for her sin.

- Or in his empathy for the woman who threw herself at his feet at the last supper and who anointed him for burial, to the shock and disapproval of his disciples.
- Jesus actually learned from women, like the Syro-Phoenician woman who challenged him.
- Or consider who it was that first announced the resurrection: women.

And outside the Bible, we have learned more recently that the earliest pictures of the Lord's 'Supper that were found on the walls of catacombs included women sitting at table with the men disciples and Jesus!

Jesus saw to the heart of each woman whom he met. He went beyond the cultural mores of his day, and even some of the religious teachings of Judaism. He consistently opted for what was hospitable, welcoming, respectful, and uplifting. That is where we take our cues, rather than a few verses sent in a letter to a particular church and a particular situation.

Ultimately, it boils down to the broader theme of what kind of church we would imagine of which Jesus would be most proud, and my reading of scripture says that it would be a church in which all people are received and celebrated and employed in the task of Christian discipleship without discrimination against worldly condition, including whether you are a man or a woman. When you compare a few statements of Paul admonishing women to be silent in church with his overarching view that within the Christian church there should be a special community of love and acceptance, distinct from the secular world's values, a place of respite and peace where people are accepted simply for who they are, as a child of God, neither slave nor free, male nor female, it is the latter view that is more consistent with the law of love and the ministry and teachings of Jesus.

And so we are called as Christians to be Christ-like in our dealings with one another, especially within the church; and to employ women in the tasks of ministry; to ordain women as elders, deacons, and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. To hear them as they speak and pray, and to hear them not with tolerance, but with appreciation for the gifts God has given them to speak with authority and truth.

Going beyond that, we continue to work on language in the church, our language in describing God and our images that we might have of Jesus. God is certainly beyond gender, beyond being male or female, but because we can only describe God with our finite language and metaphors, we need to be careful about that. To use the term "father" to describe our relationship is biblical and is the term that Jesus used to describe his relationship with God..."Abba," "Father." And a few years ago a leading Presbyterian feminist wrote a book entitled "Is God the only reliable Father?" urging Christians not to abandon that image, but use it to remind us all, especially fathers, that the God of the Bible provides a model of a reliable Father.³

But we also must be open to the more feminine, less patriarchal images of God, a God who, as our brief statement of faith says, is "like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child." For if we only see God as male, then, as Mary Daly suggests, however subconsciously, the male becomes God — like a hammer!

A few weeks ago Lucie Bridgeforth led us in another insightful church school class as she walked us through the images of Jesus throughout our nation's history. It was particularly interesting to see how shifts in our culture led to shifts in how Jesus was portrayed. One of the modern images that has been expressed, both in pictures but also contemporary Christian music is "Jesus as my boyfriend." Jesus is there with open arms whenever needed, always willing to listen, always tender and gentle, always caring. Who wouldn't want a boyfriend like that?

But listen to an email I received this week voicing a concern about that image (I use this with her permission):

"This may sound innocent enough, but does this encourage an unhealthy dependency, which has always been a problem for women ... My 12 year old grandson has been assigned summer reading which includes stories of boys caught in difficult situations who become resourceful, innovative, determined and courageous. Shouldn't our girls be encouraged to do likewise? Instead the Jesus-as-my-boyfriend idea sees girls as needy, sensitive, and weak, and advises them to be submissive and patient, counting on someone else to solve their problems."

She concludes: "Am I over-reacting? Does the church have a role in encouraging young girls to be secure and self-confident and bold, assuming those are desirable attributes for a female. Does the Bible have any encouraging words in this respect?"

Well, I hope this sermon has begun to answer that question. With no apologies to St. Paul, in fact, in firm contradiction of him, women must **not** be silent in church, in society, in politics, in the judiciary, in children's issues, in marital relations, in business and finance, in education and housing, in medicine and international relations until such time as the world reflects more of the commonwealth of God which is where we are headed.

So let both men and women speak in church and in every corner of life until that day comes which is the day we await when justice is done and no one is judged in any other respect except in whether or not they reflect in their lives the love and justice of Jesus Christ.⁴

Amen.

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¹ This is available from the Presbyterian (USA) as *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture and Biblical Authority and Interpretation* (Louisville KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1992). Address: 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202. Online see www.pcusa.org/marketplace. It can be ordered through The Presbyterian Marketplace section, item OGA 99022.

² J. Paul Sampley, "First Letter to the Corinthians," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 10*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. p. 967.

³ Dianne Tennis, *Is God the Only Reliable Father?*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985.

⁴ Many thanks to Jon Walton for these two final paragraphs, as well as other thoughts here, expressed in a sermon to the Westminster Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware, July, 1993.

It goes without saying that I owe a particularly heavy debt of gratitude for those women who have been partners in ministry with me here at Idlewild: Kate Foster Connors, Gayle Walker, Margaret Burnett, Anne Apple and Corinne Nienhuis. I shudder to think of where I would be and who I would be without them.