

## TOXIC MASCULINITY

Luke 10: 38-42; Matthew 19: 1-15

One of the most celebrated movies of 2023 and one that has been receiving many awards is the movie: Barbie. How many of you have seen it? I did, and I must admit I was skeptical at first. Maybe it's because I identify as a man and have never played with a Barbie doll or any doll for that matter. I thought it would be a movie simply made to provide entertainment without substance. But I was wrong. Behind the sparkly surface, the smiles and the bright colours there is a deeper message and one that goes to the heart of much of the trouble in our relationships and our world.

OK, some of you who have seen the movie or have heard about it may be scratching your heads. Really Dr. Harris?... Others of you may be grinning and nodding your heads. Ok, let me explain.

The movie begins with a narrator sharing some interesting facts. First, the Barbie doll was the first doll that was not a baby doll. Hmm... It was designed as a full-grown woman. Hmm... Second, when the Barbie doll was critiqued for depicting the ideal woman as a white, blond-haired, full-bodied, thin woman, the company began manufacturing Barbie dolls of all colours, shapes, sizes, abilities and disabilities too. There was an attempt to diversify Barbies enough to make every young person able to identify with her in some way. This diversity is reflected in the movie too.

But the movie goes further than that too in two significant ways. First, the movie begins with the Barbie character living happily and healthily in Barbie Land. Everyone is smiling and happy without a care or concern in the world. But very soon into the movie, the main Barbie character begins to feel some unease. There's fear and anxiety that emerges in her and she's not quite sure what that is or why it's happening. There are thoughts of mortality and death and the grief that goes along with that. There is the beginning of feelings of mental distress, emotional swings, internal struggle and tension in relationships. And there is the appearance of... cellulite! Horror of horrors! 😊

But behind the intended humour there is this sense that Barbie Land does not reflect the real world where girls and women must live. And a big part of the movie is about Barbie having to find a way to live a more meaningful life and a life of joy that must incorporate the pain, the imperfection, the uncertainty and the mortality of life too. Barbie Land and the land of real life in the world must come together in some way. This movie is about that kind of journey – bringing the dream into reality without giving up on the dream either. How do we live a fulfilling and meaningful life in the face of uncertainty, adversity, hardship and mortality?

But there's more, and for me as a man, an even deeper message. And that has to do with a term that's become pretty vogue these days: toxic masculinity. The term that's used in the movie is also a well-known term in our world today: The big "P" word as they call it in the movie: Patriarchy. And to get at what this is all about, let's begin by digging into our scripture readings in search of some revelatory perspective on gender and gender roles, especially where men are concerned.

Jesus is addressing all that's wrong with his people living into God's dream for them as a people and as persons too. God wants them to be a light to the nations as Isaiah the prophet among others declares. Being a light to the nations would be the beginning of helping the nations come together and move toward the light of transforming the kingdoms of the world more in line with God's kingdom vision.

And one of the big areas of brokenness in the world is the relationship between men and women. Jesus, as God's revelation of humanity fully alive, engages this brokenness in some radical ways. His message to women is different than his message to men, and it all has to do with what has become twisted and oppressive in the world for both men and women. Both men and women are called to liberation, to a new exodus out of bondage to a broken way of living their gender roles into God's dream of gender diversity not stuck in the oppressive boxes that have come to be.

OK, preacher, tell us more... Well, let's zero in on our scripture readings beginning with Luke's gospel account which is addressed primarily to those who identify as women. Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus are described throughout various gospel accounts as close friends of Jesus. What's fascinating is that Lazarus is not given any privilege of place as the male of the household as far as Jesus is concerned. Wherever they are named, they are named as equals, with Mary and Martha mentioned far more often in their interactions with Jesus. It may not seem like a big deal to us modern day Canadians, but this would be a huge deal in certain parts of the world and certainly in Jesus' world. There's a big message here.

But in case the message is not heard, the account in our gospel lesson zeros right into the problem. What gender roles are Mary and Martha reflecting? Martha is playing the role assigned her by her culture and world. She is the hostess, cooking, cleaning, setting up and managing all the household chores so that the men of the household can sit down, eat, socialize and discuss important matters. Why have things been divided this way according to gender lines? Patriarchy is one word for it. It's not Martha's fault. She's been put into that role just like the men slither into their roles without questioning their privilege and thinking outside the box.

But then there's Mary. She's having none of it. She wants to learn, engage, question and dream with her mind and heart. And Jesus? He thrives on it. Lazarus is not mentioned here. The male disciples are not mentioned here. Jesus is having a wonderfully engaged discussion with Mary

and Mary is the student, hungry to learn. To be a disciple is to be a student. That's what the word means. If there's any argument to be made for the education of women and girls, here it is. Household tasks are not to be confined to those who identify as women, and intellectual pursuits are not to be the sole privilege of those who identify as men.

Jesus' rebuke of Martha is not intended to put her down or disrespect all the work she's doing. No. Jesus' rebuke is about challenging Martha to rise up, to put off the yoke of bondage and walk a path toward freedom just like her sister Mary is doing. And it is no surprise that in the story of the raising of Lazarus, also in the gospels, it is Martha Jesus is engaging with his teaching on the resurrection. Martha will begin to experience the resurrection like her sister Mary in their internal liberation from what the world here and now confines them to being.

We're not told how Lazarus, or the other male disciples react to Mary being among the men. But we do know from numerous gospel accounts that the women are named as part of the disciples following Jesus. Can you imagine all these women away from their households, unattached to men, following this male teacher and prophet, believing him to be the messiah, and wandering around from village to village all the way to Jerusalem? Can you imagine how radical that would be in their world and how controversial? Imagine the so-called messiah of the people totally breaking all these social taboos and instead of reinforcing women sticking to their so-called God ordained roles at home, being liberated to go out, unattached, engaging in learning and discussion with men? People of that time would have heard the message loud and clear! How about us?

But there's more, much more! Our gospel account from Matthew is addressed primarily to men. There are three parts to our reading. First, there is the teaching on divorce. Sadly, like many parts of scripture, the whole focus of Jesus' teaching here has been lost by treating this passage as forbidding divorce and judging those who are divorced. Wrong...

In Jesus' world, divorce was the privilege of men, super easy to get and with no strings attached. This is also a world where women are the property of men. They cannot work outside the home and their job is to have children and manage the household. If a man is bored or tired or a woman wants to rise up and claim some freedom or rights for herself, the threat of divorce is made.

And what's a divorced woman to do? A man can get remarried just like that, and trade in the older, used model for a shiny new one. But a woman who has had children or is unable to have children but is no longer young or virginal becomes destitute, unless she has a surviving brother or father who is willing to take her in in her dishonour and shame. Pretty awful! Jesus is declaring that men must be responsible with their commitments. They must care for their wives come what may. They cannot just divorce them when it suits them. They must make it

work somehow and give their wives a better reason to be happy and cooperative. Wow! What a different reading, no?

And then, Jesus adds a second point. His male disciples recognize that in their world, this would be a tough pill to swallow for men. Imagine their freedom to move from woman to woman at will, taken away! Imagine having to be committed and responsible and ensuring their wives are happy with them. Imagine...

Well, Jesus says, maybe you shouldn't get married then... Jesus even says that identifying as a man shouldn't be a box with narrow guidelines society so easily imposes. Consider a eunuch, Jesus says. Some are born without clear gender specificity. Are they a man or a woman or somewhere in-between? Then there are those who are made eunuchs, surgically. The medical term is: Orchiectomy. Today, this surgery is done either for someone with prostate cancer or as gender-affirming surgery in a way where the male testosterone hormone is no longer produced. Eunuchs in Jesus day would be identified as a lesser man. Clearly, Jesus is affirming eunuchs as full humans in the gender spectrum as anyone else. Jesus is trying to break the gender boxes of his world so that people are free to rise up and break free from the gender stereotypes set up to keep women and men in their places.

And thirdly, Jesus calls a eunuch someone who chooses to be single or celibate. Is he referring to himself? Certainly, in the first centuries of the church some people read this passage as a liberating passage. You don't have to be married as a man to be fully a man. You don't have to produce children. You don't have to fill that role. You can have relationships with different genders that don't have to be sexual. And it also frees you so that you can live a different kind of life. We may totally miss the significance of this passage, but I can't emphasize enough how radical what Jesus is saying here is!

And finally, the care of children. Up to a generation or two ago here in Canada, the care of children was a women's job. Dads were not feeding, changing and caring daily for their infants and children. In the ancient world, children were also to be managed out in public by the women. They would not be interrupting or disrupting men learning and discussing important things. But once again, Jesus disrupts all of that and welcomes the interruption of children. Break free, Jesus is declaring to the men around him. Break free of all you're depriving yourself of living as men, break free of your need to control women and use them, even abuse them, and break free of having such limited views of what it means to be a man. Break free and in your breaking free you will support women breaking free too.

OK, Jesus, we hear you... so back to Barbie. Barbie land is not only populated by women. There are men too, and the men are represented by the character of Ken. Ken is profoundly insecure. Ken has a very fragile ego. And as much as men may resist seeing and accepting this about themselves, I know very few men who don't have a fragile ego, me included. Accept it. It

is what it is. The problem is that men refuse to accept it, and that is why they need to control women and create a world where control and subjugation is the way you deal with your insecurity.

Think about three men in our world today as great examples of fragile egos: Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu. How much damage, carnage and cruelty are being perpetrated, and sadly will be perpetrated by just these three men seizing power by force or manipulation. Do you not think that their fragile egos and profound insecurity have anything to do with their behaviour? Do you not think that so much harm in our world is done because men are crippled from developing intimate, caring relationships where they expose their vulnerability to each other, weep together as much as laugh together and share in affection and remorse instead of blame, shame and violence? Violence against women is epidemic here in Canada as anywhere else in our world. Think about why that is...

The character of Ken comes around at the end. The movie ends with him wearing a shirt which says: "Kenough." Ken is enough. I am enough. I am loved as I am, imperfect, broken in some ways on a journey toward becoming whole... I don't need to solve my problems by violence toward myself or others, by addiction, by controlling others and especially the women in my life... I can break free, and I must break free of the trap of patriarchy and toxic masculinity.

Imagine if like Ken, all men could truly grow to see that they are enough. Imagine if Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, like Caesar and the religious authorities in Jesus' day, could be stripped of their power, of their false masculinity, and they could truly hear the words: you are enough. You are loved. You can be whoever you are. Gender doesn't confine you. It is a form of expression. We are all imperfect creatures on a journey of healing toward mutual forgiveness and reconciliation.

Imagine how the world could be... closer to the kingdom of God Jesus was trying to inspire, empower and embody in himself. Yes, he was crucified, just like so many are crucified in our world today by the violence instigated by toxic masculinity. But love rises up again and again to call to us... Will we hear Love's voice?... Amen.