

## PAUL THE FEMINIST, PART 1

Galatians 3:26-28; Romans 16: 1-16

Recently I read a novel by a Toronto crime reporter named Tamara Cherry. The novel is called: *All the Bumpy Pebbles*. Even though the novel's characters are fictional, Cherry includes a lot of real-life data from her years of reporting about crime in the GTA. One of her areas of focus has been the sex-trade. The novel's main character is a young teenager from a broken home. She gets lured by a young man who is attractive, flashes a lot of money, and showers her with attention and praise for her beauty. He promises to marry her and to create a beautiful life with her, taking her away from all her problems.

But then, he also begins to ask her for favours. These favours include providing sex to other men for money. He also begins to use anger and violence whenever there's resistance. In time, she is coercively manipulated into a vicious system with other young women drawing in hundreds of thousands of dollars for criminal networks who use them and abuse them like slaves. The sex-trade and human-trafficking is easily as lucrative for criminal organizations as drug-trafficking and other criminal undertakings.

But how is this possible? How can a young woman draw in hundreds of thousands of dollars yearly for her 'owners'? Because there are men who are as addicted to abusive sex as they are to other addictions.

But lest we see the sex-trade as something out there involving the criminal element, broken homes and extreme addictions, we should pause and contemplate what we have been witnessing even in the last 20 years here in Canada with all our progressive laws. Think about the Me-Too movement and what it has shone a light on in terms of the regular, every-day harassment and abuse of women by men in the workplace. And think about the ongoing statistics of violence and murder of women by their male partners which continues to be epidemic in proportions.

In fact, even as we typically think of the word "pandemic" to refer to Covid-19 and its variants, people are also using the word pandemic to point to pervasive social problems like racism, that generate thousands of victims throughout society. The abuse and mistreatment of women from every-day

harassment to sexual violence all the way to murder, is clearly one such pandemic, even today, and even here in a nation like Canada with so many laws to protect the full-equality of persons no matter their gender. We are so grateful for ministries like ARISE, which we support here at Armour Heights, who work with the most vulnerable of victims of sexual exploitation. But such victims are the tail end of a larger, systemic problem throughout society.

So why is this happening? How has it happened? I certainly can't answer such questions in a sermon. But I can shine a light on how the pandemic of misogyny, enslavement and control of women has also infiltrated the church from the very beginnings of Christianity. What I would like to uncover for you in two sermons is how a radical, liberating and counter-cultural movement like Christianity became distorted and enslaved by a broader patriarchal culture of the ancient world, a culture that continues to this day. By patriarchal I mean a world ruled primarily by men for the primary benefit of men. Women are instrumental for that, so long as they stay at home, bear children, be readily available to pleasure the men who rule them and manage the household so that men can go about and rule society and the world. How did this happen to Christianity? What is the gospel message?

Let me make a personal confession. Even though I am a biblical scholar and theologian who has been aware of these issues for decades, recent study I've been doing has uncovered for me a broader layer of the conspiracy to silence and the subjugation of women in the early centuries of the church. I've had several 'aha' moments recently, but I can only point to a few of them in two sermons. The goal of a sermon is always to open up space for the transcendent whom we name God to meet us, liberate us and add fresh water, sunlight and soil to the transformation happening in us as we expose ourselves again and again to the gospel of Jesus. Let's see what happens for us today.

The gospels we have in our bible are very radical in what they have to say about the social conventions of society at the time. Whether it's about Jew and gentile, wealthy and poor, the powerful and the powerless, the free and the slaves, men and women, the Jesus we get in the gospels is a Jesus who stands with any person or group who is marginalized seeking to raise them up to fullness of being. This also means that any difference between people that is used to measure status and worth in the world is relativized. While in society our worth and social status is defined by our differences, Jesus declares that the rule of God he has come to establish makes everyone infinitely worthy

because everyone is infinitely loved. Men may have more power out there in society, but wherever God rules such power inequities must be thrown out the window.

And Jesus proves this time and again in the gospel narratives. Even though following convention the 12 official disciples chosen are all men, we are told repeatedly that there are many more disciples which include women, that the men are so stuck on power that they don't get Jesus, and it is the women who not only understand Jesus but are faithful to him in ways the men never are. In fact, on Easter Sunday it is explicitly stated that the women are the ones who encounter the risen Christ first and then proclaim him to the male disciples. In fact, the earliest gospel, that of Mark, which we are currently studying in our adult study group, ends the resurrection story with the women. It's up to them to spread the word and bring the men on board.

So how come women have been silenced and subjugated in the church and in the 2000 years since those early days? Well, it all comes down to Paul. Jesus started a movement. He didn't start churches. That was for those first disciples to start. The rule of God wasn't established in the world because the world rejected a God of infinite love for all. But churches were to become mini experiments of the rule of God until, as the Lord's prayer expresses: God's kingdom would come, and God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the meantime, churches were to demonstrate in their life together what the rule of God's love could look like as a counter-cultural witness and influence in society. That meant women had to be treated like men and given access to leadership just like men. But how would that go down?

Enter Paul. Paul is the 13<sup>th</sup> apostle after the other 12. And given that the other 12 were focused on the Jewish people mainly, Paul took his commission as apostle to the gentile world. By the time the New Testament was being written down and organized as scripture, the church had become largely gentile. And so, Paul the 13<sup>th</sup> apostle becomes the most important apostle of all. His letters form the earliest writings we have in the New Testament, and they're all written to specific churches trying to help them live out the rule of God in all that would mean in the nitty gritty of everyday life.

But here's the thing: even though Paul follows Jesus closely where the place of women in the church is concerned, as the church was getting hungry for social and political power, it had to de-radicalize Paul. Paul the feminist was turned into Paul the misogynist. And this has been the Paul we have been

taught for 2000 years. And if this is not bad enough, a few decades ago when I was going through seminary, radical feminism in the church had bought into this patriarchal Paul. I was being told Paul was not only a misogynist, but anti-body and anti-sex, too, all of which was packaged together. Basically, if you were a feminist living out a liberated sexuality and sexual identity, Paul was the enemy.

And this, my friends is very sad, because it's a total falsification of Paul. So, who is the real Paul? What did he believe and teach? How is he a feminist like Jesus in how he envisions the church of Jesus Christ? Because what I want to tell you is too much to fit into one sermon, I'm dividing my thoughts into two sermons. Today I focus on Paul and how the gospel of the infinite grace of God in Christ, revealed to him, makes him a champion of full equality. Next sermon I will focus more on how Paul the feminist was turned into Paul the misogynist, seeking to liberate him once and for all.

OK, our first scripture reading for today is from Paul's letter to the Church in Galatia. This church was divided in many ways, but the big one for them was race – Jew versus Gentile. Before the church became fully gentile, being Jewish was a status symbol. You were somehow closer to God being part of the chosen people and closer to Jesus the Jew. In fact, some so-called apostles even argued that to be a mature Christian, you had to practice not only the 10 commandments, but all those Jewish rituals that defined you as a Jew over against anyone else. Being a Christian and being Jewish were one and the same. Paul the Jew has a real problem with this.

The word Paul introduces into Christianity is the word 'Grace.' Grace means love, but love as a gift, love as something given and shared with no thought or calculation of who deserves what and how much. All humans are infinitely worthy of the fullness of eternal love, period. In fact, Jesus on the cross even forgives his enemies. That means no one is beyond the pale of God's mercy. Everyone is included fully and completely. That means equality. So, what does that look like in the church? It means that even though out there in society people will measure you and judge your worth and status by things like race, money, sexuality or gender, there is no place for such judgements in the church: In Christ there is no Jew or gentile, slave or free, gay or straight, male or female. We are all equal, all infinitely precious and valuable.

But there's more. For Paul equality in the church was not just a sentiment. It meant everyone in a congregation, from those who swept the floor to those in

leadership were reflective of the diversity of society. And so, our second reading from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, ends with a series of thank yous and acknowledgements to various people. And it reveals just how egalitarian and feminist Paul was in his everyday dealings as an apostle. I have intentionally boldened the names of all those who are women in our reading. And some of the women the apostle acknowledges as colleagues and friends in the most intimate of ways, are women at the top end of the church's leadership: women like Phoebe the deaconess who would be like the chair of the board of managers and probably a major patron of the church with considerable means herself. There is also Junia, whom Paul not only names as an apostle like himself, but 'prominent among the apostles,' one who was 'in Christ' before he was, and therefore, probably a key mentor for Paul. Clearly, everyone in Paul's world would know who Junia was. Why has she been lost to us?

Well, in a patriarchal world, the idea of an apostle and a prominent one at that being a woman would totally subvert the social structures of society. A woman's place was in the home or in a convent, not on pulpits and podiums and market-squares being the voice of Christ and the church! And so, what happened to Junia? Some translators added an 's' to Junia and made her Junias the man. Others translated the verse in such a way that Junia is honoured among the apostles for her service but is not an apostle herself. Still others who could not argue away that Junia was, indeed, a woman and an apostle at that, argued that she was a rare exception and shouldn't be treated as typical.

Yet, Paul the apostle of grace very clearly acknowledges Junia as prominent among the apostles, an apostle before him, and hence, a mentor to him, and there is nothing to suggest that gender was in any way, shape or form a factor for Paul whatsoever. While society was patriarchal, those baptized into Christ are gender blind when it comes to leadership and service. What matters is the love of God and the gifts of God given whatever gender identity is expressed.

Grace is a beautiful sentiment. Unconditional love, love as a gift, beyond any calculation of merit or worth by whatever human measure is used... it's a beautiful sentiment. But until it is lived out in real life, in institutions, in places of power and leadership, in human rights and social justice, grace remains a mere sentiment. If we are to embrace our Christianity not just as our private spirituality, but as our inspiration for how we live in the world, then the grace of God's infinite love that sees the value, worth and capacity for

transcendence in all life means that the freedom, value, leadership and wisdom of women must not only be recognized, but protected and celebrated until injustice and oppression are stamped out. This is the gospel call for us today if we follow Jesus and the apostle Paul. We have made a beginning in the Presbyterian Church. We still have a way to go.

So, what about you and me in our everyday interactions and relationships, at work or at home? Let us pray: Heal us, O God... heal us by opening our hearts to your infinite grace for us... and grant us the courage to raise up all those who are pushed down so that our solidarity with them will shine a light on their infinite worth and capacity for transcendence... Amen.