

PAUL THE FEMINIST, PART 2

(Part 1 preached on February 7, 2021)

Galatians 3:26-28; 1 Corinthians 14:26-40; 1 Timothy 2:8-3:5

In recent years one of the most important words we've been learning to appreciate is the word "systemic." In the midst of the Covid pandemic, city streets in the U.S., but also here in Canada, exploded with protesters crying out: "Black Lives Matter." Here in Canada we also added to our cries: "Indigenous lives matter." What we were being challenged to understand once again with the word "systemic" is how racism is not just about specific incidents of police brutality. No. We were being challenged to recognize how racism is so deeply ingrained in our society that many of us don't notice it until it erupts in serious violence and death. And once the dust settles, and once politicians and those in authority make big promises of change, many of us go back to our regular lives where the racism is still as prevalent as ever, but goes unnoticed; unnoticed, that is, unless you are black or indigenous.

And that's the problem with something that's systemic. Unless you listen to the victims, you just don't see it. You don't notice it. "Privilege" is another word we've been learning about. Privilege means you don't have to live in daily fear or have your guard up. Privilege means doors open for you and you can't imagine that such doors don't open for everyone else too. If you want to know whether there is racism among us, don't ask someone who is white. Ask someone who is black, brown or indigenous. The everyday stories they will share with you may shock you. Are we living in the same society? How come some of us don't notice the racism? "Privilege" is the word which points to this.

Well, in the last number of years, we have also been witnessing how the word "systemic" and the word "privilege" have also been used to point to discrimination against women. In my last sermon I pointed to the reality of the sex-trade and sex-trafficking which are especially lucrative for criminal organizations. Why? Because there are men addicted to abusive sex. But I also pointed how this was just the tip of the iceberg of a much more pervasive, systemic problem in our society. The historic word is "patriarchy" – a society ruled by men for the primary benefit of men. And even as things have been changing in more progressive societies with more progressive laws like here in Canada, women are not only abused and murdered in

“pandemic” numbers here in Canada, but they are subjected to harassment and discriminatory behaviour by men in the office, on the street or at home on a daily basis. And if you or I don’t notice any of that, maybe we should park our privilege and ask some women we know what they have experienced and continue to experience.

Now you would think that the church of Jesus Christ would reflect a very different witness than the racism and sexism within our society. You would think that a church that follows the Jesus who called women as well as men would stand against patriarchy. Not so. In fact, the church historically has provided a biblical and theological foundation for patriarchy, further entrenching it within our social history. How is this possible? Where did we go wrong?

Today’s sermon is part 2 of a sermon I preached two weeks ago. The biblical person most responsible for the support and development of patriarchy in and through the church, we are told, is the apostle Paul. With two scripture readings in our New Testament, a mere two passages, both attributed to Paul and therefore bearing his stamp of authority, the church has kept women silenced, subjugated, and barred from any leadership in the church for 2000 years. And even as some churches like our own Presbyterian Church in Canada have only recently opened the door to ordination to women, many Christian churches still bar women from ordination and leadership within the church.

But what if we discover that Paul never authored the two passages in question in our scriptures? What if those passages were falsely attributed to Paul? And what if such attribution not only turned Paul into a misogynist, but also undermined the very foundations of his theology of grace, its application for the church and its witness in society? Well, my friends, today I want to tell you that this is exactly what happened. For 2000 years, the church has defended patriarchy and silenced women based on a lie. And in the process, it has also silenced Paul the apostle and the radicality of the gospel of Jesus he proclaimed. How so? Let’s dig into our scripture readings and uncover the conspiracy to turn Paul the feminist into Paul the misogynist.

Our first reading is a mere two verses. But these two verses are axiomatic for Paul’s core understanding of the gospel. Christians, he declares, have committed themselves to Christ and belong to Christ. As Christians, he says, we have been baptized into Christ. He calls the church the body of Christ. It’s

not just a place or a space. It is a body. Christ is the head. We are the hands, feet and heart. The apostle also says we are 'clothed' in Christ. That means when people encounter us, they should also encounter Christ's love.

Well, Paul also has a special word he introduces throughout his letters to express such love. The word is grace. Grace means we are loved infinitely by God as Jesus has revealed and embodied God. In practical and social terms this means our value and worth are infinite. Even as there are so many things that make us different: our racial and cultural backgrounds, our economic circumstances, our sexuality and our gender, now that we are baptized into Christ and clothed in Christ, what unites us is far more important than what makes us different. And Paul is particularly concerned about how our differences become reasons for measuring our worth, our value and our status in society. Our differences of skin colour, culture, sexuality and gender are part of the creativity of God, not a reason to measure who is more worthy than who.

"Therefore," Paul declares, in the church "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Even if out there in society social status and worth are measured and defined by all these differences, in the church it has to be different. We have to bear witness to the world that there is a better way.

OK, Paul, but how would that go down when the people who come to church also live in the real world? How will we demonstrate full equality and the infinite love of God for all when people in society have different kinds of status according to their race, their financial resources and their gender? Well, throughout his letters, Paul is struggling to help churches understand and implement full equality from the leadership all the way down. That means leaders must not only be Jewish but Gentile too, not only people of means with social standing in society which also brings money and prestige into the church, but also those who have experienced slavery and may still do so, and not only men, but also women. Can you imagine the challenge Paul would have faced on the ground? We can read all about it in his letters.

But what happens after Paul dies? What happens to his letters as scribes and copyists keep copying them by hand and passing them along over a generation or two? What happens as Christianity is slowly adjusted so that it becomes more socially acceptable, which also lessens any negative attention

by those in authority? What happens when Christianity eventually draws the attention of the emperor, seeing in it a means to unite the empire under his power?

Well, it means Christianity's transformational power in society must be subordinated to society's values and hierarchies of power. Race has to matter and at the top it has to be Rome. Wealth and power have to matter, and you need slaves and subjugated peoples who know their place and their worth compared to those higher up. And gender has to matter as men cannot be respected and feared if they cannot keep women in their place. So what do we have to do to the scriptures and to the most radical apostle of all, who is also the most revered apostle of all next to Peter? Well, we must make him into a defender of patriarchy not one who overturns it.

And this is what happened as the New Testament was being put together. When Paul was writing his letters there was nothing else written down. Stories of Jesus were circulating orally from person to person and community to community and that's how Paul learned them and taught them himself. Paul's letter to the Christians of Corinth was written just a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. The first copies of his letters and New Testament writings we have today, though, are 100 years after that. What happened over that span of 100 years as the New Testament was being put together?

Let's begin with 1 Corinthians. In our reading from chapter 14, we have Paul writing about worship and how things have to be better organized in worship. The word he uses for public preaching is: prophesy. When he or another apostle wasn't around to prophesy, preaching during worship was shared between those gathered. Someone would begin by offering a word of encouragement or inspiration based on a Jesus story or a scripture. Another would then lead in the singing of a hymn. Another would then offer a prayer. It was natural and spontaneous.

But Paul is also hearing that people are often talking over each other and not really listening to one another. Furthermore, there is what's called: tongue-speaking. Speaking in tongues is not speech that people can understand. The problem, Paul is arguing, is that unless there is someone to interpret the tongue into words everyone understands it just adds to the chaos people are already experiencing during worship. Therefore, he says, "be more eager to prophesy..." He also adds that people should take turns rather than speak

over one another. "All things should be done decently and in order". The worship experience should be an inspiring experience for all, where everyone has the opportunity to participate, engage and listen to one another.

OK, but should it just be men getting up to talk? According to the passage in question in our scripture reading, "women should be silent in the church... they are subordinate... and if they have anything to say let them say it to their husbands at home..." Wow! But here's the thing, just a few chapters earlier, Paul takes it for granted that both men and women are prophesying in worship, and both men and women share in all aspects of the congregation's life and leadership. For all the issues Paul is addressing in this letter, clearly men and women participating in worship and prophesying equally was not one of them. In fact, having both male and female participation, as well as Jew and gentile, free and slave, fit perfectly with his gospel of grace applied in everyday church life. So why this sudden crackdown on women in our reading from chapter 14?

Well, scholars are most all agreed that the passage in question here was never written by Paul. If you remove the bracketed section, the chapter reads very clearly. Keep the bracketed part in about women being silent and it reads very awkwardly. Add to this that in the earliest manuscripts of Corinthians found 100 years after Paul wrote the letter, this section has been inserted in different places – in the middle or at the end of the chapter. The conclusion: clearly some scribe was coached to insert this section. If this letter was left as it was, women would have the kind of freedom and empowerment in the church they were never permitted to have in society or at home. Imagine a woman prophesying to men and to her husband! Wouldn't this totally subvert the social hierarchy?

And what about our reading from Timothy? Well, once again, scholars believe that Paul could never have written Timothy even though it's written as if Paul is the author, giving it his stamp of authority. The big focus of Timothy is order and discipline in the church. It even refers to bishops. Clearly, this letter is written a generation after Paul when the church was much more hierarchically structured. Moreover, it totally contradicts Paul's theology of grace. "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission" totally contradicts "In Christ Jesus there is no longer male or female." To impose such silencing and subordination in the church is a betrayal of Christ and how the grace of God's infinite love and worth must be applied in the church and through the church as a challenge to society.

So then, for 2000 years the church has taught that women should be silent in the church and therefore barred from ordination and leadership. It has based this view on two passages taught to be authored by Paul. Grace is a beautiful idea, we've been taught, as long as it is not applied in real world relationships threatening social status where the privilege and power of some overrules the full personhood of others. And it has all been based on a lie. It has turned a radical, liberating gospel of Jesus into a source of oppression for the non-privileged. It has turned Paul the liberator and feminist into a defender of patriarchy.

In this season of Lent, let us open our minds and hearts anew to the ways we have been tutored by society's racism and sexism. As Christians, it is time to embrace not only how we have experienced the grace of God's infinite love, providing us with solid ground for our personal sense of worth, but also how such grace then challenges us to fight for the infinite worth of all persons in society. As those baptized into Christ's body, the church, may we clothe ourselves in Christ, becoming ever more his hands, feet and heart in our world. Thank you Paul, for leading the way. May we liberate you from the patriarchy within which you and all women have been imprisoned far too long. Amen.