

PAUL THE FEMINIST, PART 3

Luke 8: 1-3; Galatians 3: 26-28; 1 Corinthians 7: 1-9, 25-28, 36-40

Early in my ministry, a young couple came to see me. They were engaged and wanted to be married. Would I perform their wedding, they asked? Their family had been connected to the church for years. Well, we got into some conversation. I had my questions. But the more we talked the more I got an uncomfortable feeling. The man did the majority of the talking, and whenever the woman talked, she always looked over at her fiancé, seeking, it seemed, permission or approval for everything she said. It's as if she was being controlled. And so, in subsequent conversations I emphasized several things. 'Love and passion,' I said, 'cannot flourish if there is not equality and a free and mutual give and take in the relationship. If one person has power over another or has more control over another, any love in a relationship will be choked.' The couple were both very receptive to what I was saying. They also did a marriage prep course. What else could I do but agree to marry them. Besides, the man's family were big donors to the congregation. I'd like to say that played little part in my decision to marry them, but I'd be lying if I said that.

And so, the day came for the wedding rehearsal. It was the first time I met the families. I was taken aback by the groom's parents in particular. The mother was all over the details, while the father sat there like a patriarch providing advice. The bride's parents just sat there letting the groom's family take over. It was clear to me that the groom's controlling tendencies were a total chip off the old block and a domineering mother just fueled it all. The bride's mother was totally submissive, while her father seemed quite comfortable with his daughter being bossed around. Nothing felt right about it, but who was I to stop this big wedding from taking place in less than 24 hours?

Sure enough the wedding happened. It was a spectacular event with lots of guests and partying well into the night. I was glad it was all over and received sufficient praise and assurance of the family's continuing support of the church. Within a year, though, I got a call. The young bride had left. Where had she gone? Not back home. She had left the city and the province. Where she had gone, nobody knew. The man's family were outraged. The girl's family were ashamed. She had dishonoured them all. And yet, I couldn't help

feeling: she was now free, totally free. This was the only way she could be free. She had to run away, away from them all. Wow!

How many women in our world feel trapped in relationships, and even in marriages that are demeaning and dehumanizing? How many women in our world feel trapped and controlled by fathers, brothers and husbands? Think about princess Latifah the daughter of the crown prince ruler of the United Arab Emirates, as a recent, public example. And even here in Canada, with all our progressive laws to protect the freedom and dignity of women, how many women and girls suffer sexual abuse, rape and even murder by men they often know intimately.

Sex is a form of power and control. Women unattached to a man are a threat. Women who refuse to be possessed are a threat. Some of us may not see this. Some of us may find all this hard to believe. We're fortunate and privileged if that's the case. But let's not assume only what we notice is the reality. The statistics are startling. Even here in Canada, women are harassed and sexually assaulted by male colleagues, husbands, boyfriends, fathers and other male relatives in pandemic numbers.

So how as a church do we respond? What alternative vision do we have? Tomorrow (March 8) is International Women's Day. You would think as Christians we would support full equality among genders and that injustice and abuse against women would be a top concern for those who seek to be the hands, feet and heart of Jesus in the world. But alas, historically and even today, church is as much a place that can be dangerous for women's full equality and safety as anywhere else.

So how did this happen? When did it start? Are there resources within our own core faith as Christians that would inspire a vision of full equality against a patriarchal history which privileges men with the power not only to rule, but to use and abuse women for their pleasure and benefit?

Here's the thing. Both the gospels and Paul offer a radical vision of women as full persons just like men. But the world and the church have never been ready for it. Men were not prepared to give up power and control. As a result, within a few hundred years, church leaders who were men, used their power to suppress and distort the vision of Jesus and Paul. How?

In the first sermon of this series (February 7), I focused on Paul's vision of full equality of genders in Christ, and how in practical terms Paul worked with colleagues in ministry who were women leaders all the way up to Junia the apostle. But within a hundred years, patriarchy infiltrated the church and Junia was either changed to Junias the man in translation or dismissed as an oddity and exception rather than a typical example of leadership in the church as Paul envisioned it.

In the second sermon (February 21), I focused on two key passages falsely attributed to Paul, which declare that women should be silent in the church and subordinate to men and to their husbands in particular. Paul the feminist was turned into Paul the misogynist and these passages were the basis for barring women from ordination and leadership in the church for 2000 years.

In today's sermon, I want to focus on the feminist criticism of Paul, that he was anti-marriage, anti-sex, and therefore anti-woman as a result. The truth, in fact, is very different. Jesus and Paul inspired a whole feminist movement in the ancient world, one that was suppressed by the growing patriarchy infiltrating the church from early on. How so?

Our gospel reading is just a few verses and therefore easy to pass over. And yet, to anyone who pays attention, what it reveals is very radical. Jesus not only has 12 male disciples who are named. No. We're told that Jesus has also collected a number of women disciples. Some of the more prominent ones are named, which probably means that decades later when the gospels were being written down, these women had been key leaders in the church and therefore known by reputation. And then, after some of them are so named, we read that there were also "many others, who provided for them out of their resources." Wow. Here you have women, clearly unattached to men and therefore, independent, accompanying Jesus and his male disciples, providing for them, which also means they had means and abilities, and we know from other stories that they were also very much engaged in discipleship learning with Jesus also.

The first woman so named is Mary Magdalene. She appears in many gospel passages and depending on which gospel accounts of the resurrection we read, it is she, or she and other women, who are the first to witness Jesus resurrected and then proclaim him to his male disciples.

And in case this does not stand out as radical enough, there is literature written within 100 years of the gospels, by women, for women, pointing to the special relationship Jesus had with women in particular. One such writing is entitled: "*The Gospel of Mary*," and the Mary here is Mary Magdalene. In this 'gospel' Mary is depicted not only as especially close to Jesus, but closer to him than any of his male disciples. In fact, Mary is given special revelation by Jesus which she discloses to the others, making Peter and the others jealous and offended. Now, even though this account is fictional in some ways, it is inspired by the imagination of women who read the gospel stories and heard stories passed on over generations told by women for women. They not only felt empowered by Jesus to rise up and become full persons with minds, not just bodies; but they also experienced a messiah who engaged women like persons, and it had nothing to do with a sexual agenda or marriage.

And this is highly significant especially in a world where sex and the institution of marriage are forms of possessing, controlling, subordinating and silencing women. Jesus clearly welcomes women who courageously choose another path, whether they are widows or have never been married, or have been violated and therefore treated as tainted and unclean within society. Jesus shares himself with them and there is nothing sexual about it. Imagine a man who is interested in you as a woman and it's all about your mind and heart, your spirit, your soul, not your body. Isn't this radical?

But this is also a threat. The gospel of Mary, like other literature written by women, for women, was suppressed, and any copies found were destroyed. Only more recently, in the last 100 or so years, have some scraps and pieces of such literature been rediscovered.

And this brings me to Paul and our controversial reading from Corinthians. How does Paul's gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus for all, infinitely and equally, square with Paul's counsel that marriage and sex are fine, but being single and celibate are even better? Once again, it's all about context and where you as a person stand in your context. What are your options if you as a woman deserve to flourish as a child of God infinitely loved?

Just like feminist literature inspired by Jesus, suppressed for 2000 years, there is feminist literature inspired by Paul, also more recently discovered. The most well-known writing in this regard is entitled "*The Acts of Paul and Thecla*." Once again, like the gospel of Mary, historical reality and legend are

blended. However, what's fascinating is the feminist imagination that inspired such story-telling.

Thecla, herself, became really famous in the first few centuries of Christianity. Many shrines have been discovered dedicated to Thecla in Syria, Egypt and Turkey. In fact, at one time, next to Mary the mother of Jesus, Thecla was most famous, and pilgrims would flock to her shrine to worship and pray. I bet a lot of these pilgrims were women. In fact, Thecla was such a threat that male church leaders suppressed her story and her memory, and only in the past few generations have we rediscovered her. In the few minutes that remain, I can only summarize her story and how it is Paul the apostle who inspires it.

The story begins with Thecla as a beautiful young bride to be. Her value to her family is in getting engaged to an important man from an important family with lots of money and status. Paul the apostle comes to their city, and even as he proclaims a gospel of grace for all, he contextualizes it in this way, and I quote: "Blessed are those who have kept the flesh chaste for they will become a temple of God. Blessed are those who are self-controlled, for God will speak to them. Blessed are those who have wives as if they did not have them; for they will be the heirs of God." Sound familiar? Paul speaks in beatitudes like Jesus, but the content is all about renunciation of sex and marriage just like our scripture reading.

And who do you think is attracted to such a message? It is women. They hear in it a path to gospel liberation. But the men hear in this message a threat to their power and control. What if women took this in and refused to get married. How can we men possess, control and enjoy them if we can't marry them? And so, Paul is arrested and thrown into prison. But Thecla is so attracted and fascinated by Paul, she finds a way to get into his prison cell. They spend the night together, we're told, communing heart to heart, mind to mind. The next day, this is found out. Thecla is in trouble and Paul is kicked out of the city.

The rest of the story focuses on Thecla's adventures as she escapes the city and her impending imprisonment in marriage. Her adventures include getting away from men who want to possess her by marrying her, other women who support, hide and protect her, and even a lioness in the arena where Thecla is to be executed as a Christian, who fights off all other wild animals, including a male bear. Somehow, Thecla escapes all dangers and, after her fiancé conveniently dies, she is free to live her dream as an

independent woman. She catches up to Paul who is so impressed with her courage, perseverance and stubborn determination to become a disciple he takes her on. And then, he commissions her to become an apostle like him. The story ends with Thecla choosing her own destiny as a commissioned apostle, preaching the gospel and building church community throughout what is present day Turkey. She lives a good long life, she amasses many followers, and she dies blessed among her people. Wow! What a story!

So why was Thecla such a threat? Well, here you have a woman apostle, and one commissioned by the apostle of apostles – Paul. Here you have a woman who chooses her own freedom and is blessed for so choosing. Here you have a woman totally free from the control and possession of men, and one who, in fact, preaches, teaches, baptizes and guides both women and men.

According to ancient church leaders who were men, though, Thecla's story not only sanctions women leaders in the church; it also threatens the institution of marriage and how marriage and sex in marriage are a form of control and domination, protecting the power and privilege of men. And so, Thecla's story was suppressed. And this further contributed to the great apostle Paul being seen as a defender of patriarchy.

But Paul, like Jesus believed in equality. He believed that all persons created by God and called by Jesus were full persons, spiritual persons with minds and hearts to be cultivated and celebrated. Sex and marriage are gifts, but too often historically and in many cultures and contexts, sex and marriage are forms of oppression and abuse for women, institutions of domination and control. Jesus and Paul were dangerous liberators, and when they lived and proclaimed lives of celibacy and sexual renunciation, they were providing options, options for women, where such options didn't exist.

And this, my friends brings it all back to us. Let's think about our relationships, from those with our neighbours and colleagues, to those more intimate relationships with friends, lovers and spouses. Where and when does power and control, fear and mistrust, judgement and shame undermine equality and fullness of being? When do we become reluctant or afraid to share ourselves? How are we prevented from being full human beings with minds, hearts, imaginations and gifts, not just bodies used for sex and making babies? And how are we as followers of Jesus called to help liberate all those we may know, who need support in their journey of liberation?

Let us pray: Liberate us, O God... liberate us by filling us with your love, so that we are free to become whole persons, and free to walk with others and support them in their own journeys of liberation toward wholeness; Amen.