

April 22, 2018
Fourth Sunday of Easter
“Controversies of Our Faith: Women and the Church”

This sermon is based on *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014. See Chapter 27.

I heartily recommend Rev. Hamilton’s wonderful book. I am covering only a small portion of it, and there are many treasures in it you will discover if you buy and read it.

Biblical quotations are from the *Common English Bible*.

Think back to your formative years in the church—when you were a child or when you first began to attend. What was the role of women in church life? What were the first lessons you were taught on that subject?

My first thought about it as a child was that pastors were men. Not that women couldn’t be pastors, but they were just all men. So if you needed to ask permission for something, or you had a question about God, you asked the male pastor. But, if you wanted to get something DONE in the church, you asked the women! The pastor was the figurehead, but women ran the church. They made the bulletins and newsletter. They taught Sunday school. They made and served all the food. They kept track of church history and records. Women directed the Christmas program and the choir; they collected money for missions, knew where every item in the church was (which is a special kind of power), were in charge of weddings and funerals, and were caretakers, movers and shakers of all persons, projects and objects under church jurisdiction.

And when the pastor needed someone to dress up in a robe and do a pantomime of God creating the earth, he asked my mother, A WOMAN, to play the role.

Perhaps these formative experiences were why, as I entered church life as a vocation, I never once had a gendered moment of self-doubt. I already knew and witnessed the powerful ministry of women all my life.

But I realize this is only because of recent changes in the church. Until quite modern times, women were barred from any leadership role. The basic argument for this is that Jesus chose as his twelve apostles all men; therefore, he must have felt that women should not be church leaders and not be ordained into ministry.

I have two issues with this. First, ***Jesus didn’t choose any female disciples that we know of***. The authors of the gospels were Jewish men deeply steeped in the patriarchy of first century culture. If Jesus had called women to serve, would these patriarchal men have reported it? Maybe; maybe not.

Secondly, Jesus surely knew that female disciples wouldn't have been received well by society. It was men who had the best chance of being accepted as leaders. There was no such thing as a female rabbi. ***By the nature of their culture, women acting as teachers may have undermined his message.***

So, I don't think we can say that Jesus was against women apostles. He never said a word about it, but his culture spoke volumes.

Judaism in the first century was profoundly patriarchal. Women had important roles in the home, but they were subordinate to men in nearly everything. Josephus, a historian living then wrote, "The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she might be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man." And the "Law" he was talking about was the Law of Moses, of the Torah.

Conservative churches, to this day, maintain this position. They look to Paul, who wrote in 1 Corinthians 14: 33b-35:

...in all the churches of God's people, the women should be quiet during the meeting. They are not allowed to talk. Instead, they need to get under control, just as the Law says. If they want to learn something, they should ask their husbands at home. It is disgraceful for a woman to talk during the meeting.

And to 1 Timothy 2: 11-12:

A wife should learn quietly with complete submission. I don't allow a wife to teach or to control her husband. Instead, she should be a quiet listener.

But then he wrote passages like Galatians 3: 26-29:

You are all God's children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise.

And Paul himself identified a number of women who were leaders in the early church. In Romans 16, he named several women who worked with him. This included Phoebe, "a servant of the church,"; Prisca, who risked her life for Paul; Mary, "who has worked very hard for you,"; Tryphaena and Tryphosa, who "are workers for the Lord." Paul also raises up Junia, his relative who was imprisoned with him. He describes her and her husband as "prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me." *Prominent among the apostles.* Hmmm....

So why does Paul, after naming a woman an “apostle,” after saying that in Christ there is no male or female, still say that women should be silent in church?

For Paul, it comes down to the second creation story in Genesis. He grounds his prohibition in 1 Timothy this way:

Adam was formed first, and then Eve. Adam wasn't deceived, but rather his wife became the one who stepped over the line because she was completely deceived. v. 13-14

So what about those creation stories? Judaism's patriarchy, and ours, really goes all the way back to that.

The first thing we have to attend to is that there are two, separate creation stories, and evidence suggests they had different authors writing in different times. The first creation story, in Genesis 1, is egalitarian:

God created humanity in God's own image,
in the divine image God created them,
male and female God created them.
God blessed them and said to them, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.”

There is no patriarchy here. Man and woman were created together in God's image with no dominance, one over the other. They were to be partners in managing God's creation. ***And God saw that it was good.***

The second creation story, in Genesis 2, is a little different. Man was made first, followed by woman, who was made from man's rib. God says, “It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him.”

It's in this word, “***helper,***” that women's status hangs. The patriarchy has assumed that this is a subordinate role. Man directs, woman helps. But that's not the actual meaning of “helper.” This is the Hebrew word *ezer*. It doesn't mean someone who is weaker, meant only to help a stronger person. Rather, it means ***a strong person who comes to the aid of someone weaker.*** It is used 21 times in the Old Testament, mostly to refer to God coming to the aid of his people. But, here, the word is used to refer to Eve, suggesting she is not subordinate to Adam. Also notable is that in this story, God tells Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil before Eve is even created. So ***Eve may have been deceived, but Adam was just plain disobedient.*** It just doesn't make sense to me to put the blame on Eve—they both sinned—unless you are a member of the patriarchy who desires to have a scapegoat rather than taking responsibility for your disobedience.

This is described in Genesis 3 where the story turns darker. Adam and Eve do eat from the forbidden tree, and they are turned out of paradise. God explains the consequences of their sin. Man will have to work in sweat and effort, and die into the dust from which he came. And to the woman, God says:

“I will make your pregnancy very painful;
in pain you will bear children.
You will desire your husband,
but he will rule over you.”

v. 16

Here’s the point: this outcome was not how God created humans to be; it was a consequence of their sin. God created man and woman to live in paradise as equal partners; because of their sin, man would labor and woman would be subordinate. And so patriarchy was born.

In the United States of 2018, we have come a long way—but ***patriarchy still exists***. Women still earn significantly less than men. They are still outnumbered in the highest paying and most respected jobs. Women are still victims of violence at the hands of men in far greater proportion than vice versa. They are still reduced to sexual objects in many arenas. We still need a #MeToo movement because women are still subjected to chauvinism, harassment and worse.

And in much of the world, the situation goes even farther downhill. Parents sell daughters to human traffickers. Girls are trapped in the sex trade, or forced into marriage while still children. Women live in many places without rights and protections we take for granted.

God created man and woman to live together in paradise, partners in life and worship; but because of human sin, that partnership was lost.

We’ve talked about Paul, and we’ve talked about creation, but what about Jesus? What did he have to say about the role of women?

Jesus had remarkable relationships with women. He healed and spoke to them when no one else would have. He spoke to a Samaritan woman at a well, an act that defied his Jewishness, social order, and gender. And she became the first evangelist, telling others about this amazing man.

At a banquet, in front of disapproving Pharisees, he accepted the ministry of a woman, welcoming her tears and her anointing.

Mary and her sister Martha were among his best friends. As he sat to teach his disciples in their home, Mary sat at his feet to listen. When Martha scolded both of them for Mary not participating in her prescribed gender role, Jesus said:

“One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won’t be taken away from her.”
Luke 10: 42

And when Jesus rose from the grave, he appeared first to the women, who were instructed to “go and tell” the male disciples. **Jesus encouraged and empowered women in the face of profound patriarchy, defying social, cultural and religious convention to do so.** He gave them respect, value and voice. Could it be that we are called to do the same?

The gospel of John gives us a powerful view of Jesus’ atonement for us on the cross. He begins his book:

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
John 1: 1

This is meant to take us back to Genesis 1 and the Garden of Eden. Near the end of his book, he tells us:

There was a garden in the place where Jesus was crucified, and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid.
John 19: 41

Hamilton says:

Jesus is crucified in a garden, and buried in a garden. He is raised in a garden and, when Mary Magdalene first sees the resurrected Christ, she doesn’t recognize him, because he looks like the gardener. Here’s the point: Jesus came to reverse the curse of Eden. Part of that curse is the subordination of women.

The curse placed upon Eve was redeemed by Christ on the cross. ***In the beginning, God’s will for us was partnership. It was our sin that brought patriarchy. As we strive together to bring forth the Kingdom of God, shouldn’t we be striving for a return to the garden, for a return to our equal places in God’s created order?***

If we weren’t striving for exactly that, I wouldn’t be your pastor. And I’d like to suggest that this church would be a shell of itself without the faithful and remarkable ministry of women. Thanks be to God for the faithfulness of our denomination (who began to ordain women in 1956), for the faithfulness of all our spiritual mothers of all places and times, and for the faithfulness of the good people of this congregation, who esteem and uphold the ministry of women. The value we place on women and their ministries is a sign of God’s Kingdom among us.