

Sermon 3/10/2024
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Preface: Friday past was international women's day and today is honoring women in ministry Sunday. In today's sermon, I'm going to be talking a lot about women, not to exclude our gender-non-conforming or non-binary siblings. I will be talking about gendered politics within the context of the ancient Roman Empire. I hope you'll see in the sermon that even from the earliest days of the Christian church people have been pushing back against gender roles and binaries.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 NRSVUE

³⁴ Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says. ³⁵ If there is something they want to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

The words of Paul, for the church in Corinth.

We could easily dismiss this passage by saying that Paul was writing to a specific group of people in a specific time, for a specific purpose. Surely Paul did not intend for us to take his words as authoritative nearly 2,000 years later. Or, as a good friend of mine pointed out, some scholars have suggested that these two verses are a later addition, not original to Paul. Scholars have had a field day trying to determine which letters or verses are authentic to Paul, and which are pseudo-Paul. But it doesn't really matter because here they are, in what we consider to be holy scripture, inspired by God. We hold these writings to be sacred

and authoritative, all of them, not just certain sections, not with exceptions for the parts we think might not have been written by the historical Paul.

We shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the parts of the Bible we don't like. The truth is, that all Christians, everywhere, in all denominations negotiate with the text. We give more authority to some parts. Preachers may prefer to preach from certain texts or avoid difficult texts. One time I was sitting around a table of Presbyterian pastors, and I asked why pastors don't preach about women's issues from the pulpit. Some tried to tell me that it's because they don't come up in the lectionary. But I protested, Presbyterian pastors are not required to preach from the lectionary; try again. On the second go-round, some answered that it's because they want to keep their jobs. Well, at least they're honest. So I figure, **this** job has a natural terminus date. I can use my relative lack of power to say what others won't. Additionally, our friends in other denominations do use this passage and others like it to silence women and keep them out of church leadership. Any woman in ministry can tell you, these types of passages are used regularly. Therefore we must be willing to wrestle with them. And maybe imagine new ways to interpret difficult passages that don't simply dismiss them.

We can use some historical information to try to imagine: what's going on in 1st C. Corinth? The population in Corinth were largely freed slaves or poor people that had been relocated from the city of Rome. Most of the people, especially

women, were probably living at or near subsistence level. The Roman world in the 1st century was violent, patriarchal, and basically saw women as property, objects to be subjugated. All Christians at the time were living in the Roman Empire and trying to negotiate what it means to be a Jesus follower in Roman culture. For example Paul, throughout his writings waffles on certain issues; for example: Eating meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods, sometimes Paul says absolutely no, sometimes it's okay. On the issue of celibacy, sometimes Paul is very pro-celibacy, and at other times seems to encourage people to marry. And it seems that many people were attracted to Paul's teachings on celibacy. They may not have cared much about purity or sexual morality, but the option to remain unmarried may have been attractive to anyone who didn't fit strict gender binaries. Women in particular were drawn to Christianity, because it allowed them to move out of patriarchal gender roles. Women in the early church were able to increase their standard of living and their position in society through church leadership. In I Corinth 4, Paul notes this change in status, while Paul's status has declined since becoming a Jesus follower, those in Corinth have improved their social status.

Romans weren't too happy that this outsider was encouraging women to remain celibate. One of the complaints from Romans about the first century Christians was that all their women were flocking to this strange new religion and leaving the men without wives to serve them. It seems that most early Christian

assemblies welcomed women, and their gifts of prophecy were honored. Whether authentic to Paul or not, this passage in Corinthians and others like it such as the household codes in Timothy and Titus reflect the Roman influence on early Christianity.

Paul seems very uncertain about the role of women in church. In the book of Romans, Paul refers to Prescilla as a co-worker and Phoebe and Junia are listed as leaders in the church. In I Corinthians 11, Paul assumed that women prophecy. Why does he consider women to be co-workers in some places, but in other places he seems to silence their voices? Well, Paul is doing what all Christians have to do at some point. He's figuring out how to uphold what he believes are Christian values, within the context of Roman society. Paul seems very interested in building communities that are not in conflict with their pagan neighbors. Much of chapter 14 in I Corinth is concerned with orderly worship. Apparently speaking in tongues, prophecy and ecstatic worship had become very popular in the church in Corinth. Paul is concerned with how outsiders will perceive unintelligible utterances when people are speaking in tongues, or people won't know what's going on if everyone is speaking at once. Christians were not being persecuted to the degree that we might imagine, but they were causing concerns, and possibly ostracized by their pagan neighbors. Paul, and all first century Christians were trying to figure out how much they wanted to stand out, how to differentiate themselves while not

attracting unwanted attention from Roman officials. Exactly how do you follow a crucified messiah?

Prophets, regardless of gender, are almost always a threat to institutional power. Prophets speak truth to power. Due to their economic and social status, women in particular have been drawn to the role of prophecy, charismatic worship, and celibacy as a form of institutional resistance. Prophecy is anti-imperial critique, and gave women the means to exercise leadership. Freedom from marriage and release from the burden of child-bearing not only meant liberation, it was also a powerful form of protest and resistance against patriarchy and imperial power. I imagine the prophetic voices of women, and their autonomy from patriarchal family structures attracted unwanted attention from the surrounding culture. Gender and gender performance has never been fixed, nor binary. Perhaps the church in Corinth had eschewed gender roles, which aroused suspicion in their highly-gendered culture. And Paul, as always, thought he knew what was best for the churches he wrote letters to. Paul thought the people in Corinth should tamp down their style of worship and leadership to be more in line with the social norms of the day.

There are a lot of things we don't know about Paul's letters. We don't know the exact historical context or what problem or question Paul was writing to

address. And we don't know how any of his letters were received by their original intended audience.

In my prophetic imagination, I wonder how the leadership of the church in Corinth received Paul's advice. Perhaps they were confused, or dismayed by Paul's letter. Maybe they're confused as to why Paul would advise women to cover their head when they prophecy, then a little later in the letter he tells them to remain silent. Perhaps they outright reject Paul's advice. In II Corinthians, Paul talks about a difficult visit that had caused him grief. Perhaps there was conflict between Paul and the leaders of the church in Corinth. Maybe they went right on doing things their way. I think it's possible that the church in Corinth didn't care for Paul, and they didn't take his teachings very well.

The women prophets in Corinth were not a new innovation. Women have always been prophets. Though women can be ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA, our siblings in other denominations do not allow women to teach in church. The growing conservative movement in the United States is pushing for legislation that limits women's healthcare. It is no coincidence that conservative Christian denominations use the scriptures to silence women's voices. Just as Christians in the first century, Christians today often reflect the values of the dominant culture. Culture itself influences how we read and interpret the scriptures. That's why we need prophets, to stand in opposition to the empire and patriarchy of our modern

world. We need the prophetic voices of all people, of all genders, to speak truth to power. Prophets, regardless of gender, must be valued and uplifted. There may be lots of things we don't know about Paul's writings, but one thing I do know for sure and certain; this woman, right here, this prophet will not be silent in church.

Amen