

## WHAT JESUS TEACHES US ABOUT WOMEN

(05/09/10)

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 1:26-27  
Luke 8:43-48

I have to admit that writing today's sermon proved to be a challenge. This Easter season we have been exploring various understandings of death in our worship and in our spiritual study and growth group. Then along comes Mother's Day. I spent the first part of the week trying to figure out how I could blend the theme of death with Mother's Day. The best I could do was to recall one of my mother's sayings. If I misbehaved as a child, which wasn't that often, my mother would say, "Just remember, I brought you into this world and I can take you out." That is why I associate mothers with death.

Actually, she didn't say that. I have to straighten out the record just in case she is listening. I love my mother very much, but she didn't have a good sense of humor, and unless the experience of being in heaven is accompanied by a radical transformation of one's personality, I suspect she still doesn't.

The impetus for this morning's sermon was two articles that I came across recently in the Boston Globe. They have to do with the oppression of women.

The worldwide oppression of women throughout history is a complex matter. To state the obvious, women are and have been oppressed and persecuted by men. One could also make the case, however, that both men and women have been wounded by the patriarchal culture, though in different ways. Women's oppression has been endemic to every culture since the beginning of time. Since religion is an integral part of every culture, a major cultural determinant, one could also regard this oppression as stemming from or being supported by certain religious belief systems, most notably in those religions that we describe as monotheistic and patriarchal.

This morning, before we explore the way women have been viewed from the perspective of our Judeo-Christian tradition, the tradition that I know the most about and have the greatest stake in reforming, I would like us to consider patterns of oppression that are embedded within the religious and legal systems of some Muslim cultures.

The first is the report of the poisoning of eighty schoolgirls in Afghanistan, purportedly by the Taliban. This poisoning was an attempt to dissuade young girls from

attending school, from getting an education. The second is the report of legislation that has been proposed in Pakistan to protect wives from physical abuse by their husbands.

Violence against women is a widespread phenomenon in Pakistan, a Muslim-majority nation of 175 million people where most people are poor, only half the adults can read, and extremist ideologies, including the Taliban's, are gaining traction. Over 80% of wives in rural parts of Pakistan fear physical violence from their husbands and 50% of wives in urban areas admit that their husbands beat them.

It is not uncommon for Pakistani husbands to throw acid in their wife's face, with the intent of totally disfiguring her for life. This often follows the wife's threat of filing for divorce or reporting him to the police. There is actually an organization, Acid Survivors Foundation, that provides medical, psychological, and legal support to attack victims. This might be a good mission to consider in the future.

Apparently the majority of Islamist lawmakers are opposed to the proposed law that bans domestic violence. They claim that the law could tear apart the social fabric of their country by undermining families. One lawmaker was quoted as saying that domestic violence was not a problem in Pakistan until advocacy groups appeared and "created the issue of women's rights."

We know that the teachings of the various world religions concerning women have shaped the culture of societies and peoples since the beginning of time. Within our own Judeo-Christian culture we find that the biblical perspective on women is a far cry from our honoring of women on this holiday. In Jesus' day, women were regarded as inferiors. They were not allowed to study the Torah, the sacred scriptures. Rabbi Eliezer, a first-century rabbi, put the matter this way: "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman."

In ancient Judaism, women, along with children and slaves, were not allowed to recite the morning prayer or say grace before meals. The Talmud states: "Let a curse come upon a man who has his wife or children say grace for him." The daily prayers of Jews in Jesus' time included a three-fold prayer of thanksgiving:

*Praised be God that He has not created me a Gentle (a non-Jew);  
Praised be God that He has not created me a woman; and  
Praised be God that He has not created me an ignorant man.*

It is interesting that the man thanks God for not creating him an ignorant man though he manifests a profound ignorance of the deeper dimensions of God's will for all God's children, men and women alike. It seems to me that people who unthinkingly live out the culturally prescribed prejudices of their time deserve to be called ignorant.

The attitude toward women in first century Palestine found expression in the institutions and customs surrounding marriage. A man could have several wives, but a woman could not have several husbands. A husband could divorce his wife by simply handing her a writ of divorce, while a woman could not divorce her husband under any circumstances. The Talmud says,

*It is well for those whose children are male, but ill for those whose children are female. At the birth of a boy all are joyful, but at the birth of a girl all are sad. When a boy comes into the world, peace comes into the world; when a girl comes, nothing comes. Even the most virtuous of women is a witch. Our teachers have said: Four qualities are evident in women. They are greedy at their food, eager to gossip, lazy, and jealous.*

This is how women were viewed in the Palestine of Jesus' day.

God speaks to us in many different ways. Human beings have experienced God's presence and heard God's word in different cultures at different times throughout history. The Bible is one such record of people's experiences of God. As such, it is not the only word and certainly not the final word. The teachings of the Bible were shaped or conditioned by the time and the culture in which they were written. They are not eternal truths. This is an important distinction to keep in mind as we look at what the Bible teaches us about women.

The Bible is a very powerful and a very sensitive spiritual guide. However, as you know, I don't believe we should take all the parts of the Bible literally and as prescriptive of the way we should live in twenty-first century America. To do so in relation to women not only does violence to women and to the feminine side of men, it does violence to the living word of God by codifying it within the misogynist prejudices of ancient Israel. To treat women the way the Bible says we should treat women is an insult not only to women but also to God.

The men who wrote the books of the Old Testament argued that man is superior to woman because God created man before he created woman. Actually, there are two

accounts of creation in the Book of Genesis. In Genesis 2, we read that God created Adam and later created Eve from Adam's rib. However, in Genesis 1 it is recorded that God created human beings, male and female, in God's own image.

This implies that human beings, men and women, were created simultaneously, as equals, and that both men and women carry the image of an androgynous God. I take this passage to mean that God is both male and female, or that at times we experience God as male and at times we experience God as female. However, by the time we reach the third chapter of Genesis we find God telling woman that "thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee." This theme of master and slave is then continued and amplified throughout the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Paul offers several guides to the role of women in the early church. In I Timothy 2:8-12, Paul says:

*It is my desire, therefore, that everywhere prayers be said by the men of the congregation, who shall lift up their hands with a pure intention, excluding angry or quarrelsome thoughts. Women again must dress in becoming manner, modestly and soberly, not with elaborate hair-styles, not decked out with gold or pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, as befits women who claim to be religious. A woman must be a learner, listening quietly and with due submission. I do not permit a woman to be a teacher, nor must woman domineer over man; she should be quiet. For Adam was created first and Eve afterwards; and it was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who, yielding to deception, fell into sin. Yet she will be saved through motherhood - if only women continue in faith, love, and holiness, with a sober mind.*

And in I Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul says:

*As in all congregations of God's people, women should not address the meeting. They have no license to speak, but should keep their place as the law directs. if there is something they want to know, they can ask their own husbands at home. It is a shocking thing that a woman should address the congregation.*

In terms of the passage from Timothy, those of us who are reserved and proper New Englanders clearly do not believe that we must pray with our hands in the air. It would therefore also be absurd for us to assume from this passage that women should not pray in worship, read the scriptures, or be the ministers of a church.

In I Corinthians 11, concerning the matter of women's behavior at religious services, Paul says:

*Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of woman, and God is the head of Christ. [Note that the decreasing order of authority is God, then Christ, then man, then woman.] . . . A man should certainly not cover his head, since he is the image of God and reflects God's glory; but woman is the reflection of man's glory. For man did not come from woman; no, woman came from man; and man was not created for the sake of woman, but woman was created for the sake of man.*

I realize there is a problem with this passage from the perspective of biology, the part about man not coming from woman. Anyway, that's the kind of nonsense one is led into by taking the Book of Genesis literally instead of symbolically.

In fact, Paul's overall teaching about women is quite progressive, at least for his day. In I Corinthians 11:5, Paul says women can pray in worship as long as their head is covered. In Romans 16:1-2, Paul writes:

*I commend to you Phoebe, a fellow-Christian who holds office in the congregation at Cenchrae. Give her, in the fellowship of the Lord, a welcome worthy of God's people, and stand by her in any business in which she may need your help, for she has herself been a good friend to many, including myself.*

The Greek word for holding office in this passage is "Diakonos," a word that is translated twenty times in the New Testament as minister, seven as servant, and two times as deacon. Paul is clearly stating that Phoebe had a place of leadership and authority in the early church and he urges the people in Rome to assist her in her ministry as she utilizes her God-given gifts.

I believe Paul's view of women, inspired as it was by the Holy Spirit, was quite enlightened for his time. When in I Corinthians 12:4-31 and Ephesians 4:4-16 Paul talks of the variety of gifts we bring to the church and to life: the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, the ability to speak in tongues, the ability to interpret tongues, and when Paul talks about the different tasks performed within the church by those who are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, helpers, and administrators, none of these gifts or tasks is labeled "for men only."

The crowning statement of Paul's exceptional openness for his time is found in Galatians 3:28, where Paul says: "There is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave or

freeman, male or female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus.” This sentiment finds eloquent expression in our hymn: “In Christ There is no East or West.”

And finally we have Jesus. Judging by our modern standards, living two thousand years later in a modern or post-modern culture, Jesus appears as enlightened and progressive in his stance toward women. Because Jesus was the Son of God and because Jesus shows us what God looks like in human form, Jesus’ attitude toward women shows us God’s attitude toward women. Jesus’ attitude was very different from that of the people and the organized religions of his time, and also, sadly, of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures of our time as well.

First, Jesus openly taught women about God. He taught them the meaning of the scriptures, and he imparted his own special knowledge or “gnosis” to them. When we recall that in Judaism it was considered improper and even obscene to teach women the scriptures, we see how radically Jesus departed from the culturally and religiously entrenched prejudice of his day.

Second, Jesus invited women to become his disciples. In Luke 8:1-3 we read that a number of women, both married and single, were regular followers of Jesus. Jesus showed the people of his day how God regarded women when he ministered both to and with women. He invited them to become his disciples not only in the sense of learning from him but also in the sense of following him, serving him, and serving others, just like the male disciples.

In the Gnostic gospels of Thomas and Mary Magdalene, it is clear that Mary Magdalene is not only equal in rank to the other disciples, there is a good deal of evidence that she was above them in some way. Whether this was because, as Dan Brown suggests, that Jesus and Mary were married, or whether it was simply because Mary grasped the deeper meaning of Jesus’ teaching, there is little doubt that she was at least as close to Jesus as any other disciple.

Our Gospel lesson this morning was the account of Jesus’ healing of a woman who was suffering from a menstrual problem or condition. In Jesus’ day, women were considered unclean at the time of their period, were isolated from men, were not allowed to touch men, and were definitely not allowed to engage in any religious ceremonies. The simple act of allowing the woman to touch him, acknowledging this,

and then publicly healing her while surrounded by a crowd of followers was a startling counter-cultural act. It was just as unbelievable as when Jesus allowed the prostitute, the woman of the city to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. In Jesus, God was calling ancient Israel and all cultures for all time to set aside their fear of women and prejudices against women and to accept them as full children of God.

According to scripture, Jesus' first appearances after the resurrection were to women. He entrusted women to carry the glorious news of his resurrection to the other disciples, who initially refused to believe the women since, according to Judaic law women were not allowed to bear legal witness. Jesus knew the religious law of his day. Thus, his decision to appear to women and to commission women to bear witness to the most important event in history must have been deliberate. It showed that for followers of Jesus, no matter what the customs of the land, women could no longer be regarded as inferior, unclean, evil, or second-class citizens.

Finally, Jesus' view of women's role in the church as well as society is clearly seen in his visit to the home of Martha and Mary. Luke 10:38-42 shows how Jesus rejected the stereotypical notion that the proper place for all women is in the kitchen.

As recorded in this passage, Martha took the typical woman's role and served the men. Mary, however, took the supposedly male role, the intellectual role; she sat at Jesus feet and listened to his teaching. In response to Martha's criticism of her sister, Jesus commends Mary for having "chosen the best part, that which shall not be taken away from her." At a time when women were not allowed to study for the rabbinate, it is difficult to imagine how Jesus could possibly have been clearer in his insistence that women were called to the same intellectual and spiritual life as were men.

Although I am saddened by the way women have been treated in our culture and every culture around the world since the beginning of time, I am proud to be a minister in the United Church of Christ, the denomination that ordained the first woman minister, Antoinette Brown, in 1853. I am saddened by those branches of the Christian church that still treat women as second-class citizens and who desecrate our scriptures by twisting them around to support their prejudice.

When I think of my grandmothers, mother, and mother-in-law, my school and Sunday school teachers, my therapists and supervisors, my colleagues and friends, and

my wife and daughter, I am filled with a deep gratitude. When I think of all the ministries that women carry out in this church and every church, I am filled with similar feelings.

When I read the scriptures, there is no doubt in my mind that Jesus, two thousand years ago was trying to tell us that God saw men and women as equals. Some societies, some religions, some denominations, some men, and even some women who have been trapped in their cultural gender-role stereotypes, have just been a little slow catching on. This is why I am especially proud of our church in the missions we choose to support. We support the Rape Crisis Center of Central Massachusetts, which ministers to women who have suffered a terrible form of abuse. We support Abby's House, a shelter for women and their children. And we support the Central Asia Institute in its efforts to build and equip schools for girls and women in Afghanistan.

In the spirit of Jesus, both on Mother's Day and throughout the year, let us continue to do our part as individuals and as a church to correct the terrible injustice and heal the terrible wounds that have been inflicted on women by cultures and religions throughout history, including, sadly, our own.

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