

“Jesus and the Equality of Women”
A Sermon based on Luke 10:38-42 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35

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Last year a good friend of mine died whom I had known for over twenty years while I was living in Minneapolis. Her name was Liz Heller and she was a Presbyterian minister. I want to tell you about Liz because she grew up at a time when churches like ours did not yet permit women to be ordained as ministers. Liz was one of those pioneers who first blazed the trail for other women to become ministers in mainline Protestant churches. But before I tell you about Liz, I want us to look at our two texts from the New Testament, both of which have to do with the role of women in the early Christian movement.

The ancient world was patriarchal: that is, it was a male-dominated world in which women were subject in virtually every respect to the domination and authority of men. Whether we are talking about the Jewish world in which Jesus and his first disciples lived or the Greco-Roman world into which Christian missionaries like the apostle Paul brought the Christian message about Jesus, women were subordinate to men in power and prestige. Yet one of the remarkable things about Jesus as we read about him in the gospels was the frequency of his interactions with women. Furthermore, *the way* Jesus interacted with women was even more remarkable; he treated them with respect as persons in their own right who deserved to be taken seriously by men. Women occupy a large place in the gospels, from his birth, throughout his ministry, up to his death and resurrection. Just take a few well-known examples: Jesus’ own mother Mary as well as Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist both played important roles in

the stories leading up to his birth; Jesus healed a woman who suffered for many years from a flow of blood after she had exhausted all her money in vain on doctors who failed to heal her; Jesus was criticized by one of the Pharisees for letting a sinful woman wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair; Jesus told a parable in which he likened God to a woman who went searching for a lost coin; Jesus healed the daughter of a Gentile woman; the women disciples stayed beside Jesus while he was dying on the cross after the male disciples had fled in fear; and the women were the first to discover the empty tomb and to proclaim Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Moreover, in the stories about the early church recorded in the Book of Acts, we learn of wealthy women like Lydia who became benefactors to the church or of itinerant missionaries like Priscilla who was the colleague of Paul. So, in spite of the fact that Christianity emerged in a patriarchal, male-dominated world, women were there from the start as active participants in the ministry of Jesus and the early church. As one biblical scholar has said, without the women in Jesus' life there might not have been a Christian Church at all!

Today we might easily overlook just how remarkable these women were for the ministry of Jesus and the early church because we take the active participation of women in all spheres of life for granted. We live in a society in which there is virtual equality between men and women, or at least we believe there is supposed to be such equality. But we should not forget just how recent and new our modern Western egalitarian ideas about women really are. When in 1776 the framers of our Declaration of Independence wrote the revolutionary sentence, "All men are created equal," women were not included in that sentence. It was only a hundred years ago, in 1920, that the constitutional right of women to vote in American elections was ratified. Before then, some women had been imprisoned for protesting on behalf of their right to vote. My

grandmother turned 20 years old in 1920 when women were granted the right to vote; by that time, she was already in business for herself and owned a restaurant in Chicago. I'm sure she had to listen to many pundits and prophets of doom who opposed her right to vote as though this posed a threat to the very foundations of American society itself. There were many preachers who used their pulpits to oppose women's suffrage since it seemed to challenge the divinely ordained order of nature according to which men are supposed to govern the public domain and women are stay at home. After all, if women were given the right to vote, wouldn't that open a Pandora's box that could never be closed again? Where would it stop? What would they want next? Equal pay for equal work? What if they demanded that the professions traditionally reserved for men be opened to them as well? Women might become doctors, lawyers, police officers, or—God forbid—even ministers!

In the story of two sisters, Mary and Martha, we see the contrast between a woman who knew that her role was to tend to the household and another woman who wanted to learn as men did. Luke tells us that while “Martha was distracted by her many tasks,” Mary “sat at Jesus' feet and listened to what he was saying” (Luke 10:39-40). Mary wanted to learn from Jesus, whereas Martha was busy with housework and criticized her sister for not lending a hand. Martha was doing what a traditional woman was expected to be doing, but Mary dared to assume a role reserved for men in her society by wanting to learn from a teacher. In the face of this conflict between them, Martha asked Jesus to take her side; after all, isn't that what a good rabbi would be expected to do, namely, to remind a woman of the proper role God has assigned to her? But, surprisingly, that is not what Jesus did. Instead, he gently chided Martha for being so anxious: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.

Mary has chosen the better part which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42). Jesus respected Mary’s mind, he affirmed her desire to learn, and he did not brush her aside.

Reading this story again brought to mind a popular movie a few years back starring Barbra Streisand called “Yentle,” in which the main character is a young Jewish woman in Eastern Europe who wants to study Torah, the law of Moses, with a rabbi, but she can’t because such study is reserved for men alone. Although though she has a first-rate mind, even the local book vender refuses to let her buy religious books since they are written for men. And so, in her deep frustration and anger with the narrow role assigned to her by traditional Jewish society, she cuts her hair and disguises herself as a man so she can attend a rabbinical school, and therein lies the drama of the movie. The question raised by the movie is whether it really is God’s will that women should be so restricted by a traditional view of gender, even if it has the authority of an ancient religious tradition behind it.

My friend Liz was like both Mary in our gospel and Yentle in the movie. She had a fine mind. She wanted to go to seminary and study theology. She felt called by God to become a minister. But in the late 1940s and the early 1950s when Liz was a young woman, the Presbyterian Church in which she had grown up did not ordain women. That’s because of what the Bible says about women’s place in the church. In 1 Cor. 14:34-35, we read: “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate...For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” Wow. That is a stinging rebuke of any woman who would presume to think she has something worthwhile to say in church that others should listen to! But this is not the only such verse in the New Testament that prohibits women from

speaking in church. In 1 Timothy 2:12 we read: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men." And yet, my friend Liz felt a strong and persistent sense that God was calling her into the ministry. But how could that be? Surely, God could not be calling a woman into the ministry when the Bible, God's Word, explicitly teaches that women are to keep silent in church and that no woman is to have authority over men. So, Liz must have been mistaken; it wasn't God's voice she heard calling her into the ministry, but perhaps the voice of Satan, tempting her to step out of her proper place as a woman in defiance of God's explicit command in the Bible. Still, Liz insisted it was truly God who was calling her to the ministry.

Despite the fact that women weren't allowed to become ministers, Liz went ahead and enrolled in seminary anyway and completed her degree. When she graduated, there wasn't a joyous celebration of her ordination to the ministry as there was for her male classmates from seminary. She was back right where she started, since the church still refused to ordain women. Nonetheless, she found a job as an assistant to the college chaplain at the University of Minnesota and she worked there for a number of years. Then, in 1956, the Presbyterian Church changed its mind: women could now be ordained as ministers on an equal footing with men. Liz, who already had her seminary degree in hand, promptly presented herself to the board that examined candidates for the ministry and she was approved. So, after all those years, Liz was finally ordained as a minister of the church and she served with distinction as a Presbyterian minister in Minneapolis for the remainder of her life. Liz was vindicated by the church after all; the church acknowledged that God had indeed called her into the ministry.

John Wesley, when he started the Methodist movement in eighteenth-century England, recognized that there were some extraordinary women who had had been blessed by the Holy Spirit with gifts for preaching that equaled (and sometimes even exceeded) the abilities of ordained male ministers. To one such woman, Sarah Crosby, he granted a license to preach in 1761. But this was an exception to the general rule; nonetheless, a door for women in ministry had been opened slightly. However, it wasn't until 1956, the same year that the Presbyterians decided to ordain women, that the Methodist Church also decided to ordain women as ministers on an equal basis with men. Now the door was flung open widely and other Protestant denominations broke with tradition and began to ordain women as ministers.

Yet in each case, the decision to ordain women was not made lightly since there was always intense controversy surrounding it. After all, the opponents of women's ordination charged their churches with abandoning biblical authority, that is, with disobeying God. For this reason, *most* churches throughout the world still do not ordain women. Our Roman Catholic friends across the street do not allow women to be priests, even though I have known many Catholic women who have felt called to the priesthood; indeed, some of my fellow students in seminary were Catholic women who were just as smart or often even smarter than the rest of us but who couldn't look forward to ordination by their church upon graduation. As in the Protestant churches, so too in the Catholic Church: the argument against the ordination of women is always about authority, God's authority. I vividly remember, for instance, driving in my car a few months ago and listening on the radio to a Christian evangelist who was taking questions from listeners who would call in to his program. One caller wanted to know why women couldn't be pastors. Immediately, the evangelist replied: "Because God said so in the

Bible.” Recently, I visited Mariners Church since I wanted to see this highly successful mega-church in our area I had heard so much about. Out of curiosity I sent the pastor an email the next day asking him a few questions about the church. One question I asked was whether Mariners Church would ever appoint a woman to be its pastor. He promptly replied: “No, a woman would never be appointed as the church’s pastor.” Why? Because of what the Bible says about women’s roles in the church.

Here we confront a major division among Christians as to how we are to relate ourselves properly to the Bible. Have those churches that ordain women disobeyed God by setting aside an injunction found in the Bible? Or have these churches been faithful to what God has been doing in our world today by calling women as well as men into the ministry? That’s the crucial question. Some Christians think that God has already said all that God ever intends to say once and for all in the pages of the Bible and there is nothing more to be said. Other Christians think God is still speaking if we would but listen. Indeed, the United Church of Christ has chosen for its motto: “God is still speaking.” It’s not an easy dispute to resolve. On the one hand, if we say that the Bible is the Word of God, aren’t we beholden to every word found within the covers of the Bible? That’s what the opponents of women’s ordination say. On the other hand, don’t we also believe that the Holy Spirit is still alive and at work in the church and in our lives today, speaking to us in ways that may go beyond what is written in the Bible? That’s certainly what my friend Liz thought when she claimed to hear God speaking to her and calling her into the ministry.

Almost all of our controversies in the church about moral issues ultimately come down to controversies about how we interpret the Bible. That's why, as a church, we have to study the Bible with care and be clear in our own minds how to use it properly as we discern how God is leading us as a church. And one of the biggest questions we have to answer is what exactly we mean when we call the Bible "the Word of God."

Christians have always affirmed that, in some sense, the scriptures are inspired by God. They hold a special place in our worship and in our lives as Christians. The Bible is the basis of our preaching and teaching. Yet we also know that the Bible was written by human beings, whose names are often found prominently in the titles of the biblical books: for instance, The Book of Jeremiah or Isaiah or Ezekiel, The Gospel according to Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, the Paul of Paul to the Romans, etc. So, our puzzle has always been how to understand the relation between divine inspiration of the scriptures and its obvious human authorship which the Bible itself never seeks to hide. Note how different this is from what Muslims believe about the Quran: they believe that every word of the Quran was directly recited to Muhammed by God through an angel. The text of the Quran itself is therefore the revelation, God's Word. That's not the same as what we Christians have traditionally believed about our Bible. For us, God's Word has been revealed in a person, Jesus (as John's Gospel says: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," 1:14). For us, the Bible is not the Word of God in the same way that Jesus is the Word of God. For Muslims, however, God's revelation is a book which contains the literal words of God. Yet, for Christians, God's revelation is a person who is the Word of God incarnate, God addressing us and speaking to us through Jesus. The Bible is crucial to us because its words bear witness to Jesus as God's Word made flesh. The Bible is inspired because

it is the bearer of this good news, the gospel. The Bible, as Martin Luther used to say, is like the manger in which the baby Jesus lay. When the three wise men came from the east, they didn't venerate the manger, they venerated the baby Jesus who was lying in the manger. So too is it with us. We don't worship the Bible. Properly understood, the Bible is the Word of God only in a derived or secondary sense because it mediates our encounter with Jesus, who *is* the Word of God itself. When we look at the Bible in this way, we can get a much clearer sense of how to understand the Bible properly. The Bible is inspired because, though it contains the words of human beings, their words bear witness to the Word of God incarnate in Jesus.

If we read the Bible keeping this in mind, knowing that its words were penned by human beings like ourselves, we can avoid the biggest mistake that some of our fellow Christians make when they interpret the Bible as though everything written there was directly dictated by God. This is to view the Bible the way Muslims view the Quran. But Christians who view the Bible in this way end up with a misplaced devotion to the letter of the Bible while missing its main point.

Consider again the issue of slavery that we examined a few weeks ago. Modern Christians who defended slavery as morally acceptable in the sight of God were able to appeal to many verses in the Bible because the biblical writers as ancient people simply took the existence of slavery as an institution for granted. By contrast, the abolitionist Christians opposing slavery as immoral had to defend themselves against the charge that they were abandoning biblical authority and defying God's Word. In this controversy, however, they appealed to the larger themes of the Bible. They pointed to the story of the Exodus and noted there how God heard the anguished cry of the oppressed Hebrew slaves and sent Moses to deliver them from their

bondage. Moreover, they appealed to the New Testament where we are told that “in Christ there is neither slave nor free” (Gal. 3:28). By drawing upon these larger themes from both the Old and New Testaments, the abolitionists concluded that slavery is opposed to God’s will for humanity, despite the fact that there are also many verses in the Bible regulating the relations between masters and slaves.

Just as slavery was a fact of daily life in ancient society for the biblical writers, so too was the subordination of women to men. Nonetheless, they had an inkling that the new community into which they had been called by Jesus was the forerunner of a new humanity in which the old traditional patterns were being overturned or were about to be overturned. Not only did they believe that “in Christ,” that is, in the new community of the church created by Christ, there is neither slave nor free,” but they also affirmed that “in Christ there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28). As one biblical scholar says of this verse, “Baptism into Christ [becoming a member of the church] means that all worldly distinctions become irrelevant.”¹ What this means is this: your status in the world, whatever it is, does not determine your value in the church; in the church there is only one status for everyone: a beloved child of God. Hence, in the church, all are equals.

The proponents of women’s ordination appealed to this verse, as well as to the many other examples where women played a prominent role in the ministry of Jesus, to argue that the church should recognize that God calls women as well as men to become ordained ministers. In reply to those who opposed the ordination of women, they urged their churches to view those

¹ Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, second rev. edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 93.

passages in the New Testament prohibiting women from speaking in church and having authority over men as reflections of an ancient patriarchal culture and not as reflecting the spirit of the gospel. As I said, most churches in the world still do not ordain women as ministers on account of these verses in the New Testament. But I rejoice that I grew up in the Methodist Church that listened to what these women were saying and made the decision to treat women as the equals of men in every respect. I am firmly convinced that the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church as well as the other mainline Protestant churches did the right and faithful thing when it set aside the inherited prohibition against the ordination of women. Even though other churches might denounce us and charge that we have been disobedient to God's Word in the Bible, we can reply in good conscience that it is not being disobedient to God to think through the full implications of what the Bible means by affirming: "in Christ there is neither male nor female." So too, we can reply to these same Christians using the words with which Jesus answered Martha: "You are worried and distracted by many things; but only one thing is really needed" (Luke 10:41-42). And the one thing that is really needed is that we read the very human words of the Bible to point us to the Word of God, who is Jesus Christ.