

***NEITHER MALE NOR FEMALE***  
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University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Galatians 3: 23-28**

**Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified through faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.**

I would like to talk to you today about sexism in the Christian faith. I spoke just a few moments ago with a television reporter about sexism in the Bible. The problem is that one cannot speak about sexism in the Bible without understanding the sexism in the cultures and contexts in which the Bible was written. People who think that we can talk about sexism in the Bible seem to imagine that we need only correct “sexist language” to make the Bible inclusive. If only it were that simple. The problem is that language itself comes out of an historic culture and reflects the values of its people – or at least the people who get to write history.

At the heart of sexism is the objectification of women. They are understood to be objects that are bought, sold, and used for a variety of purposes. In other words sexism holds that women are property. In the commerce of women they may be traded for sexual pleasure, domestic services, or reproduction. When their capacity for these or other uses diminishes not only do women lose their value they become a financial liability.

Such values are woven throughout the Bible and the ancient world that it is a product of. Perhaps one of the most blatant of Biblical examples is found at the very foundation of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Ten Commandments. We read in Exodus 20: 17 the tenth commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

The list of items that one is not to covet is nothing less than a property inventory of descending value. It is something like a ship’s bill of lading. The value of a house

or barn or shop is a man's greatest treasure. The wife is a second piece of valued property, followed by slaves, animals and so on. All of the items in this list are pieces of property.

Such assumptions flow throughout the entire Biblical world. When a man died his property went to his oldest son, not to the wife. In fact, the good mother was totally dependent on the generosity of her children to have a roof over her head and food to eat. There are some pieces of ancient wisdom that recommend a widow throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre and be consumed by the flames rather than suffer the indignity of certain poverty. A woman could not by law divorce her husband. He, on the other hand, could divorce his wife by simply saying, "I divorce you," in the presence of witnesses. There were no documents to sign, property to divide up, and alimony or child support payments to be arranged. The husband retained all of the property.

Up until the last few decades a father walked his daughter down the aisle in the wedding ceremony. At some point the minister would ask, "Who gives this woman to be

married to this man?” Behind that question was the assumption that the bride was property that the father had a right to give away. Most brides still want to be walked down the aisle by their fathers and we struggle to find the words that accompany such an action while eviscerating the assumptions of property.

I mention all of this to stress the point that we simply cannot correct the language of the Bible to make it gender inclusive. We cannot eliminate gender-based pronouns and solve the problem of sexism of the Bible. The “he/she” solution does not satisfy either. It does not work linguistically because many languages are gender specific with regards to nouns and pronouns. In Spanish, for example, grandparents are identified as “abuela” for grandmother, or “abuelo” for grandfather. The language adjustment does not alter the underlying cultural assumptions about the property value and place of women. Language does not make it easy to create an inclusive Bible.

I certainly think that where we can make the language of the Bible inclusive we should try and do so. That work

has been attempted in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with such translations of the Bible as the New Revised Standard Version. But I insist that will never prove to be adequate.

What then is the solution? I believe that the Christian community has no choice but to identify the cultural assumptions and practices revealed in its scripture that are sexist, discriminatory, or violent. We must hold them up to the light of the gospel and expose them for the oppressive practices that they are.

I believe that the teaching of Jesus invites every person to the table of grace and the cup of life. Anything in our scriptures, tradition, theology, or rituals that bars anyone from that table must be excised from our community life. Any religious habit or custom that denigrates, discriminates against, or oppresses another human being from the grace of God must be expunged from the community of faith. It does not matter to me whether we talking about gender, race, gender identity, ethnicity, age, or ability.

Now people might ask by what authority dare we determine that a piece of scripture or Christian doctrine or

ritual is no longer binding in matters of faith? I answer that by saying we do it by the same authority by which the Bible was created in the first place. We can never escape the historical fact that the Bible was written in various and sundry parts in various and sundry times. It was written in the context of faith communities in unique historical circumstances. The scriptures present the witness of men and women of faith as they confronted war, pestilence, freedom, oppression, drought, abundance, national ascendancy and decline. The Bible is a record of their history, stories, lore, poems, prayers, and hymns. Like all writers they brought to their material their biases, hopes, fears, and cultural myths. Furthermore, the Bible was compiled and edited by councils of men in the long process of canonization.

And because the Bible is a human document we, as human beings, are given the responsibility to understand this history and its context. We need no other authority to interpret the Bible for modern minds than the authority of our shared humanity.

Now, you might wonder, why should we exercise our authority to critique the Bible's fundamental sexist assumptions? The answer is quite direct. Sexism and every other form of oppression deny to human beings their rightful place in the promise of God. What St. Paul was writing to the Galatians about was the inheritance of grace. His fundamental argument is that by virtue of baptism all are heirs of promise. There are no distinctions that elevate some and denigrate others. That is what he meant when he said, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ."

Karl Rahner, a German theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, believed that a human being is embodied spirit. That is to say, a human being is capable of radical questioning and free and responsible action destined to an ever-receding horizon. Elizabeth A. Johnson writes, "In other words, when caught in the act of being most personal, human beings

disclose an openness toward infinite mystery as source support, and goal of the operation of their very selves.”<sup>1</sup>

Working off of Rahner’s anthropology, human beings can encounter God at the deepest levels of their being. Self-disclosure is God disclosure. Self-discovery is God discovery. “Writes Rahner, ‘The personal history of the experience of the self is the personal history of the experience of God;’ ‘the personal history of the experience of God signifies, over and above itself, the personal history of the experience of the self.’ Each mutually conditions the other.”<sup>2</sup>

I think that two things are suggested to us here. If women are denied their primordial engagement with the mystery of life their very humanity is stunted. If they are denied their radical capability to question and exercise their freedom of moral agency they are less than fully human. When women are viewed and valued as property they lose their self identity and identity as an expression of God. To

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.



put it another way, if a person's life experience is that of slavery that person's experience of God is also captive. And if Rahner and Johnson are correct God's self-expression and presence in the world is also shackled.

The Christian church claims that in one way or another Jesus is the incarnation of God. This church's covenant professes that we "believe that the Christian faith affords our clearest insight into the nature and will God." Congregational churches live and die by their covenants. Our covenant is only fulfilled when we understand that the nature and will of God is the freedom of the human conscience for self-expression and sacred expression.

Think of it this way. I believe that the Christian Church is faithful to its identity and purpose when it is polyphonic. Polyphony means more than one sound. Instruments that are polyphonic include the organ and the synthesizer. At its most basic level a hymn is polyphonic. It has a line for the melody and a base line. A hymn would sound strange to us if we only sang the base notes. The choir would not be the same if there were only a soprano

section. There would be several songs that I am sure that they could sing well, but the repertoire would be limited. Likewise, a symphony orchestra would not sell many tickets if it only had a brass section or percussion section. We need all of the instruments, all of the choir sections, all of the voices in the congregation if we wish to have the full swell of music.

The Christian faith is richest when it is polyphonic, filled with many voices. We can only have the full expression of faith when there are women and men, children and teenagers, people of color, an abundance of differing gifts and talents, a broad swath of experience, a variety of social and economic representation, and the voice of those on the margins of our society. Yes, I mean all who have ever been oppressed, excluded, and denigrated by their gender, race, gender orientation, and so on.

I dare say our covenant is not yet fulfilled. The Christian faith is not yet fulfilled as long as there sexism, racism, classism, and religious intolerance. I believe it is my calling to fight the good fight of God's justice and a radically

inclusive Christian faith. I believe that is what our covenant means when it declares that in this church “we join one with another to worship and work so that peace, justice, and brotherhood may prevail in this world.”

Now there, you see, we have already hit a snag in our noble purpose. Is there another word we might use that is more inclusive than brotherhood? How about universal fellowship? I don’t know. Perhaps we should work on that. In the mean time perhaps we might adopt James Weldon Johnson’s great poem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” as the theme of our mission and ministry. It is also known as the “Negro National Anthem.” I’ll read just a few verses.

Lift every voice and sing,  
 ‘til earth and heaven ring.  
 Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
 Let our rejoicing rise,  
 High as the listening skies,  
 Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the  
 Dark past has taught us,  
 Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;  
 Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,  
 Let us march on till victory is won.

God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears,  
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who hast by thy might led us into the light  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

The Christian church can only be the church when it is polyphonic. So let us lift **every** voice and sing.

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