

"God Bless the Uppity Women!"

Genesis 1:26-28

1 Timothy 2:11-15

August 12, 2018

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

1st Timothy 2:11-15

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

My growing-up church was a 1st Timothy church. I grew up LCA Lutheran as did some of you, and that was the *least* conservative of the Lutheran options in the 1950s and 1960s. We had male pastors, male deacons, male liturgists, male church council members, and female Sunday School teachers, music leaders, and kitchen workers. Boys were acolytes until the time when not enough boys were in the church, and then, only by default, girls were drafted to fill in.

This is the culture into which I was indoctrinated, and I never questioned it. It just was the natural order of things that was accepted by the faithful churchgoers right along with the teaching that the Bible was the literal word of God and the certainty that we were born as sinners and sinners we would always be.

I accepted these statements. I heard the message that Jesus died because I could be reconciled to God in no other way. I felt haunted by the Holy Ghost, whose purpose was to remind me that I that I needed salvation, that God was watching and judging my every move, and that Jesus expected me to love everyone even though he could not bring himself to accept me as an equal to my brothers in the faith.

Welcome to the 60s in mainstream Protestantism, the Age of Shaming, Fearing of the Angry God, and Religious Practice as knowing your place in the Doctrinal Pecking Order and never, never, questioning *anything* that the minister said from the pulpit, for it was God's Holy

and Ordained Truth. My Catholic friends say they were indoctrinated in similar fashion.

Bitter? You ask, and Nay, I say. It just was. I am grateful to have grown up in the church. Along with all the oppression and exclusion that went on, there were good messages, too, character formation, community, and real gems in the Bible like Jesus telling us to do unto others as you would have done to you and the calming effect of Psalm 23. I loved the stories of the Old Testament about how God spared Isaac from Abraham's knife and how God saved Joseph from the pit and how God parted the Red Sea for Moses. I liked how Jesus stood up to the Pharisees. I loved the Garden of Gethsemane story the best, where Jesus is allowed to get real with God.

During the formative years of my life in church, I never really was invited to read or hear stories about the women of the Bible or of the Christian faith. Women just weren't all that important. Oh, well, I thought, God just didn't invest us with the same value as men.

I said this, but in my heart, I really didn't believe it. And then there was this one day after my grandmother died, and my father and sisters and I were sitting in the small chapel of our church listening to the minister talk about her death and resurrection. My father had given the eulogy, expressing his belief that his mother knew she was going to die on this, her last trip from Colorado to Arkansas.

The minister then said that my father was wrong, that only God knows the hour and day of our passing. He ridiculed and shamed my dad in front of everyone. I was angry and disheartened. I told the minister this after the service. His only response to me was that, "Girls in church should keep their opinions to themselves." When I reminded him that I was a college graduate and I had a voice, he replied, "Women have no business going to college. You should be married and at home having babies." That was the last straw for me among many. I left the church.

This was 1 Timothy theology from a man threatened by women claiming their own empowerment in his neatly-ordered, male-dominated church world. His reaction to me was just like the men who backed Bobby Riggs against Billie Jean King in 1973.

Tonight's film, *Battle of the Sexes*, tells the story of the most watched sporting event of the era in our country, the tennis match between the self-proclaimed "male chauvinist pig" and the best women's pro player of her time. Promotional materials for the match declared it to be the "Lobber vs. the Libber." Riggs taunted King saying, "Are you still a hairy-legged women's libber?" She looked at him and replied, "I'm a tennis player, who happens to be a woman." As an afterthought as she was walking away, she yelled out, "And I shave my legs, too!"

When a powerful tennis promoter refused to offer prize money to women tennis players anywhere near what the men were paid for the

same tournaments, Billie Jean convinced the women to boycott his events. She stood her ground proclaiming, "It's when we dare to want a little bit more, a little bit of what you've got, that's what you can't stand."

During the Riggs-King match, Howard Cosell made a sexist observation while draping his arm paternalistically around the shoulders of his co-commentator Rosie Casals. He said, "You get the feeling that if [Billie Jean] would ever grow her hair out and take off her glasses, someone would be vying for a Hollywood screen test."

Ugh Cosell! I remember watching that match. It took place in the Houston Astrodome, attended by 30,000 people paying upwards of \$100 per seat. Millions more watched it on television. I remember feeling the importance of the event that maybe, for the first time, the time-worn clichés about women being the weaker sex would be put to rest. If only she could beat him!

Most feminist and Civil Rights causes of the day were met with both direct and more veiled threats. They succumbed in fear, but the primary weapon used against women seeking gender equality was ridicule. If you watch the film we are showing tonight, this truth will not be lost on you. The 1973 "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match came just one year after Congress achieved its own landmark: passage of the Title IX Education Amendments of 1972. Some people in powerful

positions were angry over Title IX, seeing it as a threat to male dominance in American society.

Billie Jean's entire public career focused, however, on her stated and unwavering goal, that sports be the conduit for social change. This is part of what she has said about her own story:

I was in college in the '60s. Jimmy Connors and Arthur Ashe, Charlie Pasarell and all these great players—all the men—had scholarships to college and I didn't. And the only reason I didn't was because of my gender.

Title IX mandated that if any government money was going to private or public high schools and colleges, those schools for the first time in their history had to ensure that both genders had equal opportunity. Title IX was succinct:

"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

Those 37 words have had an enormous impact on American society well beyond sports. "What a lot of people don't understand is that Title IX was not just passed for sports," as King pointed out. "In fact," she explained, "women doctors, lawyers, engineers—all of them—would never be where they are today without Title IX."

Females owe many thanks to the Uppity Women of the 20th century, those who fought among other things for the right to vote, to own land and bank accounts in their own name, for Title IX, and for the opportunity to follow what were once male-dominated professional career paths and callings. If society moved at a snail's pace in responding to the demand for gender equalities, Christianity has moved even slower, protecting for centuries traditional male privilege and power in the name of God.

In the second century AD, decades after Paul's death, the author of 1 Timothy, following the custom of the times, borrowed Paul's name and adapted Paul's theology so as to bring an authoritative word to bear on a crisis he saw emerging in the second-century church. Along with 2 Timothy and Titus, these three letters were likely meant to be read together; they form what has been known since the 18th century as the "pastoral letters." These writings were designed to correct behavior viewed as threatening to the internal stability of the young churches. Part of what the early church leaders feared was that women were gaining too much power, upsetting what they saw as the natural order of social relationships.

1 Timothy's author did not appreciate the leadership of women in the church. He seeks to restore ecclesiastical power to the male members of the faith communities. Its language does not identify in any real detail the substantive teachings of women that were so

threatening, leading scholars to conclude that it was a relational imbalance, not a theological one. Many of the author's comments about women amount to little more than name-calling and stereotyping. Women were lumped in with Gnostics, troublemakers seen as destabilizing forces within early Christianity.

In reality, however, writes scholar Eugene Peterson:

"women played a prominent role in the earliest Christian churches, including those associated with the apostle Paul. They served as evangelists, pastors, teachers, and prophets. Some were wealthy and provided financial support for the apostle; others served as patrons for entire churches, allowing congregations to meet in their homes and supplying them with the resources necessary for their gatherings. Why, then, do most people today think that all of the early Christian leaders were men?"

This thinking pervaded Christianity and has been sustained up through this very day in some of the most prominent, well-known practices of the Christian faith. It is amazing to me that women—that I—am not allowed to preach, hold positions of authority, read the Gospel, or serve the host in the vast majority of churches. Even in traditions such as ours, the United church of Christ, there are individual congregations that will not entertain the possibility of a female pastor. We can operate on your heart, sentence you in court to the death penalty, serve as President of the United States of America, fly to the moon on a rocket ship, balance your budget, manage your

portfolio or be president of a bank or major corporation, but in many places, we women still cannot preach the word of God or publicly declare the Gospel.

This church has not followed the norm, and I appreciate that. You have before me had female pastoral leadership, even when the congregation was more conservative than progressive. The UCC and its predecessor traditions have been one of the most, if not the most welcoming to women in professional ministry.

Antoinette Brown in 1853 was the first woman since New Testament times ordained in the US as a Christian minister, and perhaps the first woman in history elected to serve a Christian congregation as pastor. At her ordination a friend, Methodist minister Luther Lee, defended "a woman's right to preach the Gospel." He quoted Paul's writing in his letter to the Galatians: "There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Today there are only 11.4% of congregations in the United States with a female pastor, but over 40,000 ordained women in ministry.

Trailblazers like Billie Jean King realized that their witness would inspire change along a continuum and not just in the limited area that was their focus. As in her context—professional sports—there is a long way to go in Christianity until gender equality is realized. It's not just men that need convincing. One need only Google on-line

discussions on the subject to find they are regularly populated by women expressing this theology.

I personally like how Billie Jean frames her vision for an egalitarian future. She writes: "Every human being is a natural resource. If we ever get the gender card right, we're going to get a lot of other things right." All people have gifts to share in furthering the kin-dom of God. Not just men. Not just women. All people.

May It Be So.