

Woman, You Are Set Free
August 29, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 13:10-17

From last week's business news: Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, filed an appeal to stop a class action suit brought by one million women who worked for the company. The suit claims that men are paid more for the same job and get promoted faster than women.

In news from Congress, the International Violence Against Women Act continues to await action in the House of Representatives. The bill's supporters – including the Presbyterian Church USA – report that 1 out of every 3 women worldwide has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime, increasing her exposure to HIV/AIDS. Violence against women worldwide is nothing short of a “pandemic,” the bill's supporters say.

On the international front, in second-world economies such as those in Antigua, Guatemala and Zambia, Africa, too many men turn to drink or other distractions to forget their inability to provide for the family. But all this seems to accomplish is that their equally poor wives, daughters and mothers are left with virtually all of the responsibilities of the family, including scratching out a livelihood through crafts and cottage micro-businesses.

And in local news, an average of 1,200 women in Charlotte remain homeless every night, exceeding the capacity of local shelters and forcing dozens of women to fend for themselves on the street.

For too long, in too many places and in too many circumstances, women have been second-class citizens in this world. Actually, in many places, second-class citizen would be a promotion.

For too long, women have walked this world stooped over, laden with the burdens of violence, discrimination, cultural biases and bigotry and economic disadvantage. They have been prohibited from standing up straight, from holding their heads high, from setting their sights on far horizons because society puts limits on their possibilities. So, their eyes are cast downward and all they can see is their feet and the patch of dirt where they stand.

That was, quite literally, the case with the woman who walked into the synagogue one day when Jesus was teaching there. She appeared with a “weak spirit,” the text says. Perhaps she had what we know today as osteoporosis, the bone condition that causes a person to stoop in old age, women far more than men. Or perhaps her spirit truly was weak, so weak she felt she could not hold her head up and look other people in the eye.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that she simply appeared. Maybe she came to pray. She didn’t ask anyone to pay attention to her, much less the great teacher who was attracting so much attention with his views that seemed to bother the religious officials far more than the people.

“When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood straight and began praising God.” (v.12-13)

The leader of the synagogue, on the other hand, was irate. “There are six other days of the week when you could heal this woman,” he said to Jesus. “How dare you do it today, the Sabbath, a day of rest and complete devotion to worship.”

“Let me get this straight,” Jesus said back to the leader of the synagogue. “You untied your donkey and led it to water before you came to worship today, but you don’t think we should do even that much for another human being, much less a woman in such suffering?”

The synagogue leader fell silent. This time, it was his turn to hand *his* head and look down at his feet. The woman, now standing up straight, continued to praise God, and the people who were there smiled at the common sense justice and compassion they heard in Jesus’ faith.

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The gospels give us any number of several stories of how Jesus reinterprets the Sabbath, providing no small amount of irritation to the religious officials who had a vested interest in the status quo. Twice before in Luke Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. He had said he came to release the captives. He’d also said his actions would cause trouble and division.

Jesus’ last visit to a synagogue in Luke is this story of the stooped woman. It raises a variety of issues and questions worth considering, such as:

What is right and proper on the Sabbath? In particular, how should we think about the broader idea of Sabbath and rest in this global, wired, ever-demanding, never-sleeping, 24/7/365 culture?

What role does worship play in our lives? Is worship about us? Or God? And who does worship belong to – if anyone - the church and its sanctioned leaders or the people?

All of those are excellent questions that could be explored through today's text. Some we should come back to. But, above all, this text and its poignant emphasis on the Sabbath healing of this woman with a weak spirit and a stooped back calls us to focus on the role of women in scripture. It also represents Jesus' particularly scandalous ministry with women, which, all by itself, was enough to incite the ire and the persecution of both the government and the religious officials of the day.

Jesus' ministry to and with women would've been viewed as revolutionary. Women in first-century Palestine played very limited roles, after all. But women play prominent and highly non-traditional roles throughout the gospels.

It started with Mary, unmarried yet pregnant, standing courageously by Christ's side until the end. Her song of praise set a standard for all who worship. Women followed Jesus throughout his ministry. His close friends included the sisters Mary and Martha from the village of Bethany. Mary Magdalene was as present a witness to Jesus' ministry as any disciple. She, Joanna and Susanna supported Jesus out of their own resources.

Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, the daughter of Jairus, the woman with the flow of blood and the daughter of the Syrophenician woman. He spoke hard truth that provided spiritual healing for the woman at the well. He defended the widow's mite.

Some have gone as far as calling Christ a feminist, but that is to apply a term of one era to a vastly different culture and set of circumstances. What can be said with confidence is that Christ sought the company and the counsel of women and included them in almost all aspects of his ministry. No wonder, perhaps, that the risen Jesus appeared to women first.

Then, in the earliest days of the church, women played large and active parts in leading the first steps of the body of Christ. In Acts, Lydia, Paul's first European convert, did more than just serve refreshments and sit at the male apostles' feet. She began her own house church, which required not just resources but courage. In Romans, we read that Paul considered Phoebe a colleague in ministry. Some translations even call her a

deacon. Elsewhere in Romans, Paul gives thanks for Prisca, who risked her neck to protect Paul.

Paul seemed to reflect all of this in his letter to the church at Galatia, when he wrote: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

With this record of facts, as Peter Gomes writes in his widely published work, The Good Book: “The issue of women in the churches would *seem* to have been settled a long time ago.”¹ (*My emphasis.*)

But somewhere we got off track. The centuries that followed, influenced by male theologians, church officials and scholars, presented a very different picture of the role women were to play in the church and in society. That has changed in the last few decades, in particular as women emerged as leading scholars and historians who bring fresh new and needed perspective.

In the church, the Presbyterian Church at least, women today play many, if not most, of the top ecclesiastical roles. Our newly elected moderator is a woman, an elder from Washington, DC. Decades ago, tens of thousands left the Presbyterian Church over its decision to ordain women. But the PCUSA has stayed the course, even if we were not on the leading edge of prophetic witness on some other issues.

I must confess a bias. It wasn't that long after the decision to ordain women that my home church in Atlanta made my mother its first female clerk of the session, a top position of lay leadership. Another church might have used my parents' divorce as a reason not just to avoid ordaining her, but as a reason to run her out of the church altogether. Thanks be to God the Presbyterian Church did not. Instead, it affirmed her as a leader.

Across society, however, there is much more rebalancing of the genders still to be done to return us to how Jesus must have seen and valued women, including the stooped women he encountered in the synagogue.

When Jesus berated the synagogue leader for his hypocrisy, he called her “a daughter of Abraham.” That is no small thing. It was not unusual for one man to call another “a son of Abraham” as an expression of honor and respect. When Jesus called the women

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“a daughter of Abraham,” the only time such a phrase appears in all of scripture, surely he meant to elevate her to a new status.²

That work continues, that is, the work of elevating women worldwide to their deserved status, which should be nothing less than shoulder to shoulder with men in every realm of society. That work remains unfinished in too many places, in too many circumstances.

Thanks be to God for the ministries this congregation extends to women of all ages, from Guatemala to Room in the Inn, from Merry Oaks school to the Caldwell Bilingual Preschool, which opens again this week.

Most recently, God has presented us with the opportunity to provide shelter and hospitality to the many homeless women who are now turned away because the Salvation Army Center of Hope is full. May God continue to guide our efforts to be their host and may God inspire our community to raise not just the funds needed to run an overflow shelter but to provide the funds and the wisdom to build a systemic solution to the problems of homelessness and affordable housing.

In the Confession of 1967, one of our denomination’s more modern creeds, we are invited to say these words:

With an urgency born of (its) hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God. (9.55)

What those words mean, I think, is this: Even though the kingdom of God has broken through and come into this world in and through Christ, it is not fully here. Look no further than the status of women around the world, from Antigua, Guatemala to Africa to Afghanistan and all the way back to the streets of Charlotte. Surely the status of women today is far short of the standard Christ set and the prayers Christ continues to pray for all women.

As the confession states, we’ve achieved only limited progress. We have much work still to do. And, as the body of Christ, that work rests in our hands, among others. It is the work to help women in all manner of oppressive circumstances throw off their

² As asserted by Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, Daughters of the Church, p. 31

burden, stand up straight and set their sights on far horizons, that they might praise God and lift their faces to heaven.

Amen