Women Ordained

Galatians 3:23-29; Acts 2:16-18; Kimby Young

1 Corinthians 14:34-36; 1 Timothy 2:8-15 July 21, 2024

Today’s topic – the leadership role of women in the church – is obviously a very personal one for me. As I am blessed to be an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian church for 37 years, you also obviously know where I stand and what I believe. I believe God calls men and women, people of all kinds and varied talents to work in the church in a variety of ways, and to lead or teach in the church if those gifts are obvious and affirmed by others.

Again, this is a very personal topic for me. It surprises me that people think women should not preach or serve in leadership in the church. They think I am wrong – that I have not heard God’s call correctly. Let me be perfectly clear. I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that God has called me, equipped me, used me and blessed me as a pastor and leader in the true church of Jesus Christ. My call is clear and always has been. What shocks me, is that someone who doesn’t know me, presumes to doubt my relationship with God and my understanding of call, or to doubt my faithfulness and honor for God’s word in scripture. I know I am called to be a pastor. I know God loves me. I know God blesses my work and ministry. I know. God and I are good. I am certain.

Normally if someone doubts my call or my faithfulness, or your church in its rightness in calling a woman pastor – normally I just say, “agree to disagree” and walk away. In fact I have been doing that for the 8 years I have been here in Gardner. But I realize that some of you are being confronted and challenged, and I decided to preach this sermon series to affirm our decisions and our understanding of God. To explain why we do what we do – that we are being completely faithful, absolutely Biblical, and that we firmly believe God calls men and women of great variety to preach, teach and serve in our church, to witness to Jesus Christ, and to share God’s love in all inclusive ways.

I do understand what is happening though, why some people doubt that women should preach or teach men. As I said for the last two weeks, People understand the Bible in many different ways. The scripture for today from Timothy and Corinthians are the reason why some people don’t think women should preach. Historically some people have pulled those two verses out of context to support prohibiting women in ministry. At the same time they have ignored the other two scripture passages from today about God’s full inclusion of women in prophecy and inspiration. They have ignored or they have had to explain away the countless Biblical stories of women in leadership called by God – from Miriam and Deborah in the Old Testament to Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, Joanna, Chloe, Susanna, Lydia, Eunice, Anna and several of the Marys in the New Testament. In fact the very first witnesses to the resurrection were the women at the tomb. They ran to the disciples and told the Good News. Perhaps some say that wasn’t preaching, but it was certainly sharing their experience of Jesus Christ to a group that included men.

What do you do when two passages of scripture seem to conflict? And it happens far more often than you would think. Because as I have said all month – scripture was written by and to certain people at a certain time in a certain place for a certain purpose. All scripture is not equal. Numbers chapter 1 verse 34 does not have the same importance as John 3:16. We know that because of the context and the content. So again, how do you hear God’s Word when two passages seem to conflict? As I have said before, you measure everything by Jesus, and by the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus is first. The rule of love is the measure.

By sheer volume the number of scriptural witnesses to women leading in faith far out number the two verses and only two verses that prohibit it. So why do some people continue to limit the role of women in leadership in the church? – Because history and tradition outweigh the actual scripture. In other words, because we’ve always done it that way. We fear change, so we don’t always hear everything God says in scripture. We are not always open to God’s new inspiration.

I know here, you agree with me – or you wouldn’t be here. The Presbyterian Church has been ordaining women as elders, deacons and ministers since 1956. The Methodists, Pentecostals, Quakers, and even some Baptists had women preachers in the 1800s. There are women in ministry in the church of Jesus Christ as far back as the Middle Ages. But lately some churches have called that practice into question and have made it an issue again. They claim to be standing on scriptural reasons. But as I have said, they are relying on two verses. Let’s look at those two verses and how we can understand them.

The letters in today’s scripture – Timothy and Corinthians – were written by Paul to specific situations in specific congregations. Unfortunately we don’t have the other side of the story – the letters **to** Paul about what was happening. So we have to speculate what Paul was talking about. It is believed that in both situations there was some kind of conflict in the local church. Paul was writing in answer to his friend Timothy and to the leaders of the church in Corinth, also his friends, to give his advice about what to do in that situation. It is not believed that Paul was setting down rules for every church of every time. If these were absolute prohibitions, why did Paul not mention them in his letter to the Romans, the Colossians, the Philippians, the Ephesians, or any of his other writings. Because for Timothy and for Corinth Paul was writing about a specific problem situation. It is believed that a group of women were being disruptive, manipulative and destructive for those local churches. We don’t know the issue. It’s not explained. But for some reason they were interrupting worship and meetings and causing discord. Now I can’t imagine anyone in the church being selfish and self serving – but apparently it was happening there. Paul’s advice was to tell them to be quiet, to try to get those women under control, to try to help them to grow and be less selfish. Paul’s advice to Timothy was about how to keep order and how to be organized in the church. In both cases it was about respect and restraint and care for others. It is believed this advice was only intended for these situations in conflict. But these verses have been taken out of context to apply universally to the leadership of all women in all churches. Since none of us were there, we all have to listen for God’s meaning and purpose. Obviously, different people and churches have come to different conclusions.

For me, it is about respect, love, honoring each other. It is about serving God and listening for God’s will, not only way back then, but right here and now. How today, are we called to love one another and to witness to God’s grace in the world? How are we called to use our gifts and share God’s love? Yes, how are we to keep order in the church and in our families? How are we to deal with conflict and anger? The answer is to listen to God, to respect everyone involved, to listen to each other without judgment and with civility. We must love one another, especially in difficult circumstances, especially when we disagree. That’s really hard to do sometimes. I recognize that. But that is God’s call. Love one another. Love even your enemies or those who choose to attack you. Love one another. Act with respect, honor, care. Listen to God and try to do your best.

Admittedly, this whole sermon has been a bit defensive – in defense of something I believe, in defense of myself, in defense of the Presbyterian church and other denominations like us. And admittedly there are some who will vehemently disagree. Unfortunately, we may just have to agree to disagree. That is really hard to do when it is something you care passionately about – God, faith, church, family. It is hard to “agree to disagree” when someone seems to be attacking or threatening you or something you care about. Trying to see it from the other side – perhaps some people feel threatened by me, their values seem threatened by my ministry. That is not my intent. Fear, destruction, discord are not my intent. My intent is to serve God fully and faithfully.

But beyond just me, I want to affirm every woman and man, every boy and girl. I want each of you to listen to God’s call - because God does call you – each of you and all of you. I want you to feel God’s Spirit moving you to action. I want all of us to be encouraged and to know, not only that you are loved, but that you are called by God to love others. We Christians are crazy human people. We may never all agree about what it means to serve God and how we are called to do that. So we must just focus on what we can do. Focus on God. Focus on grace. Love God. Love others. Leave the rest for God. By the grace of God. Amen.

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Galatians 3:23-29

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 by 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Acts 2:16-18

No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit;

and they shall prophesy.

1 Timothy 2:8-14

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 in moderate clothing with reverence and self-control, 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 do not permit a 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 self-control.

1 Corinthians 14:34-36

Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is something they want to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.