

“We Belong to God (All of Us)”
A Brief Statement of Faith
What We Believe—The Book of Confessions

1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and Luke 24:1-11

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Sunday, May 14, 2017

You just heard one of the Bible readings that have been used over history by some people to justify male control—in the church and in the home. The Bible says it: women should be silent in church, and at home they should ask their husbands.

For a long time, Presbyterians believed this. In our *Book of Confessions*, there are 12 statements of faith that help us understand who we are and how we are to live as Christians. Two of them—the Scots Confession and the Second Helvetic Confession—explicitly proclaim that women should not preach or baptize. They are almost 450 years old, but they are part of our Constitution.

But here at Covenant and in thousands of other Presbyterian churches, women are preaching and baptizing and offering communion.

We don’t do this because we’re heretics or trouble-makers. We do it because we believe that God continues to show us new things and that we don’t have it all figured out yet.

Our second reading is a good reading for the season of Easter—to remind us of the Good News of God’s love, that sin is forgiven and death is not the final word. The reading also reminds us that doubt is part of the Christian journey. And it is a good reading to remind us of the surprisingly prominent role that women had in the ministry of Jesus. Listen for God’s word:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture. Amen.

An idle tale. The phrase “idle tale” comes from the Greek word *leiros*, and this is the only time it appears in the Bible. My thesis advisor Anna Carter Florence says *leiros* could be translated as nonsense, baloney, or something a little stronger, not appropriate for church.

The male disciples didn’t believe this baloney, this “idle tale” that the women heard at the empty tomb. Did they not believe because the message was surprising, or because it was shared by women? The text doesn’t say.

Sadly through much of the history of the Christianity, women have not been believed, respected, or seen as equal, but instead been treated as second-class citizens. And when the church has assented to the idea that women are second-class citizens, this carries into the world, sometimes in hurtful ways.

I remember several years ago, driving at night and listening to a conservative Christian talk radio show—the sort of show where the listeners hear that the man is the head of household, because the Bible says so.

On this particular night, a woman called in and very timidly shared with the two co-hosts that her husband was being abusive—emotionally and physically. It sounded like it had been going on for a while and was quite serious.

I was hoping the hosts would encourage her to go to a domestic violence shelter and get help and even call the police. But instead, one of the hosts, responded to the caller saying something like: “What do you think you are doing that is making him respond like that?”

I was stunned and found myself gripping the steering wheel in anger. If I had had a cell phone, I probably would have called.

For too long, a few select verses of the Bible have been used as a tool to justify oppression of women.

I’m glad to be part of the Presbyterian Church, where we are learning—slowly but steadily—about God’s love for all people. Women and men. Black, white, and every other color. Gay and straight and transgender.

In 1983, the northern and southern branches of the Presbyterian Church reunited, after splitting in 1844 over the issue of slavery. (It only took 139 years for us to reconcile.....)

This new Presbyterian church needed to clarify its identity. After many drafts and revisions and much prayer, “A Brief Statement of Faith” was approved in 1991 for inclusion on our Book of Confessions. You’ve hopefully already seen some of it in the bulletin for today. And you can read it in your hymnbooks, on page 37, with the Spanish and Korean versions just a few pages later.

This statement affirmed many long held Christian beliefs, while also breaking some new ground in boldly affirming gender equality.

Early in the BSF we read:

*In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God’s image, male and female,
of every race and people, to live as one community.*

Later we read:

*In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah
chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth.*

There’s a fun old Sunday School song about father Abraham, singing about all his sons. But he wouldn’t have had too many sons or daughters without Sarah.

And then toward the end of the statement we read:

The Spirit...calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.

So “A Brief Statement of Faith” makes a clear statement about women in contrast to previous church teaching. How did we get to the point of making this proclamation, which stands against centuries of Christian understanding?

I can think of two main reasons.

First is how we read the Bible.

As Presbyterians, we listen for the *full* message of Scripture, not just a few verses. We've learned more deeply about God's love for all people, as we especially see in the life and ministry of Jesus.

He made a point of including those who were excluded, remembering those who were forgotten, welcoming those who were shunned—the poor, the sick, the foreigners, the children, and yes, the women.

We don't read the Scriptures literally, but we recognize that the texts are God-inspired, but written by humans in particular times and places.

In other words, we don't worship the Bible, but we worship God who is known in the Bible. And the over-riding message of Scripture is about God's love for the world and God's call for us to love one another. If you are interpreting the Bible in such a way that doesn't bring love, then something is missing.

This week in our CONNECTIONS email, I wrote about the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is a profoundly disturbing but vitally important novel about a theocratic government that has taken over what was the United States. Environmental catastrophe and warfare have brought out the worst in people and in this new society, women let's just say, are not treated well.

The main character remembers the days before the theocracy and she apparently was involved in a church. Early in the novel she reflects on her current situation:

The Bible is kept locked up.... It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?

--Offred, in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Bible has a message of God's radical love for all people.

Perhaps the best known Bible verse is: "For God so loved the world...." God loves the world, the whole world.

The other reason we have been able to change our understanding is because of the essential message of the Reformation tradition.

*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda
secundum verbum Dei,*

“The church reformed, always to be reformed
according to the Word of God”

An essential part of our Presbyterian identity is to continually be reforming, to be growing, to be learning new things

Back in the early 1600s, a Pilgrim pastor named John Robinson proclaimed that “God hath yet more light to shed on his word.”

Even then, at least one Christian recognized that we don’t know all the answers. That God is not finished with us yet.

What is it that haven’t we learned yet...

I’ve been reading a lot of scientists are suggesting that we expand our understanding of gender from a simply binary to something more fluid. We’re going to be hearing more about this in coming years.

I’m grateful that we’ve learned that it’s not just rich white male landowners are the only valued members of society. We’ve come a long way.... But we’re not there yet.

So “A Brief Statement of Faith” opens with the wonderful affirmation:

“In life and in death, we belong to God.”

The rest of the statement affirms this, and helps us understand that belonging to God is both a gift and a responsibility. A gift we need to welcome, and a responsibility to make sure everyone knows the love of God.

So if you're here today and you feel like in some way you don't belong, or if someone is making you feel less than a beloved child of God

Because of your gender, your race, your sexual orientation, your political orientation

Or because of your family or your job or your appearance or whatever,

Then I hope you will take the message of the BSF to heart. More than that, take the Good News of Easter to heart: God loves us and God is offering us new life, a life of love.

