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## Part 2: Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism

### **“Uppity Women Unite”**

Two weeks ago I began a sermon series that I’m going to carry through the summer titled “Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism”.

I hope you’ll learn something in this series about how we read the Bible as Presbyterians, and I hope you’ll allow yourself to ask questions and grow and struggle as we cover some difficult topics like why there’s so much violence in the Bible, or why there are so many different portrayals of Jesus in the Bible. And as we address contemporary issues like the intersection of science and religion, our topic two weeks ago – or the role of women . . . our topic for today, I hope you’ll gain a better understanding of how scripture speaks to current events.

Now some of you may be surprised that in 2021 the role of women in the church would even be an issue. But I can tell you that the role of women in the church is alive and well and it’s in large part because of what the Bible says about women. Because let’s be honest, the Bible isn’t kind to women.

In short, women were the property of men. Socially and politically, there was no acceptable category for a Biblical woman who was not married and procreating – some women might argue that’s still true today, by the way. And in some places in the Bible, if a woman didn’t have children and her husband died, it was up to her husband’s brother to procreate with her. She simply didn’t have a choice in the matter since her body belonged to her husband.

And since we’re on the subject of marriage, let’s talk briefly about marriage in the Bible. Biblical marriage was not based on mutual love and respect. A man could purchase a woman from her father, daughters were sometimes given as rewards for succeeding in battle (see Joshua 15:16), and polygamy was practiced by several of the patriarchs. Jacob had 12 sons who make up the 12 tribes of Israel, but they don’t all have the same mother. Jacob had four women making those babies: two were his wives and two were his slaves. Abraham, also, had children by his wife Sarah and his slave Hagar.

And while we're on the subject of Sarah and Abraham, the great patriarch and matriarch of the Bible, let's not fail to note that most of the references about Sarah are in light of Sarah having children, or not being able to have children, or going along with Abraham's plans. In other words, even when we talk about Sarah, the matriarch, it's always in light of the fact that she was Abraham's wife.

So, we can read all these stories (and more) that tell us that men were more important than women and chalk it up to reflecting the time in which the Bible was written. And we can even joke about the way women were property and their value was only in how many children they can produce, but the problem is that many of these ideas are still at work today, even among "enlightened" societies. And these ideas spill over into society outside the church. I mean, how far have we really come?

My former church, for example, used to host a number of weddings, and it was not uncommon for the church to get a request from a non-member to hold a wedding there and want to bring their own minister because they didn't want a woman officiating at their ceremony. Some couples would even say this openly to me. Just two weeks ago I got questioned at a hospital when trying to visit a member, even when I had my nametag on and they allow ministers at any time to see a patient! And I'll be honest that every once in a while when someone says something to me or expects something from me, I sometimes wonder if the same thing would be said to or expected from a male minister. I think any woman in any workforce has wondered that at times.

Among major Christian denominations in the US, 9 allow for the ordination of women and 7 do not. In 1906 the northern branch of the PC(USA) approved the ordination of women as deacons, in 1930 as elders, and in 1956 as ministers. The southern church approved the ordination of all 3 in 1964. That wasn't that long ago. I know one woman who was told by her pastor (a man), while being driven by that pastor to her exam for her ordination as a minister, that he didn't think she should be ordained.

In 2012, so just 9 years ago, there were just over 10,000 churches in the PC(USA). Only 12% had a woman serving as an installed solo pastor, head of staff, or co-pastor. Of the roughly 1200 churches being served by women, nearly 2/3 of them were under 150 members. Would you like to guess how many churches over 800

members were being served by a woman head of staff just 9 years ago? 17. That's ½ percent of churches over 800 members are served by women heads of staff. In the church, we call this the stained-glass ceiling, and it's alive and well. More women are serving in part-time positions than men (and I know from talking with colleagues this isn't always b/c they want to stay home to also be with their children, sometimes that's the only job they could get), and there are more single female ministers than single male ministers, but similar proportions have children living at home – i.e., more single female ministers than male ministers are the primary caregiver for their children, a dynamic that certainly affects a congregation.

So those are the hard core, bleak stats on women in ministry in the PC(USA).

I'd like to tell you I'm surprised by them, but when you consider the role of women in the Bible, and the fact that women's ordination was denied up until 65 years ago because of what the Bible says about women, it really doesn't come as a shock.

Which leads me to our story for today, about the hemorrhaging woman, and Jairus's sick daughter. Because Jesus' response to both of them would have been a shock.

When Jairus meets Jesus, he is desperate. Frantic. Begg. "Please, come and lay your hands on my little girl so that she may live," Jairus says. And Jesus goes. Notice that Jairus approaches Jesus from the front, confident of his role and place in society. Notice, too, that Jairus has a name.

But no sooner does Jesus start to go with Jairus than a woman approaches him quietly and unobtrusively. Mark says that she has endured much under many physicians. In other words, doctors keep taking her money for unsuccessful remedies. She lives on a roller coaster of renewed hope and crushing disappointment as the specialists keep writing new prescriptions. Notice the woman is never given a name, and remains hidden, and approaches Jesus from behind – a reflection of her worth in society.

The Jewish Talmud describes eleven different cures for this woman's disease. Some were tonics. Others were superstitious remedies. One was to

drink a goblet of wine containing a powder compounded from rubber, alum, and garden crocuses. Another was to carry the ashes of an ostrich egg in a linen bag throughout the summer. But even with these creative remedies, she didn't get better. With the doctors' help she got worse.

From the Jewish point of view, no disease could have been more humiliating than a constant menstrual flow. According to Leviticus this woman is permanently unclean. Not only is she disqualified from worshipping in the temple, but everyone with whom she comes in contact is unclean. She is as untouchable as a leper, but she is desperate.

So desperate, that in a last ditch effort to be healed she reaches out to touch Jesus. And miraculously, she is healed. But notice what has just happened—it's so subtle that many readers miss it: when the unclean woman reached out to touch Jesus, she made him unclean. Simply by virtue of touching him, Jesus is now as unclean as the woman.

Now, at this point the law is clear that Jesus needs to stop everything he's doing, wash his clothes, and not go anywhere until sundown. But what does Jesus do? He proceeds on to Jairus' house.

Do you see what is happening here? Jesus' religion tells him he should stop what he's doing and go and bathe. But Jesus' heart is telling him he needs to move on to Jairus' house and help that little girl. In this story religion could have gotten in the way of healing someone.

And unfortunately, religion still gets in the way of healing – of healing society from the ill of sexism.

Back in 1961, JB Phillips wrote a book titled "Your God Is Too Small". Phillips message was on target for his context and ours. Phillips says that we adults too often worship a concept of God we learned as children in Sunday School. Some worship a god just a little larger than their own projected image--a magnification of their own good qualities, their own worship, and their own boundaries.

The problem with this thinking is that we begin to think that our image of God is the only image or the best image. And we all do it. Liberals, evangelicals, conservatives, biblical literalists, fundamentalists-all of us-tend to assume we have the inside track on understanding God, and therefore we all run the risk of reducing God to a size that fits comfortably into our lives and beliefs.

The religious leaders at Jairus' house had reduced God to a manageable size: "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" They asked. The doctors who tried to cure the bleeding woman had reduced God to a manageable size. But along comes Jesus to once again break down the stereotypes, and misconceptions that are so prevalent.

"Do not fear. Only believe," Jesus tells the people gathered around the little girl's bed. And then Jesus whispers in her ear: TALitha koom, little girl stand up.

It's impossible to read this without getting the sense that Jesus really wants us to take God out of the sexist box we've constructed, because Jesus knows that God is far too big to be contained in any box. In fact most times God's ability to treat everyone as equals far surpasses our ability to do the same.

Friends, just like Jesus commanded the dying girl to stand up, Jesus commands all of us to stand up; to stand up to old prejudices, to exclusionary practices, and to sexism, and to say enough.

TALitha koom, little girl stand up. And so she does. And so can you and so can I. Amen.

Sources:

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