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10:30 a.m.



#EveToo

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Text: Matthew 5:17-20, 27-30

Sitting in a musty church basement with a freshly scrubbed face, my best dress on, patent leather shoes shined with Vaseline, I waited eagerly for the Bible story. A masterful storyteller, this Sunday School teacher brought the images to life. But something went terribly wrong in the telling of this story about the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. First of all, I had seen plenty of live births (kittens, puppies and lambs), and females gave birth, not males, and not from a ribcage! Secondly, I had seen my grandmother chop a snake into a million pieces when it scared her in the garden. There's no way any woman I knew would be communicating with a serpent. Finally, I had never seen my mom succeed at making my dad eat anything, particularly fruits and vegetables. All the blaming did not ring true for me until I was elbowed by the boy sitting beside me, who hissed, "You see, girls are the problem!" I left the Sunday School class with hurt feelings, confused.

We do have a problem when one of our stories of origin perpetuates the subjugation of women. The story of Eve in the book of Genesis has had a profoundly negative impact on women. For at least 2,000 years, this story has been interpreted by patriarchal and misogynist biblical scholars and theologians. Early Christian writers depicted Eve as subordinate and inferior to Adam. Because she was created after and from him, Eve is characterized as weak, seductive and evil, the cause of Adam's disobedience. Until quite recently the traditional interpretation of this account in Genesis went virtually unchallenged. In the 1970s, Phyllis Trible of Union Theological Seminary argued that the problem with the Eve story was not the text itself but the centuries of accrued sexist context that had grown up around it. Freed from that context, she believes, the story has a liberating essence for women.

According to Trible, none of the traditional patriarchal claims are altogether accurate, most are simply not present in the text and some actually violate the rhetoric of the biblical account. For example, patriarchal interpreters claim that the woman is inferior because she is created last (Genesis 2:22). But these same interpreters never argue that humans are inferior to animals because the animals were created first (Genesis 1:27). On the contrary, they regard the final creative act in Genesis 1, the creation of man, as the pinnacle of Creation. If this later-is-better principle were applied consistently, the creation of the woman in Genesis 2 would be seen as the crowning achievement.

But instead, Eve is blamed for bringing hardship at the very least and evil at the very worst into the world. The words about the difficulties of giving birth and the hardships of life were taken as prescriptions for the way things should be, as opposed to a the description of their reality. From this Genesis story, man's experience became the normative. Women are viewed as unworthy of having meaningful or purposeful experiences due to the simple fact that they are not men. Not only are their experiences trivialized, but their physical bodies have been used and abused.

I imagine that almost every woman here can remember the first time she heard that she was not allowed to do something because she was a girl. Every woman here can tell you a story of being verbally demeaned. If statistics are correct, one in three or one in five of the women in this room have been sexually harassed or assaulted.

None of this may have been the intention of those early storytellers, but this is what has been perpetuated. After hundreds of years of understanding the Bible exclusively through the male experience, women become accustomed to the idea that they are, indeed, inferior to men. Feminist theologians have tried to redeem these texts by looking at the biblical message in totality and bringing a hermeneutic of suspicion, which asks whether the texts really mean what they say. You may be thinking the story of Adam and Eve is just a myth—no one takes the Bible seriously anymore. And yet, this myth is deeply embedded in our cultural psyche. Any person who works in ministry or at a women’s shelter will tell you that the reason women do not seek help is often based on a biblical notion.

Taking this further, it is perplexing to me why our culture—our Christian churches in particular—perpetuates the ideology of the misogynist biblical texts rather than the teachings of Jesus. There are so many examples of Jesus breaking the cultural and societal norms of his day to speak with women. Remember the story of the Syrophenician woman who challenged Jesus about his exclusion of people outside of Judaism, and she changed his mind? Think of that! A woman changed the mind and heart of Jesus to widen his ministry and be more inclusive! What if that were the story that inspired us?

If you look at the text from Matthew, the teaching would have us think that not just our actions but our thoughts—all those negative, judging, lustful, gossipy thoughts—are to be let go. They are not to be nourished through our addictions to social media, pornography or the myriads of ways we entertain ourselves. What if during this Lenten season, we make Jesus the lens through which we reread power and social and sexual relations? What if we really started managing our thoughts and actions in ways that Jesus and the visionary and revolutionary women around him modeled?

In a recent TED talk, Jackson Katz, who teaches about sexual violence, said, “Harassment and violence against women are *intrinsically men’s issues*. We talk about how many women were raped last year, not about how many men raped women. We talk about how many girls in a school district were harassed last year, not about how many boys harassed girls. . . . We say that Mary is a battered woman, not that John hit Mary. . . . We have to ask a different set of questions.” (Source: https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue)

This is where it gets tricky for me, as a woman, to speak to the men here. If I am too directive, I fear being accused of being a harpy. Frankly, I’m not interested in making men feel worse than you may already feel. I know that men suffer from misogyny, too. The subjugation of any of us hurts all of us. I know ever since the #MeToo movement’s resurgence in December, some of you have timidly or jokingly asked if it is all right to give me a hug. I know you want to do the right thing. In the same way that gay folks need straight allies and African Americans need informed or “woke” white allies, women need men to join the fight against discrimination and work for equality.

Can we count on you to step in when you see harassment happen or at the very least call out sexist male behavior in locker rooms, at work and at sporting events? When hearing off-color jokes, can you say, “I don’t find that funny?” Can we count on you to examine your language and behaviors so you are not patronizing to women? Will you intervene or notice when someone is mansplaining, dominating the conversation or otherwise silencing women? Can we count on you to teach your sons and grandsons to be gentle, respectful and loving? That’s how the system will begin to change!

Recently I was at a clergy breakfast with the pastors of our downtown congregations, and we were talking about how each church, synagogue and mosque was trying to work on issues of sexual violence and harassment. One of the imams said that it's challenging because sexism is so tied to racism. He said (I am paraphrasing), "Think about how the repercussions of slave women routinely raped by white masters and abused by white women, and how emasculating it was for the male slaves to be powerless to do anything to protect their wives and lovers." We white folk say, "But . . . it wasn't me." Like Adam, we want to blame it on someone else. Even if we personally did not do it, we are living with the repercussions of a society that allowed it. And yes, we can have pride that our Plymouth Church ancestors worked against such behavior—but our work is far from finished and white culture continues to benefit disproportionately from ongoing white privilege and white dominance. We need to figure out what more we can do.

A few years ago, Anita Hill wrote a book titled *Reimagining Equality: Stories of Gender, Race, and Finding Home*, in which she connects sexual harassment with racism and the desire for a safe home. At a book signing, someone asked what she has learned since she spoke out and has now spent decades fighting for justice. She said, "I realize now that I was naïve to think that my speaking out would change the world. I realize now that being black and a woman made my words seem more threatening than I could imagine. I realize that people would blame the messenger for the message rather than consider the message itself. And I realize that there will come a time when the enormity of this abuse will no longer be contained and that the powerful men who hold that power will fall."

My friends, the enormity of the abuse is now evident. We need a new narrative. This is the message of Jesus, after all, who was crucified by powerful men in government for his inclusive love and courage to speak truth to power. We do not have to be defined by abusive misogyny. We do not have to be a culture of toxic masculinity. We do not have to continue to be a society where "locker room talk" is acceptable, where "boys don't cry," where male loneliness is an epidemic, where some men turn to assault rifles and mass shootings to feel powerful.

It's time to create the realm of God to which Jesus pointed. It's time to listen to the stories at the margins: if we are men, especially to the stories of women and gender-nonconforming people; if we are white, especially to the stories of people of color. It's time to start healing the toxic masculinity around us by teaching boys it's okay to cry, to be gentle and humble. It's time to empower girls and stop sexualizing them. It's time to stop interrupting women when they talk, to catch ourselves when we are patiently mansplaining to them as if they were children. It's time to believe that *no* means *no*. It's time to heal our culture's association of male sexuality with power and let vulnerability, courage and authenticity be what it means to be human.

Let us work to create a safe place where those who have experienced harassment and abuse can find support. Let us be a place where men can explore new ways of being men and women can explore new ways of being women and nonconforming gender folks can be who they are. Let us provide a nurturing environment for all our children to thrive.

Before I close, I know that sermons like this can trigger past hurts and create a need for additional support, understanding and processing. Please know that Beth and I are available after the service and throughout the week for conversations and support. I also know that the Spiritual Exploration committee is working on a men's retreat that will address some of these issues.

This is my prayer: That together we reimagine a new story of origin where the birth mother Eve has power and equality. Let us follow the teachings of Jesus, where he turns the world upside down and empowers both women and men. Let us create a church where all of our inherent worth and dignity, all of our

marvelous variety and beauty, all of our diverse gifts and potential are given air to breathe, nourishing love and compassionate support. Let us begin to shape a new story, as Jesus dared to do. The time has come to move beyond #MeToo. May it be so. Amen.