

## IT'S DIFFERENT IN HERE

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**Texts: 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36**

Maeyken Wens, Anne Hutchison, Jarena Lee, and Barbara Harris: These are the names of just a few preaching women from the Middle Ages to the 21st century whose ministries and martyrdom remind us what happens when the church fails to be different from the world.

In 1573 in Belgium, an Anabaptist woman, Maeyken Wens, was arrested, tortured, and burned alive because she dared to read and study the Bible and proclaim the gospel to anyone who would listen. In 1637, Puritan Anne Hutchison was tried for heresy in the colony of Boston for holding religious services in her home. She was convicted, excommunicated, and banished from the colony. After she and her family and followers were massacred in a war between colonists and Native Americans, several pastors publicly asserted that it was God's just vengeance for her heresy. In 1811, Jarena Lee, a free Black woman approached Pastor Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to tell him that she had heard a voice telling her "Go preach the Gospel! Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth." For eight years she was forbidden to preach because, according to her pastor, there was no provision in the Bible or the church for women to preach. In 1988, when Barbara Harris became the first woman to be chosen to be a bishop in the Anglican communion, the resistance to her consecration and the sheer volume of death threats against her led authorities to plead with her to wear a bulletproof vest to her consecration service.

In heeding their calls to ministry, all of these women were met, not with affirmation or celebration, but with a quote of Scripture, from both liberal and conservative voices from every Christian tradition: Women should be silent in the churches for they are not permitted to speak; it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. And down through the ages, in cruelty and/or carelessness, this text became a binding universal prohibition on faithful women seeking to follow their calls to ministry. How many women have had to forego their callings and suppress their gifts because of an appeal to this text? How many women have been told to be silent for the sake of order and unity? How many women have been silenced or ignored because their leadership and participation in church was perceived as threat to the conventions of gender relations?

Because of the damage it has caused, I consider this passage to be a text of terror. Since the letters of Paul were canonized, it has been used to oppress, victimize, and—yes—even kill women. It remains the biblical and theological basis for denial of women's ministry in every denomination and religious collectivity that continue to withhold ordination of women to this very day. So this passage of familiar Scripture must be read with suspicion. That suspicion is warranted given that scholars have concluded that this passage is likely not something that Paul actually wrote but rather was a later insertion during a time when the early churches sought to exclude women from ministry and public leadership in the church. Other scholars seek to redeem it as a teaching given for that particular church for the sake of orderly worship in midst of conflict. But none of these explanations can gloss over the damage it has caused. Regardless of our scholarly qualifiers, these words sit within the book, and they stand as holy writ.

But we have to face that passages like this are not holy and do damage to what and who is holy. It runs counter to every understanding of the theological arc of Paul's thought and writings. It is at odds with the experience of those early church women who led house churches and whom Paul identified as praying and prophesying by his side. It is the "biblical" reason so many people have a hard time seeing the Divine presence embodied within women. And it contradicts the church's own experience that one's encounter with God's Holy Spirit endows each person with a gift to be used to build up the body. So there is something wrong, odd, and suspicious about a text that seeks to silence women, or anyone, in the church. When read as part of the entire letter, it looks like an attempt to sneak into the church the hierarchies, prejudices, and gender norms found in a culture that was male-centered and patriarchal. It feels like somebody was trying to use Paul's exhortation to let all things be done for the building up of the church to claim that a woman's participation and leadership in the church is divisive and disorderly and does not edify the community.

But if this passage was added to the letter to subordinate a woman's participation in worship and in the church, then it is a betrayal of the very meaning of the church. And it must be neutralized and stripped of its hold over our imagination. It is the audacity of the Christian community, of the beloved community gathered around the good news of God's love for all people, that people of all walks of life, from every background and identity can, through intentional choice and commitment, become the people of God. It is the premise of the *ekklesia*, the assembly of Christians gathered for worship, that the new age of God's reign is enacted within. By its nature, the church is counter-cultural, an alternative way of existing from what is found in the world at large. Paul articulates just how different the church is: "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor. 12:13). The most familiar proclamation holds "there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Unlike every other assembly of people, unlike every other institution surrounding the churches to whom Paul wrote, the hierarchies and social relations that prevail in the world give way to one body in Christ in the confines of the church. In a word, the church is different. It's different in here.

It is because the church is so unlike the way the world works and organizes itself that some seek to bring it into alignment with the world. In every generation, the church confronts anew the temptation to see the ministries and public church leadership of women, of people of color, of LGBTQ people as somehow disorderly and less edifying and not normal. In every generation, both intentionally and inadvertently, the church confirms and expresses the unequal and oppressive conventions of gender, racial, and sexual hierarchies and social relations in the assembly of Christians gathered for worship. Worship has been used to reenact and reinforce the oppressive norms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Not so long ago, for the sake of order, Black people had to be segregated from white congregants; LGBTQ people had to be celibate or excommunicated; and women had to be silent and rejected for ordination.

But the church is supposed to be different. We are not edified or made whole by a theology that denies life, purpose, and discipleship to anyone. Any word, passage, or theological approach that silences and subordinates women is not holy nor binding on us. You see, it's different in here. Our worship, our beloved community, aspires to be the fullest expression of being one body in the Spirit. That means we are guided by what spiritual experience has taught us: that we are all created in the image of God and are all endowed with spiritual gifts that make us beloved community in all our diversity and difference. We also know there is truth in the power of love that Paul taught the church in Corinth: about love being patient, kind, and not being envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; about love bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, and enduring all things. That is what makes what we do orderly and edifying: Love. And no matter what other gifts we may possess, the gift of tongues or prophecy, none of our gifts matter at all if we do not possess love. It's different in here.

So we don't use our worship to reinforce the hierarchies of social relations. Our worship is not a reflection or projection of power we hold or seek to usurp. We do not use worship to serve the interests of our religious, political, or economic views or institutions. We commit to not allowing existing social relations and power differentials to cause us to reject or suppress the gifts of any person in our community for the sake of subjective judgements about what is orderly. We demonstrate to the world what it means to affirm and celebrate all of God's beloved who are called to share their gifts. It's different in here.

Barbara Harris died last year. I was fortunate enough to be at a service for LGBTQ Episcopalians at which she preached during their triennial general conference. She posed a question that I think many took to be rhetorical but which I think should serve as an ongoing touchstone for reflection on how to be the church: "If God is the creator of all persons, how can some people be more acceptable to God than others?"