

WGUMC October 16, 2016 "The Arc of the Word"  
I Corinthians 14:26-40

I went to seminary in the 80's when women clergy were still controversial in many churches. I was appointed to a very small church in the very small town of Filer, Idaho, when I graduated in 1989. The church had had a female pastor years before, but that doesn't mean that the church was ready for more. I remember the District Superintendent telling me that someone on the Staff-Parish Relations Committee said, "We've tried a woman, and it didn't work." Plenty of men hadn't worked, either, but they never blamed it on their gender!

Needless to say, I've never liked this passage of Scripture. I much preferred the passage in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he says, "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." [3:28] I made that single verse carry a lot of weight for me early in my ministry. Reading those words, I liked to imagine Paul as some kind of proto-feminist, a

first-century prophet with a stirring vision of equality and gender inclusion, a futurist who was giving me courage to answer the call and permission to preach the gospel.

But I knew all along that Paul wasn't a feminist, and that one verse didn't counterbalance all the other verses that seemed to be aimed at keeping women invisible. Chapter 11 really gets me going: "...any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head...a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of [man's] authority on her head...." [I Cor 11:4-10]

If you think that I am taking Paul a little too personally, I'll remind you that women weren't the only ones he was telling to keep in their place. Slaves, too, were told that they should

accept the status quo. When Paul says, in Galatians, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery," [Gal 5:1] we might think that he was issuing the first emancipation proclamation, but we would be wrong.

Very early on, the issue was raised: if Christ has set us free, can slaves who become Christian demand their freedom? The answer is obvious to us, but that would be going against what all ancient people assumed: that God has assigned each person a station in life, a place in the pecking order. Paul's answer shows that he shares this assumption. He writes, "Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it...." He goes on to say, since we are spiritually free, it doesn't matter if we are still in physical chains. Then he concludes, "In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God." [I Cor 7:21, 24]

These are just some of the passages that used to drive me crazy early in my ministry. When it comes to hot-button issues such as the status of women and slaves, the fact that it is so easy to quote Paul against himself just added insult to injury. Because Paul kept saying things that I didn't want to hear, I crossed out entire sections of some of his letters and was tempted to tune him out altogether.

Now I'm older and a lot less sure that I have all the answers. So instead of getting mad and shutting the book, I'm much more inclined to open it to see if there is some way the Spirit can help me hear the Word of God in it. Perhaps it is possible to distinguish God's freeing Word in Paul's culturally-conditioned words.

For starters, it's assuring to note that scholars believe that the verses about women keeping their mouths shut in church are a later addition to the text. They awkwardly interrupt what Paul is saying about prophets who were talking

over each other in church. And in my Bible, these verses are put in parentheses, with a footnote indicating that scholars suspect these words are not from Paul's pen.

Even if Paul did write them, we have to remember that he is writing advice concerning what to do about particular women in a particular church who were causing dissension and disruption in worship. He was not writing a rule for all women in all churches. If Paul were trying to tell women not to pray or prophesy in church, then he wouldn't have told them that they had to cover their heads when they did so.

Clearly, women had positions of leadership in the early church. Paul names some of them in the conclusion of his letter to the Romans. Phoebe is a deacon in the church and one of Paul's benefactors. Junia, along with Andronicus, was in prison with Paul and considered "prominent among the apostles." Tryphaena and Tryphosa were "workers in the Lord." I can't

imagine that these women attained this status by being silent in church! [Romans 16:1-16]

Obviously, Paul does appreciate women in leadership and welcomes their contributions to the Body of Christ. He even writes lofty words about their spiritual equality in Christ. So we wonder: why he can't envision women's equality in marriage and in society?

Richard Rohr explains that the reason Paul seems to be speaking out of two sides of his mouth is that he is a dialectical thinker. Basically, that means that he intentionally holds two opposing ideas together, maintaining that tension long enough for a third idea to emerge which takes into account both ideas and then moves beyond them. Hank will talk more about how he does this next week with the concepts of "spirit" and "flesh," and also with "law" and "faith." For now, I have a simpler explanation, one that comes from my own experience.

I've saved hard copies of all of my sermons. The oldest ones are in boxes in the garage. Every once in a while, I have occasion to go searching through those boxes, and sometimes I will read an old sermon or two. I started preaching when I was 24 years old, when I didn't know much about faith, even less about life. But the amazing thing is that somehow the Spirit of God managed to speak through me. That's the only explanation I can come up with for how I was able to preach truth that I had not yet lived and share wisdom that I had not yet gained.

I'm thinking that Paul, in his best moments, was able to write down truth that he had not yet lived. On rare occasions, like in his letter to the Galatians, he was able to glimpse a vision of a kingdom that had not yet come. The fact that he couldn't live there all the time only confirms what we already know about ourselves: that our vision is incomplete (we see as in a mirror dimly, I Corinthians 13); that our spiritual connection to God is intermittent at best; and that our culture usually has

more influence on us than Christ does. So just because Paul couldn't grasp the full implications of the gospel and its radical vision of freedom and inclusion is no reason for us to dismiss him. Whether he knew it or not, Paul planted the seeds for that vision. Buried deep in his words was a Word about dignity and equality that has taken many centuries to begin to grow.

That's why I say don't give up on the Bible. Yes, there are some offensive parts, but even the Word of God evolves, because we do. The truth that is buried in the Bible can sometimes take a long time to grow because we do, too. But we call the Bible "the living Word" because we keep discovering new truth there. It's not that it's new; it's just that we hadn't evolved enough to hear it. If this presidential campaign has taught us anything, it has taught us that we are not there yet. Human beings still need to evolve. And as we do, we will discover more truth, be able to experience more freedom, and practice more inclusion not in spite of but because of the Word.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was often challenged by impatient people who thought that racial equality was too long in coming. He answered their challenge by saying that "the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I would agree. And I have a corollary. I would say that the arc of the Word is long, but it bends toward freedom, communion, kin-dom.

So regardless of what Paul says about women, about slaves, don't lose faith in freedom. Don't give up your hopes for dignity and equality. Don't give in to any "locker room banter" that takes away your humanity. And no matter what anyone says, don't keep silent in church! We need you to keep telling your story; keep speaking your truth; keep naming the fear and prejudice; keep calling out the racism, the sexism, the xenophobia; keep witnessing to the love; keep passing the peace; keep sharing the grace—until that day (long after election day, I'm afraid) when we are all one in Christ Jesus.