



Women Keep Silent? This Doesn't Sound Like Good News

TEXT
1 Timothy 2:10–15

January 8, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home* is set in Gilead, Iowa, in the '50s. Rev. Robert Boughton is a retired Presbyterian minister in Gilead. His daughter Glory — the youngest of eight children, in her late 30s and recently jilted by a no-good fiancé — came home to Gilead to take care of her aging father and apparently to decide what her future may be, if she has one.

Early in the novel, Glory is described this way: *If she had been a man, she might have chosen the ministry. ... She seemed always to have known that, to their father's mind, the world's great work was the business of men, of gentle, serious men well versed in Scripture and eloquent at prayer. ... They were the stewards of ultimate things. Women were creatures of a second rank. ... This was not a thing her father would ever have said to her. It was [her sister] Hope who told her that clergy were only and always men, ... but she knew how things were before she was told. No bright child could fail to know.*¹

I recognize my own mother in those words. She did choose ministry, but not until her mid-50s — I preached my own

mother's ordination service. She might have chosen it earlier, but in her 20s, she sensed her real purpose in life was to have children and take care of men, who were "the stewards of ultimate things," as Marilynne Robinson says.

Why did she think that? Because she grew up in the 1950s, and in ways overt as well as unspoken, she was taught that women are "creatures of a second rank."

It's not popular to speak of sin these days. But that is sin.

Paul said, "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent."

I have never preached on this text — in part because I find it painful to read in church, and in part because I believe if misunderstood, this word that is supposed to be good news can be dangerous.

We don't live in the year 50 when these letters were written, or in the 1950s, but there is still too much practice as well as unspoken assumption that women are creatures of a second rank.

Women are to keep silent, be submissive. Now we might be tempted to say, "Oh, it's

just words. They don't matter." That's naive. Words matter.

In 2015, Rose Brooks Center for Domestic Violence had 7,857 calls from women and children in our community who were experiencing or threatened with violence. That's over 21 times a day.

Several years ago, I spoke with Margaret. She and her husband had an argument. It happens. Her husband walked out of the room, and when he returned, he had a gun that he pointed at her head. He began to strike her. He knocked her down. Somehow she got away. She first went to her parents. Her father is a pastor. Her father told her wives should be submissive to their husbands, and she should go back and not provoke him.

Margaret was employed, college educated, faithful in church. She could be sitting right here.

I have a problem with a man who sends his daughter back to an abusive husband, but I also have a problem with Paul. Why did Paul say this? What would make the apostle say that women should be silent in church?

If I understand the text, there are two reasons he says

this; one of them is respectable and holy, and one of them is sinful.

Women, be silent, be submissive. This sounds like a word to be applied to all women. It reads like a statement about gender. That's what it says, but I don't think that is what it means. Language has to be interpreted. Words are like freight cars on a train. Words are loaded with meaning, and that meaning has to be interpreted. That's true with scripture, with the Constitution of the United States and often with words spoken at the dinner table.

I got the title for this series because more than once I have had to say to people I love, "I know that's what I said, but that's not what I meant."

To read scripture, we have to do the hard work of understanding the context of the writer, and then we have to do the hard work of understanding our context.

Paul says this for two reasons: one holy, one sinful.

First of all, Paul was a chauvinist. He thought men were more important than women. I don't say that in arrogant spirit — because all of us are tempted to see some people "of a second rank." Some think Jews are lesser. Others think Muslims are lesser. Some think children are lesser. Some think the poor are less than us, or Mexicans, or those in prison, or LGBT, or people who don't believe in Christ, or people who do believe in Christ.

I said a few weeks ago, I have never met anyone who

claimed to be a racist, but I don't know that I have ever known anyone who, when faced with someone different, didn't struggle to see the full humanity in that other person. When I can see you are different, I can see you as deficient.

This is true of everyone, I think. To say this is universal is not to excuse it. It is simply to say that Paul is not likely to be the only person in human history free of prejudice. Paul talks like this because Paul, like everyone in his time, thought women were of a second rank.

It is because he thinks lesser of women that he can say, "Well, look right there; it says in Genesis, Adam came first."

I'm sorry, but that's terrible Bible study. That doesn't make any sense. He only reads it that way because he already thinks women are less important. In this, we see the Apostle's sin.

OK, on what basis do I have to say this condescending view of women is sin? In part, because of our own experience.

I have had women in my life who have taught me much about what it means to follow Jesus Christ. I am married to one. I talk about the faith every week, but she lives it. She has been my teacher regarding joy and patience; she has taught me about forgiveness. In things that matter, she has been my teacher.

My own life experience makes it undeniably clear that the gifts of the Spirit have no gender preference. Men have no monopoly on spiritual wisdom or maturity. You have had

the same experience: Jenny McDevitt and Hallie Hottle, Meg Peery McLaughlin, Diane Quaintance ... just to name a few. Where would we be without the words of these women lifted up in church?

Our experience tells us this can't be right. But it's not just our experience; it is the experience of the early church.

I have said that Paul was sexist. But people are not one-dimensional, and people are not black and white; and I think we also see in this sexist apostle a work of grace. The Spirit was at work in this man.

Why do I say that? The early church, that lived in a misogynistic society, was actually pretty progressive regarding women — not compared to our day, but for their day, there was an openness.

The Gospel writers don't hold back: The first people to proclaim the Easter truth were women. Women were the first resurrection preachers.

Not only this, we see that Paul himself recognizes a deep appreciation for the ministry of women. When Timothy has a crisis of faith, Paul reminds Timothy of his teachers. Do you remember who they were? Lois, his grandmother, and Eunice, his mother. In Romans, Paul mentions women important to Paul, including Prisca and Junia and Phoebe, a deacon of the church.

Paul says in Galatians, "In Christ there is no longer slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female; we are all one in Christ."

So this is my question: Since the church was progressive regarding women — and since Paul clearly had his own appreciation for the ministry of women — what would make Paul say something like, “Women must learn in full submission.”

The truth is, there is some information we just don’t know, but I will tell you my best thought on how to read this passage.

I don’t think Paul is so blind to his own experience that he believes all women should be silent in church, submissive to men in matters of faith. So I think there was something about these women — the ones in this community to whom Paul addresses this letter of Timothy. It is these women who needed to be silent. Stay with me!

What’s wrong with these women? Well, they have obviously been teaching, which is why Paul says they shouldn’t. And why shouldn’t these women teach? It seems that they don’t know what they are talking about.

To be a teacher requires that you know the subject. In Paul’s day, the synagogue was the place where matters of faith were studied. It was the school for the faith. But the synagogue was restricted to men. So in many places in the ancient world, and in today’s world for that matter, it was only men who were educated. It was not because of genetics; it was because of culture.

Paul doesn’t tell them they shouldn’t teach because they

are women; he tells them they shouldn’t teach because no one would let them learn.

I grew up in a home where my mother did all the cooking. I saw my dad grill a hamburger once, and he could make fudge so good it would make you weep. But leave the man on his own for ten days, and he might not survive.

So guess what? Growing up, I never learned to cook. I am better now. And I think my dad could have learned to cook ... cereal maybe, or toast. But if you are never taught, you are not likely to be skilled.

The early church was born in a culture that did not value the education of women. Paul tells them to be silent — not because of their gender, but because they have not been afforded education, and teachers should know what they are taking about.

This was not the fault of these women.

But Paul is right to want teachers to be equipped ... and preachers to be equipped ... and elders to be equipped ... and deacons to be equipped. We don’t take the work of the church casually; he is right about that. That is his holy reason for these words. There was a situation on the ground that needed instruction.

But his effort to lift this up has caused problems for countless women (and men, for that matter). So why is this text important? Well, because all of us are like Paul. All of us are sinful. All of us, at times, see others and sometimes groups of

others as less than fully human — as people of a second rank.

And like Paul, we are often blind to it. That’s what we see in the way Paul speaks to this problem. He is sexist and doesn’t know it.

But we also see something else in Paul; we see the grace of God working to change his mind and heart.

Because the man who writes, “Women should learn in full submission” is the same man who writes, “In Christ there is no male nor female, for we are one in Christ.”

I can only say that when I face my own sin, I hope the grace of God can change me in ways no less dramatic than that.

¹Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (2008), p. 20

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.