



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

TEXT
1 Timothy 2:8–15

January 8, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker and Rev. Dr. Meredith Holladay

Zach:

As you might know we are starting a new sermon series today, focusing on particular texts that are, in many ways, misunderstood or misappropriated. The Bible, better understood as a collection of books and writings, was written over different time periods by different authors — the most recent of which was about 2,000 years ago. Those writers could not have imagined today's world.

When we encounter some of what is written in Scripture, we are immediately taken into a world that is both eerily similar to our own, and yet also vastly different. And so there are parts of Scripture — parts that seem out of step, or culturally ignorant, or just uncomfortable for any number of reasons — that we are tempted to skip past those passages, or perhaps even decide they are irrelevant or difficult to trust.

And there is perhaps no better place to start than with a letter from Paul exhorting women to be silent and forbidding them from teaching men. These verses from 1 Timothy are among those cited by some, including major Christian denominations, as the reason they do not ordain women or allow them to participate in

the teaching life of the faith community.

You'll note we are not worshipping in one of those congregations.

Which begs the question: How are we to understand this piece of Scripture? And how is it that we do ordain women, and we believe very much in what women have to offer not only in communities of faith but also to the world, and yet we are also a community that holds these words as part of our sacred Word? We do not seek to edit it out of Scripture.

The beginning of that answer has to do with something we call cultural context.

One of the realities we have to know when we read Scripture is that it was written with both a culturally Jewish and culturally Greek backdrop.

No one gave women a bigger role in home and family than in ancient Judaism, but the status of women in that culture and time was still very low. A woman was not so much a person as a thing, entirely at the disposal of her father or husband. She could not own property. She was forbidden from learning the law. Women had no part in the synagogue service. More than that, women were shut apart in a section of the

synagogue or in a gallery where they could not be seen. The view was that men came to synagogue to learn. Women came to hear. Moreover, women were not permitted to teach, for they were not seen as having the ability. They weren't educated. The odds that they were literate were extremely low. They were lumped in with children and slaves and, as such, they were exempt from the demands of the Law, excused from obligatory attendance at sacred feasts and festivals.

The Greek background would have made things doubly complex. The place of women in Greek religion and culture was also low. A Greek woman lived in her own quarters, into which no one entered but her husband. She did not even appear at meals. She did not walk the street alone and never went to a public assembly. If a church was to have started in a Greek town and women were to begin taking an active or speaking role in its work, the church would inevitably gain the reputation of being the resort of loose women.

All of that said, what are we to make of these verses?

I first want to suggest what meaning these verses continue to hold for us, lest we start cutting out verses that make us uncom-

fortable. Then I want to go a step further and talk about ways in which misunderstanding these verses hold particular dangers to us as men and women.

My first temptation with verses like these is to skip over them. It is much easier to pick and choose verses, deciding which ones are relevant and which aren't. But that becomes a lesson in me writing my own version of the Bible. It risks cutting out what is challenging, skipping over things instead of being forced to wrestle with them.

When I take the time to live with these verses where Paul tells women to be silent, I also take time to find so many other women in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament:

–Mary who bears and raises Jesus;

–Four women who, of all the disciples, stand by the Cross in Jesus' last moments;

–Mary Magdalene, who is the first to see the risen Jesus;

–Priscilla (Acts 18), who is a valued teacher and who leads Apollos to a knowledge of the truth;

–Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4), in spite of their argument, are women who labor in the gospel;

–Philip the evangelist (Acts 21) has four daughters, who are all prophetesses;

–In Titus, we read that aged women are instructed to teach;

–In 2 Timothy, we read of Lois and Eunice who are held in the highest honor;

–And to read Romans 16 is to read a list of women of honor.

So there is evidence here that Paul is not making a statement about women in general, but rather speaking to a particular issue happening in this community. We know that in Ephesus there was an Artemis cult, and theologians believe there is evidence within this letter that teachers among the Artemis cult were finding a hearing among a few vulnerable women — vulnerable in the first place because of a culture that did not educate or give status to women.

The Greek word *hesuchia* that is rendered in English, flatly, as “silence” is better translated as “tranquility or calm.” It is the same word used as instruction for men in Acts 22, 1 Thessalonians 4, 2 Thessalonians 3, 1 Peter 3 and Titus 2. For that reason, it is thought that certain women in this particular community of faith were disturbing services under the guidance of disruptive teachers. Paul, in turn, was concerned about those who seemed unable to listen.

In that hearing of the text, this becomes instruction not directed at women for being women, but at what it means to speak before listening — or speaking about something you don't fully know or understand. And maybe even about coercing someone else for your own agenda.

That leads me to the danger, as a man, of reading this text as telling women to be silent. Even if we throw out everything I just said, we have to recognize that women today are viewed differently. We understand some things the authors and readers of this text didn't know — or

didn't believe — namely that women are every bit as capable and intelligent as men.

We know that girls do just as well at math and science as boys do until they hit middle school, where other studies show us that our own bias towards boys and girls tends to be at work reinforcing boys in those topics and discouraging girls. We know there are more women who graduate with college degrees, yet the professional world holds more jobs for men than for women and pays women less for the work they do.

We know that women who speak up today often speak up because they are extremely knowledgeable and have spent generations listening, and are intelligent enough to be frustrated at the unequal treatment. And then when they speak up, we point to verses like this as though it is talking about the same issue.

The danger is that we are still closer than we'd like to admit to a culture that treats women as less than, and that we are a little too willing to nod our heads when we read that women are to be submissive to men. It was less than 100 years ago that women were given the legal right to vote in our own country — a legal right to a voice.

The danger for men is that we, in our good intentions, can confuse speaking in support of women with speaking FOR women, forgetting that times have changed. And when we confuse those two things, we start to make decisions that affect women without actually giving them a chance to speak for themselves. So maybe it is

men who have been speaking about something we don't actually know. And maybe we need to learn a heart of tranquility.

So I'm going to sit down, but not because this sermon is done, but because it is time for me to keep silent while a woman speaks.

Meredith:

Here's the thing with this text — I lived the truth — the deeper, Christ-like truth of it, before I ever thought critically of the literal "truth" of it.

I was never going to be silent — at least not as a kid — but something starts to happen as you get older and savvier — or really, just older. You start to internalize messages you don't remember reading or hearing. Or maybe you don't or didn't. But I did and do. And many young girls and young women I know did. We started to believe the things that we just absorbed around us. We started to believe that we should be silent — because our voices weren't good enough or they didn't matter.

We believed to be true the messages that our words and our brains were not as valuable as our faces and our bodies and our complicity and complacency.

My parents didn't raise me to be complicit or complacent. They are both Southern, so they certainly did their best to raise me to be polite. But you don't know many Southerners if you think "Yes, ma'am," and "No, sir," and "Bless your heart" are at all synonymous with complicity.

I wasn't getting these messages at home — but the messag-

es were received and internalized all the same. There was one right way to be female, and none of us were it. It was always out there, over there, just like her, definitely not like me.

Along with the requisite self-doubt of adolescence into young adulthood came the increasingly pronounced deference to the world around me that seemed to come with being female. Always apologizing for taking up space — coming through a doorway, walking down the sidewalk, speaking in class — always seemed to be prefaced with an "I'm sorry." I began to apologize so much, I started to believe that I actually had something to be sorry for: existing, taking up space, knowing things, having questions.

All the while I was internalizing these messages, I was also fighting against them. Remember the part about not being raised this way? Combined with a lovely blend of my parents' DNA that meant I was going to be stubborn, opinionated, relentless and fiercely smart, meant I was constantly uneasy with this world that I had absorbed around me and within me. Nature and nurture were both on my side.

As often as I was apologizing, I could feel myself resisting a world that wanted to push me aside, deny my value and shut me up. It's a battle I still fight; that many of us still fight.

I threw out a request for some stories from other young clergywomen on Facebook. Although I expected lots of stories, I was overwhelmed — and horrified — at the comments and behavior

directed toward my sisters and colleagues in ministry. Within three hours, I had 60 comments; in less than 24 hours, over 200.

Comments about appearance take the prize — from people who admitted they would not come to worship when the woman was preaching for reasons ranging from not being able to accept her pastoral authority to fears that her attractiveness would be too distracting. Or comments wondering how she would be able to balance it all when the inevitable day came that she would marry and have children — assuming that she wanted both to marry and have children, and assuming that when and if she did, her calling to ministry would disappear. Or assumptions that she simply could not be the pastor — based on built-in notions about what a pastor sounds and looks like.

I can't tell you how many of us have answered the phone at our churches and been asked, "Could I please speak with the pastor?" and the conversation only gets awkward when we respond, "In fact you are speaking to the pastor." One of my favorite recurring responses to my question were the women who have been told, "It's so nice that your husband lets you be a pastor." Lets you?

And all of us seem to have experience with assumptions about our sexuality and reproductive status. All female pastors I know have heard comments about their bodies, presuming they are pregnant when we are most certainly not. These encounters are often the worst. When a member at a previous

church where I was a pastor commented to me, assuming something about my belly, I stewed with that for days — frustrated, sad, angry and discouraged that I was still only observed for my body and what my body might or might not be doing — not my brain, my pastoral presence or anything else. All of these are comments or assumptions that male ministers do not deal with.

Sometimes this struggle feels so small that I forget it's a struggle. It just seems like what is — like all the times I forget, or neglect, to put any eye makeup on, and people comment all the time on how tired or sick I look.

And it's beyond our appearance, isn't it, ladies? (Although I could comment here on how crazy it is — and how it exactly proves this point — that so many of our concerns and the comments we face deal with how we look or don't look.) As women, we so often have to fight to be heard — sometimes literally. I have friends and colleagues in ministry who have stories upon stories of people telling them they can't hear them or they clearly aren't fit to be a pastor because their voices are too small, too high, too quiet. Nevermind that modern AV technology can be adapted to fit women's voices. We just rely on the default setting — and the default setting in our world so often is fit for men.

Most females have grown used to deferring to males in the room because in many situations they outnumber us. And sometimes it's not because we defer, it's just what we have to do — or what happens to and around us.

I love this story I came across in the fall.

But first, two words for you that may or may not be new vocabulary words: maninterrupting and bropropriating. Maninterrupting: unnecessary interrupting of a woman by a man. And bropropriating: stealing a woman's idea and taking credit for it. OK, these are legit words — and studies have shown in a culture where women are constantly being interrupted, talked down to, and their ideas are coopted and bropropriated, according to Time magazine, “We shut down, become less creative, less engaged. We revert into ourselves, wondering if it's actually our fault. Enter spiral of self-doubt.”¹

So this story from The Washington Post talked about female White House staffers and their tactic of what they call amplification. “When a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognize the contribution — and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own.”² I find this incredibly inspirational, “Go team women!” and yet incredibly infuriating. We have to work together just for one voice to get heard, acknowledged and to prevent men from overshadowing us. Hello, 2017!

Why say all this? Why does this matter theologically or spiritually? Because women matter. Women's voices do matter. And this shouldn't be something we have to convince anyone of. And yet, when we start to listen to each other's experiences, we understand the ways we have

silenced each other. And I believe it stems from these messages that we have observed, absorbed and internalized.

For those of us who grew up in church and were surrounded by “churchy” people — especially if you're anything like me and grew up in more conservative circles than you find yourself in now — part of the source of those messages is scripture, is the church, and a deep and flawed reading of our own texts and traditions. We would be sorely mistaken to assume that just because the biblical text was written 2000 years ago, and by and for an audience much different than our own, that it cannot speak to us.

And yet, it doesn't seem to me like it should take too much mental gymnastics to observe how we are uncomfortably still very much like Paul's context — all too willing to encourage women to be silent because we would prefer to believe they don't matter as much or at all.

Look, I don't love this text, and I went into this highly suspicious of Zach's insistence that we find something redemptive in Paul's writings. I still am, a little bit. But it is true that encouraging silence isn't just to keep other's voices out of the conversation. Sometimes we need to be reminded to be silent so we can listen ... observe ... understand ... learn.

Before I am silent again [wink], I want to acknowledge that as much as I have suffered from these internalized messages and external macro- and micro-aggressions, I am still standing

from a place of privilege. I am a straight, white, educated woman. I cannot speak for the ways that our queer brothers and sisters, our sisters and brothers of color and our sisters and brothers with less advantage are silenced all the more. It is one of those areas in which it is probably the wisest thing for me to remain silent so that I might listen — really listen — to the voices and experiences other than my own.

May we know that all voices are important, and all have something to say. In our silence, may we seek to listen. And for those of us with privilege we didn't necessarily ask for, but enjoy anyway, may we use that privilege to keep silent, so that we will listen — deeply — and understand.

¹<http://time.com/3666135/sheryl-sandberg-talking-while-female-maninterruptions/>

²https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/09/13/white-house-women-are-now-in-the-room-where-it-happens/?utm_term=.06315404c955



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