

*From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, August 27, 2023*

Boy, oh boy!
Man, oh man!
Good golly, Miss Molly!

I can't even express my confusion on today's topic without, ironically enough, evoking it. That is, today we end our summer series of "What About...?" sermons by discussing Paul and gender. Have I saved the best for last or the hardest for last (or, I suppose, both)? You tell me in 20 minutes, eh?

This topic is vexing on two levels – one rational and the other emotional. I do not think myself a gifted enough speaker to bob and weave through both at the same time, so we're going to have to acknowledge the emotions around the topic, feel them, but all the while trust that this conversation is meant for good, not ill. I can also promise that we're not going to relitigate decisions of past generations. Specifically, at no point in discussing Paul and gender will we open up the question about whether or not women can or should be ordained. Women's giftings, callings, and the unique fruits they bear in ministry are far too obvious to reconsider that decade's old question. Indeed, no advancement that women, trans folx, and non-binary individuals have made are under scrutiny today. This question was submitted to me without such a subtext, so I will not be inviting that subtext into it.

I have to start with such a word of caution because engaging with gender and scripture – specifically, Paul and gender – has been a place of many bloody battles. While there might be good and even holy reasons to visit old battleground sites – Bob Callecod just got back from the beaches of Normandy and speaks of the experience with reverence – this sermon is not a historical romp through past tragedy, but rather an attempt to begin a vision for a holier future. If I have to name a hope for this sermon, it's that each of us leaves the conversation aware of how our gender identity can and should inform our Christian discipleship.

And that's because gender is a fact, even if a socially-constructed one. We live in a society – as all people in all times have lived in such societies – that has cultural scripts around gender. By "cultural script," I mean socially-anticipated, socially-sanctioned waya of performing one's gender identity. These scripts tend to wind their way through every facet of human life to such a degree that it is simply bullheaded to act like cultural gender expectations aren't exerting themselves on us at all times. I'm quite confident that the way I'm speaking now has been at least informed by a gendered social script and very likely the way you are sitting and listening right now have also been so informed. I hope, then, that I'm not up here man-splaining and, equally so, that you're not sitting out there man-spreading.

Social scripts are unseen, powerful influences in life because they are rarely explicitly taught and because – like a movie or TV script – they tell us how to act, talk, and what to say and do

in nearly every social circumstance. Social scripts set expectations and reinforce taboos. Generously understood, they help with social cohesion and unity... though often at the expense of excluding those who refuse to conform. Worse yet, maybe, is the fact that these social scripts are malleable, routinely changing again and again. For example, women were, at one time, rarely allowed out of dresses if they were to be in public. However, as women entered the work force in increasing numbers during the 1970s and 1980s (think *9-to-5* here, if that helps... and when doesn't Dolly Parton help?!?) we witnessed the rise of the pant suit for women. In fact, during the 1980s, in particular, women's work attire tended toward the more traditionally masculine with shoulder pads in the blazers that helped them better mirror the presumed broad shoulders of their newfound male coworkers. Yet even in this story, we see that as one part of the social script is eroded – that is, around what women can wear – another part of the social script is only reinforced – that is, what a traditionally masculine body looks like. Like I said, social scripts are implicit, complex, and ever-shifting. In many ways, we'd all be better for resisting them, but – again – the very act of resistance often becomes a form of reassertion of them. It can be a cruel enslavement.

Okay, let's pivot from scripts to scripture. When we ask a question like "What About... Paul and gender?" we're really asking, "Does Paul (and, by extension, the Bible) have a social script for gender?" And the answer is, at once, both yes and no.

We begin with the "no" because that answer makes me happiest. Paul makes it very clear in our Galatians reading that all the social norms of his day have been dissolved in the waters of our baptism. Hear those beautiful, blessed words one more time: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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."

The selection of these three examples it not just Paul capitulating to the rhetorical rule of threes. He has chosen these existential designations as a way of asserting just how complete and thorough the work of God in Jesus Christ is in the world. Significant binary distinctions are washed away in the waters of baptism. In fact, Paul does something really, really smart here that I want you to see and hope you'll appreciate. In each of those pairings, there is a culturally preferred member. For Paul, Jew would be better than Greek; for everyone, free would be better than slave; and for most of the world throughout time, male would be better than female. Paul knows these cultural biases – and attending social scripts – exist. And so, in a very deft rhetorical move, he switches the places of the presumed "good" and "bad" members. His words thus read: "there is no longer good or bad, there is no longer bad or good, there is no longer good and bad." If he had written that sentence with all the

*From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, August 27, 2023*

presumed good members first and all the presumed bad members second, it could've accidentally continued to place the so-called bad members in a literal secondary position. Remember, these social scripts resist resistance, so it would've been very easy for us to read all the socially lesser groups in the second position as an implicit way of keeping those groups secondary. But Paul's careful ordering of those words keep us from this problem. He also does this really wonderful thing where he uses "or" to connect the first two pairs and then "and" to connect the last pair – and, of course, the pair we're most interested in today. By writing "male and female," rather than "male or female" (and thus remaining consistent in his use of conjunctions), he is subtly alluding to the creation story in which we read "male and female, He created them." What Paul is signaling here, then, is that our *re*-creation in Christ via our baptisms is *MORE* determinative than God's creational work. Genesis reads, "male and female, He created them." Paul asserts, "There is no longer male and female." Paul dismisses our origin story because, in Jesus Christ, our lives are no longer about where we came from – they can come from enslavement or being a Gentile or whatever else – but are about where our lives are going. Less origin story; more destiny. Or, if you prefer, Jesus is our new Genesis – a fact that is true for Jews or Greeks, slaves or freed, men and women.

I'm belaboring this point because I hope to garner within you an ounce of respect or admiration for Paul before we turn to all the ways we're about to feel disappointed by him. Because, to be sure, our two readings from I Corinthians is hard to read as anything other than disappointing. Heck, I'm a cis-hetero male – that is, the privileged identity in Paul's letter to the Corinthian church – and *I* feel disappointed by what we read there.

My goal in this portion of the sermon is not to defend Paul. Rather, I hope to read Paul in light of Paul. That is, I hope that our Galatians reading is more authoritative and determinative than our Corinthian reading. Oh, and to be clear, this is not my insinuating that some parts of scripture are useful and others can be disregarded. No, all are valuable, though they do exist within an interpretive framework that helps us value each on a weighted curve.

So, yes, this part of Corinthians is cringe. It subjugates women to men domestically, demands sartorial choices of women that aren't exerted on men, and even recommends silence rather than speaking based upon one's sex and gender. None of that is palatable, let alone good. So, how does theologically-deep Paul from Galatians write these words in Corinthians?

I don't know. I just don't. I know this is a question-answering sermon series, but some answers are lost to history. I could spend a thousand words trying to explain cultural differences or making a case that Paul was *only* talking to the Corinthians (after all, Paul did not know he was writing capital-S "Scripture," but rather thought he

was just sending a letter. I mean, is anyone here ready to have someone 200 years from now declare the last email you sent is capital-S "Scripture"? Like, "And the Lord saith through Kathy Sweeney, "And hereth is thy recipe for peanut butter blossoms"). But, frankly, all of that feels like me just trying to justify Paul, trying to defend him, and I committed to not doing that.

Instead, what I will say is that I trust that Paul was trying to give his best guidance to that church in that time. And maybe, in some way we don't understand now, it was even useful guidance. It would not be, however, useful to us today. The real challenge that our question about Paul and gender raises isn't how to go back and make a 2,000-year-old text match the social scripts for gender that we experience today, but rather to submit even our gender to revealing the Kingdom of God, to bringing God glory, and to loving and serving our neighbors.

The goal should be less about getting gender "right" and more about doing right with our many and varied genders. In doing this, we trust our Spirit-led lived experiences. That is, if the church has learned anything over the last 65 years since women were first ordained (and, more recently, as we've been blessed by trans and non-binary Christians) it's that trying to figure out what is "right" with gender is a fool's errand. Instead, by God's grace, we've learned new insights into the love and grace of God through those whose genders allow them to experience this love and grace differently and uniquely from those of different genders. Let us commit to leading lives in such a way that our gender expression is a blessing to others and others' gender expressions are a blessing to us. And maybe, just maybe, after we've sufficiently done this for a sustained period of time, we'll be better able to see what Paul was driving at in the first place.

"What About...?" Paul and gender? The excitement isn't in answering the question; the excitement is in *being* the answer to that question. That is, to live your gender identity in such a way that your mistakes in life aren't directly attributed to it, while your successes continue to point to the God who said, "there is no male and female."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.