

Feminist Perspectives

Numbers 12:1-16 Galatians 3:23-29
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Long before the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, with the famous line, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that **all men are created equal**," it was clear to all that **our society was instead structured like a ladder of superiority. Skin color was the primary determining factor of where one stood in this caste system, imported and expanded from Europe.** Wealthy, White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men were on the top rung. Africans, and later African Americans, were on the bottom rung, and everyone else was somewhere in between. Over the centuries, some groups of people moved up the ladder, and others down.

Women in our society, in general, have always been assigned to a lower rung on the ladder than men. Seeking equal rights, privileges, and respect for women and their perspectives is still an ongoing struggle. That's the very definition of feminism.

The mainline Northern Presbyterian Church didn't begin to ordain women as ruling elders until 1930, and as ministers of word and sacrament (pastors) until 1956, just 68 years ago. **Many Presbyterian congregations are still reluctant to call a female pastor, and those female pastors are almost always paid less than their male colleagues, often being called by smaller rural congregations.** And yes, that remains true here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, as well.

I will admit I was one of those who was slow to come around to realize that **women view the world differently than men. Why wasn't I ever told this? Perhaps more likely, why didn't I listen?** I eventually learned there are many factors that can lead individuals and groups of people to experiencing life differently – and gender, along with race, is one of the most prominent of those factors. The result was a lesson in **learning how to listen, really listen, to women's experiences and perspectives on basically everything.**

In the field of religion, that includes endeavors such a biblical interpretation, theology, and spirituality. For instance, studies have shown that gender can play a role in how one connects with and experiences the Sacred Presence of God with and within themselves, and within all creation. **One of the factors that draws many to Celtic spirituality is the value it places on the feminine characteristics attributed to the Divine.**

I'd like to share with you today a few readings from female authors and scholars that made a strong impact on me, and perhaps will for you, in leading to a fuller understanding of what can be called a feminist worldview.

Again, feminism is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes, expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. So yes, men can be feminists.

The first reading comes from the Introduction to *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Editors Carol Newsom, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, and Sharon Ringe, Professor of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., write:

Although women have read the Bible for countless generations, we have not always been self-conscious about reading as women. There are many reasons why it is important that we do so.

Women have distinctive questions to raise about the Bible and distinctive insights into its texts: our experiences of self and family, our relationship to institutions, the nature of our work and daily life, and our spirituality have been and continue to be different in important respects from those of men.

But there is another reason, too. Because of its religious and cultural authority, the Bible has been one of the most important means by which woman's place in society has been defined. **Throughout the centuries, of course, the Bible has been invoked to justify women's subordination to men. But it has also played a role, sometimes in surprising ways, in empowering women.**

It has barely been over 100 years that women, once excluded from both religious offices in the church and most higher educational opportunities, have been able to enter the arena of biblical scholarship. That has changed drastically, however, over the past 50 years. It has been even more recently that female biblical scholars have been received by academia as writing about biblical interpretation and theology with authority and respect.

In her landmark 1964 book, female professor of biblical literature, Margaret Brackenbury Crook, published a study on the status of women in Judaism and Christianity entitled **Women and Religion**. In it, she makes reference to the Old Testament passage from Numbers 12 that we heard today concerning Miriam, Aaron, and Moses – all three brothers and sister. As you noticed, Miriam and Aaron both get on God's bad side for questioning Moses' authority. However, **only Miriam is punished with leprosy and exclusion. Not so with Aaron, even though he was just as guilty as her.** Crook pointedly observed:

A masculine monopoly in religion begins when Miriam raises her indignant question: 'Does the Lord speak only through Moses?' Since then, in all three of the great religious groups stemming from the land and books of Israel - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - men have formulated doctrine and established systems of worship offering only meager opportunity for expression of the religious genius of womankind.

Though I haven't read Crook's work, I was deeply affected by a book that was required reading in a spirituality class at seminary entitled, **Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction**, written in 1989 by Kathleen Fischer, a theology professor at Seattle University and a counselor at Mt. St. Vincent Nursing Center. In the Introduction she states:

Since feminism has a variety of meanings, I want to clarify my own use of it in designating this book as feminist perspectives on spiritual direction. I understand feminism to be a worldview, a lens through which we see the world and all its

internal relationships. As such, **feminism stands in contrast with sexism as a worldview.**

Sexism gives us constricted perspectives on the natures of women and men. It has become so much a part of our consciousness that the way the church and society are presently structured seems to be the way things naturally are. With the support of religion, these structures even appear to be divinely ordained.

The distortions of sexist perspective are not evident until we switch to a fresh viewpoint. Feminism provides a new way of seeing reality. It is an alternative worldview which replaces the divisions intrinsic to sexism with models of wholeness for both women and men. **Feminism is a vision of life emphasizing inclusion rather than exclusion, connectedness rather than separateness, and mutuality in relationships rather than dominance and submission.** Feminism also entails the conviction that full individual development can take place only within a human community that is structured in justice. **And so, feminism works for social change.**

Needless to say, College Hill Presbyterian Church would not have designated itself as a 'More Light Presbyterian' congregation back in 2001 (23 years ago!), advocating for the equality of LGBTQ persons of faith within leadership roles in our denomination, if it hadn't already understood and embraced feminist perspectives. For **feminism has helped lead the way for other inclusive movements.** And the church today is slowly beginning to reevaluate numerous theological perspectives and biblical interpretations after carefully listening to the voices of those long silenced.

To each one of you here today, and to those watching online, **wherever you find yourself on the spectrum of gender, sexuality, and/or race, I encourage you to listen more and more to your own voice, and learn to value and trust it** - even if it stands in contrast with dominant worldview perspectives. **That voice inside may indeed be the indwelling Presence of God speaking to you!**

Let us also be even more intentional about listening carefully to the experiences of each other. When we practice open, active, non-judgmental listening we can broaden our own understanding and theological perspectives if we allow ourselves to see the Bible, spirituality, theology, and the world itself through the lenses and perspectives of others.

For any of us, it's not an easy process to hear and accept things in a new way from a different perspective. It's even harder for us to allow ourselves to expand our often-ironclad boundaries of understanding, even as progressives.

So it is on this day, and every day, **we give thanks for the unique voices, questions, perspectives, experiences and worldviews of women.** Let's look at the caste system in this country for what it is, an arbitrary way to rank people on a supposed ladder of superiority and inferiority. That's the first step in making a real difference.

Amen.