Sunday, September 18, 1977

THE BIBLE AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION (NO. 2 IN A SERIES: THE BIBLE AND HUMAN SEXUALITY)

Galatians 3:23-29

Last week I began a sermon series on the overall subject, "The Bible and Human Sexuality." In the first sermon in that series last Sunday, we took a look at how the Bible is to be used and interpreted in dealing with any and all subjects. We noted that in the overall tradition and history of the Christian Church, the Bible has not been taken literally, but seriously. The Bible is a Holy Book in that it is the written record of a community of persons and that community's unique covenant relationship with God.

Since the Biblical witness covers more than a thousand years, we also noted that the Bible speaks with many voices; the Bible often corrects itself and most important that the church produced the Bible rather than the Bible pro-ducing the Church. Therefore, the event of Jesus Christ, his birth, ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection form. the foundation upon which the church is built. "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."

Jesus Christ is the center of the church and its founder. We take the Bible very seriously because it witnesses to Jesus Christ and the community of Israel from which He came. The Bible contains the story of Israel, and it contains the remembered teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ. The Bible, therefore, is the basic book for those of us who call ourselves Christian.

When we read and study. the Bible, we always do so through the event of Jesus Christ. In other words, the primary interpretative principle through which we judge and use all Biblical literature is God. love as revealed in the cove-nantal history of God's faithfulness to all people and particularly as it is revealed through the event of Jesus Christ. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

With these principles of Biblical interpretation in mind, this morning we are going to look at the issue of "Women's liberation" and how the Bible relates to it.

In our time the Bible is used by some as a weapon to try to prove that women are to be subordinate to men. Therefore, others who are for women's equality often see the Bible as a block in their path or as a kind of handbook for the oppression of women.

Let's look at the issue again. In the first place, it's true that in the legal codes of the Old Testament, women are legal nonpersons. These legal codes reflect the ancient social and cultural practices of the Near East which included a thoroughgoing male dominated society including polygamy, concubines, and slavery.

In these Hebrew legal codes, the woman's sexuality was her primary contribution to the family and society. She was to build up the husband's house by having children. She was the property of the husband. Therefore, for example, her adultery was a major crime because the husband's property was damaged. The unmarried woman convicted of fornication was likewise punished because she was damaged property and therefore not fit for marriage.

In the case of man, extramarital sex was dealt with quite differently. Sexual infidelity by the husband was not ranked as a crime in the same way.

In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament such as the book of Proverbs, the view of woman is somewhat different. Here she is revealed as the teacher-mother with emphasis on her instructional role in the family. As teacher whom a wise son will heed, woman is ranked equally with the man and together they represent the parental teaching function. Both are to be honored and obeyed. The woman of quality who is also the good wife is described as being prudent, gracious, honorable, and a credit to her husband's reputation. Proverbs describes her as household manager, provider of food and clothing, business manager, philanthropist, and wise teacher.

Here she is not just property, nor is she simply a sex object. The power, mystery and otherness of woman is recognized along with her intelligence, drive, and skill in managing domestic and economic pursuits.

In the historical writings of the Old Testament, woman is seen in terms of individual character and biography. We meet Deborah and Jezebel, Rachel, Miriam, Ruth, Esther, and more. In some of these historical writings, women have special roles in addition to that of wife and mother. There were a few recognized women prophets which shows that the gift of prophecy was no respecter of sex. Furthermore, these women represent the recognition by Israel that God speaks through women and calls them to deliver revelations to God's people as well as men.

And that is not all. While the Old Testament is primarily patriarchal, there are within the Old Testament some fundamental challenges to that system. And as we read and study the Bible, we discover that overall, the purpose of Biblical faith is not the perpetuation of patriarch but rather the salvation of women and men together in their full and equal co-humanity. There is no sexism in the salvation proclaimed by biblical faith.

The God of the Bible is unique and completely distinct from the various fertility gods of the ancient Near East. All of the gods of the surrounding cultures had a particular sex as male or female gods; and much of their worship involved a cult of sexuality.

The religion of the God of the Bible rejected these cults of sexuality because God is one, complete and whole, and therefore exists beyond the distinction of male or female. God is neither he nor she, not one sex requiring the other to be complete.

Although God in the Bible is frequently spoken of in the masculine form, this should not surprise us because of the patriarchal culture. What is surprising is the number of times God is referred to in female terms. In the prophet Hosea, God is compared to the Hebrew mother who teaches the child to walk, heals the child's wounds and feeds the child. In the traditions of the Exodus, God provides for those necessities which were always obtained through woman's work, food, and water. In the prophet Nehemiah, God is a seamstress, just as God also made garments to cover the naked couple in the garden of Eden. One prophet speaks of God as having birth pangs. (Isaiah 42:14) Isaiah also describes God as a mother comforting her children. And God's remembrance of Zion is compared to the love of a nursing mother and the work of a midwife.

So, while the patriarchal image of God dominates the Bible, the crucial point for Biblical interpretation is the astounding fact that the Bible does not absolutize this patriarchal image into a theological assertion. In Genesis, God creates male and female in the divine image. The God of the Bible embraces and transcends both sexes as Creator and Lord.

In fact, prophets like Isaiah saw even more than that. They saw beyond the present scheme of things and envisioned a new creation established by the power of God who will radically reorient human existence and finally abolish alienation and exploitation based on age, sex, race, and economic status. The lion will lie down with the lamb, and wild beasts and the powerless children will live together in peace when hurting and destroying are ended in God's creation.

The prophet Joel speaks of God's Spirit being poured out on young and old, man and woman, slave and free, and these will all prophecy. And Jeremiah says that God has created a new thing on earth: a woman protects a man. Jeremiah foresees a complete reversal of the way things were at that •time.

What such statements of the prophets teach is that there is nothing eternal, inevitable, or holy about our culturally defined sex roles.

In the New Testament, Jesus'teachings contain few explicit statements regarding human sexuality. His actions, however, show that he crossed over the boundaries of sex, national origin, and status in order to minister to people. For example, he crossed over accepted boundaries to speak with a Samaritan woman and to help her find fullness of life. He ignored customary barriers in permitting a. woman of questionable character to anoint him with expensive ointment and praised her sign of devotion to him. Jesus broke with many customs and regulations which tended to dehumanize people.

In all four Gospels, Jesus is never reported as acting or speaking to women in a derogatory fashion. He always treated them as equals, individuals, and persons. And when we realize that Jesus spoke to women in a society where they were often treated more like chattels than persons, his outlook becomes all the more astounding.

For Jesus, women were not just functions as mother, wife baby machine, nurse, housekeeper, cook, but human beings capable of making important decisions and commitments. In Luke 11:27-28, there is a revealing episode which takes place while Jesus was preaching. As he said this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked." But Jesus answered, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it."

This exchange could easi.ly be interpreted as Jesus giving a quick answer to flattery and pointing away from himself to the Word of God. But another interpretation might be that Jesus was saying that the function an individual performs in one part of his or her life is not the thing which defines that person, but rather the choices that are made. The response a woman makes to the word of God is what defines the character of the person, not whether she physically fills the role of motherhood.

In the New Testament, even the Apostle Paul could see beyond the cultural roles often assigned to women to a new equality. Although the Apostle Paul often reverted to the usual patriarchal customs of the time when he was asked to give everyday practical advice in attempting to solve problems and disputes within the congregations he had helped organize, in overall terms, Paul is one of the great liberationists who witnessed to the liberating power of Christ in human life.

Thus, Paul wrote to the Church in Galatia — "For as many of you as were baptized in Christ have put on Christ. There is either Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

So, we can see that in spite of its patriarchal pattern, the faith which the Bible proclaims cuts across and destroys all of our human fears and customs which we often honor and live out in terms of our being man or woman. Biblical faith proclaims that gender and genes are not the lords of life; that the gifts of the spirit are bestowed on male and female. Our Christian faith also demonstrates that many of our images of male and female temporary and false,

Certainly, we are to rejoice in our being male or female. We are to affirm our human sexuality. But at the same time, we are to remember that in Christ there is neither male or female, which is to say that human beings are equal in God's creation and that therefore there is nothing eternal, holy, or inevitable about many of our culturally defined sex roles. Amen.