

Sermon Text for May 14, 2017

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Judges 4: 4-5, Romans 16: 1-7

“Co-workers in the Lord”

I had a great opportunity this week to lead chapel at Bethany Christian School. It reminded me so much of the type of school that my girls went to while we were in Russia. One class for each grade. All of the teachers at Bethany are women so I spoke about our first Scripture and Deborah how she was a ruler over Israel, she was a prophet, so a spokesperson of the Lord, and a warrior. I told the students there that I was speaking primarily to the girls in that school and that they needed to know that like Deborah, and like this second person that we are going to see in our Scripture today, you can do anything that the Lord wants you to do. You are not limited by roles, you are limited by what other people say you can and cannot do. I'm not sure I'm going to be invited back, but that is such an important message today for women and especially young girls so that they will grow up to be women and mothers of faith and know that absolutely nothing and no one can hold them back from God's desires in their life. And, I mentioned, God desires more for you than what society explains to you.

READ

A woman pastor was hired in a small rural church and one of the elders on the session was not happy about it. So he insisted that before he could consider her his pastor, she had to fishing with him. He went to pick her up early in the morning and she was running late. Figures, he thought, just like a woman. They got to their boat and she had forgotten her fishing pole. Just like a woman, he thought again, always forgetting something. They got out on the water and she told him that she would appreciate it if he could bait her hook, just like a woman. Well, lunch time rolled around and he pulls out his sandwich and she said, oh I forgot mine on the shore, it's not far away. I'll go get it. So she gets out of the boat, walks across the water, and gets her sandwich and walks back. The man this time is fed up and says out loud to her, just like a woman, you don't even know how to swim do you?

Culturally, women have had to fight to be recognized. It wasn't just an election season issue, but it is a constant issue within the Christian church. I would say that more denominations expect and think women are inferior to men in such a way that they are not considered legitimate if they are women. I know, the language that is used is not inferior but rather the phrase: they have their own role, is what is used. When a woman is thought to be too independent for her own good the phrase I hear especially around here in the churches which do not view women equally is that she has an independent spirit. The assumption is that the independence is that which wants to place her on par with a man.

Now don't get me wrong, I know that in some minds women are placed on a pedestal, and yet they still seem to be considered inferior to men. Often, the very Scripture that is the Word of God is used to support that position. Today, we are going to see that Jesus Christ died on the cross for all of us, men and women alike, and nobody should be able to say that the Bible, or even God for that matter, sees women's roles as different or inferior to any other role of any of us.

Let's start with those classic Scriptures that people use to portray women as the weak and sinful gender. In the Old Testament we have the story of Adam and Eve and Eve is the sinner who eats the apple and then somehow seduces Adam to eat it. According to Adam's words the fault lies in as he says to God, that woman that you gave to me made me do it. So right away, we have an attempt to put the blame and the woman in her place. God saw through it and both are punished.

In Leviticus 27:3-4 you will find the value of women in money is less than the value of a man. Likewise, in the New Testament we find in I Timothy 2:11-12 the mandate for a woman to keep silent. Ephesians 5:22-24 the order for wives to be subject to husbands. In I Corinthians 14:34-36 you have another injunction to keep silent and to be subordinate.

Pretty strong wording and some pretty strong evidence that the role of women from even before biblical times, all the way up through today in most cultures and even in most religions, women have been given and have played the role of subordinates, subjects, keeping silence, and knowing their place. It was, after all, only 84 years ago that women could vote in this country. But like anything else it all depends on which

Scripture you choose to focus on. Because what you are going to hear now are Scripture which speak to the role of women not on par with men, but in some ways, even superior and more reliable than men. But you already knew that.

Well, let's hear now the rest of the story as we find it in Scripture, the very same Scripture that has been used to keep women in their place, places them at the top or at least certainly equal with men. Let's look at some rarely talked about Scripture that are just as powerful and just as important as the one we have read. Judges 4, I hope you understood the story, I know we've read it a few times. Deborah is a Judge like Samson, like Gideon, she is the ruler of Israel. One of her generals disrespects her and says he will not send his troops to fight if she doesn't lead the charge. She is up to the task, leads the charge, and he loses face. Deborah is a figure in the Bible that flies in the face of the worth of women as portrayed by Leviticus. She is called a prophet, along the lines of Isaiah and Elijah, she was the spokesperson for God. It is probably this aspect of Deborah that men would want to ignore because speaking God's voice is something that only those ordained by God to do it can do. Deborah was, there is simply no getting around it.

In the New Testament to contrast the strong words of Timothy you have this truth that Paul says in part of the Christian life. In Galatians 3:28. How can one think that we are not all, men and women, equal partners, co-workers in our work for Christ? These verses are the foundation for our faith and our understanding that in Christ we are a new creation. All of us are a new creation and we become one creation and Christ sees us as one, God's children, not one above and the other below.

You know in Genesis 1:20 when the woman is made out of the side of Adam she is called his helper. Many see this term as subordination. But if you look at Psalm 30:10 listen to the words: Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper. I don't think David was asking him to be submissive, quiet, but rather this is God he was talking to. Same thing in 54:4: But surely, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life. I'll tell you, there are more times than not when Stacy has been that for me, my helper, as I hope and I pray I have been her helper, a companion, an equal to her. But we are not keeping score, for if we were, I'm afraid I would lose if that were a competition.

In Romans 16, we get a perfect example of how our understanding of women makes no sense in Paul's eyes, even though we take some of his words out of context and try to say they relate to us. Paul begins at 16:1 by saying, I commend to you our sister Phoebe. Many people stop right there, many denominations would like to keep Phoebe as their sister and that's all. But Paul goes on to say she is a deacon of the church, a diakonon. Now, I know in the Presbyterian church we have elders and deacons and it is biblical and both are ordained. Here this term deacon is the very same one used to describe Stephen, who was one of the most effective evangelists, the first martyr of the Christian Church. There is no getting around the fact that Phoebe was a minister in the early church.

But this is the smoking gun that proves that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was not merely for guys, or to give the y chromosome an advantage. Look at vs.7. Junia is called an apostle. An apostle. Yes, all of Jesus' disciples were males, but even in the first century there were female apostles. How do you get around that? If you want to try, then do some studying and come back and I would love to talk to you about it. But this is a distinction within the Presbyterian church, we are one of the denominations that have ordained women for the longest in the United States. The covenant our Savior established was not just for the men as seen from it being a transition from circumcision to baptism. Baptism which opens the arms of God for all, men and women to come in.

Today, we live in a culture where churches will not ordain women. Where women are seen as porcelain dolls too fragile to be of any good to anyone. Why do churches not read Romans 16 and explain the obvious and stop being threatened by God's own creation. I know tradition has its place, but God's Word and the Holy Spirit will eventually tear down that which is not God's will.

This Mother's Day Sunday we recognize that not only has God opened his Word and his love to men and women in this country but around the world. The sacrifice of our Savior frees us to live a life of liberty not bound to any cultural or man-made rules.

Amen.