

<sup>1</sup> Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup> saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" <sup>4</sup> Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, <sup>5</sup> "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. <sup>6</sup> As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' <sup>8</sup> But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' <sup>9</sup> But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' <sup>10</sup> This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. <sup>11</sup> At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup> he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' <sup>15</sup> And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>17</sup> If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" <sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

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Two weeks ago, we learned of Paul's transformative encounter on the road to Damascus, which was the subject of our first reading for that day. We asked in response how this experience changed not only his view of other people presumably outside God's plan for salvation (the Gentiles) but also his perspective on women. Were they equal partners with him in his ministry, or did he believe that men should be in charge?

A time machine, conveniently kept in hiding by my predecessors here at Queen Anne Lutheran Church, would help me find an answer. I would use it to travel back to Rome in the first century to speak with the Great Apostle and hopefully get some answers.

Then, however, I changed my plans. Last Sunday, you may recall, was not only Mother's Day. It was also the Fourth Sunday of Easter. The editors of the lectionary accordingly chose a resurrection story from the Book of Acts for our first reading. In it we learned about Tabitha, a woman Peter raised from the dead, and the only woman a writer in the New Testament explicitly identifies as a disciple of Jesus. It seemed fitting, therefore, to interview several of the women Paul names in his ministry before speaking with him directly.

And so, I got into the time machine and set my course for Cenchreae, a port near the city of Corinth. There we met Phoebe, a deacon of the church Paul selected to deliver his letter to the church in Rome some twenty miles away. She introduced us to Junia, the woman Paul names as "great among the apostles" according to the oldest copy of the letter we have.

Finally, after Phoebe and Junia, we met Priscilla. She and her husband were Jewish Christians who had been forced to leave Rome when the emperor Claudius expelled them in 49 AD. Paul tells us they oversaw a house church and that they risked their lives to save him. Luke, one of Paul's traveling companions, notes in the Book of Acts as well that Priscilla helped Aquila teach the wayward Apollos what it truly means to follow Christ.

All these women and the crucial roles they played in the early Jesus movement made me think of 1st Timothy, the letter Paul allegedly wrote that male leaders of the church have used across the centuries to justify the subordination of women and preclude them from serving in ordained ministry. Its words rang in my ears: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She is to keep silent . . . Yet she will be saved in childbearing, provided [she] continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (1 Tim 2:12, 15).

How could Paul say this, I wondered, given what he writes in Romans and Galatians about women and the prominent status they enjoyed in the early church? What, moreover, would I say to the women (and men) of my congregation when I returned? Was Paul simply a hypocrite, a misogynist who needed women to sustain his ministry even though he taught otherwise, or did he truly elevate women to the status of men as we apparently see in Letter to the Romans?

I had to find out.

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"Hurry, hurry" I could hear Priscilla say as she and Aquila cleaned the dining room of the house church in Rome where, as I shared last week, I was now staying. "No!" she said to one of the men I had not met as he opened a cupboard door. "The goblets go in that one there."

“The goblets?” I mused. These must be the chalices for wine from which the early followers of Jesus drank during one of their “love feasts” or “agape meals.” These meals had the purpose of cultivating fellowship and a sense of unity among their participants, each of whom belonged to the same mystical body of Christ regardless of their station in life, their ethnicity, or their gender. Everyone had a place at the Lord’s table, something that became especially evident when they celebrated the Last Supper of Jesus had with his disciples. All were welcome.

Unfortunately, distinctions often arose, and they invariably infuriated Paul. In 1st Corinthians, for example, he scolds wealthy Christians who, having had plenty to eat at home, humiliate the poor and leave them hungry by gorging themselves at the table and getting drunk. Why? Because just as there is neither Jew or Greek, male or female, and slave or free in Christ, as Paul observes in Galatians, there is also neither rich nor poor.

How incredible, I thought to myself. No wonder Thomas Cahill, author of the magnificent *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus*, claims that Paul “is downright rabid on the subject of economic equality,” so much so that he threatens the wealthy Corinthians who threaten to undermine it with damnation (142).

Just then, someone knocked at the door. “It’s him,” Priscilla said as daylight began to fill the room. “It must be him.” Everyone was quiet. Priscilla opened the door slowly, peaking around its edge as if she was expecting a Roman soldier instead of the Great Apostle.

“It is him!” she exclaimed. “Our beloved Paul!”

The house, now crowded with 20 or 30 people, erupted in cheer. I looked at the door, eager to see the man whose letters to house churches scattered across the eastern shores of the Mediterranean would change the world. At first, I could barely discern his figure through the doorway. Quickly, however, his features became apparent: he was short, gaunt, grizzled, and bald – a man in his mid to late 60s who had “fought the good fight . . . finished the race . . . [and] kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:7).

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It took a couple hours for the crowd around Paul to disperse. I understood their jubilation. Paul greeted 26 of them by name at the end of the letter Phoebe delivered. Some probably thought they would never see him again, that illness, imprisonment, or even martyrdom would take the precious life that God had given him.

By midday, however, the opportunity for me to speak with Paul arose. I asked Phoebe for an introduction. “Of course,” she said as we wiggled our way through the remaining five or six people who were still gathered around him. “Paul?” she inquired. “This is Dan. You’ll have to pardon his strange speech. He said he comes from the north, whatever that means.”

“Ah,” Paul replied, warmly grabbing my hand to shake it. “You must be a fellow Israelite with a name like that,” he said, “or perhaps even a prophet. Doesn’t your name in Hebrew mean God is my judge?”

“Yes, it does,” I said, “although I am neither an Israelite nor a prophet. I am a Gentile who is here to ask you about the role women play in your churches. I have to say, I am surprised at how many of them are leaders. In my time—er, I mean, where I come from—many people think you taught that women have no place in the ministry.”

“They don’t?” Paul asked, clearly puzzled. “Have you not met Phoebe, Junia, and Priscilla?”

“Yes,” I conceded, “and I also know of Tabitha from Joppa, the woman Luke calls a disciple of Jesus in the Book of Acts.”

“Acts?” Paul asked, obviously puzzled again. “The Book of Acts?”

I realized, of course, that Luke had yet to write the Acts of the Apostles. It would not appear until several decades after Paul died at the beginning of Nero’s reign. “Oh,” I replied, trying to cover my tracks. “Perhaps it’s just a rumor.”

“Well,” Paul said, “that would hardly be unusual for a member of Christ’s body. I called Junia ‘great among the apostles,’ as you may know. You see, the only distinctions I make in Christ are practical: the Holy Spirit calls some to be pastors and teachers, others to be evangelists, others for the sake of healing, and still others to lead and administer the business of the church. But anyone can serve in these roles, male or female. The Spirit blows where it will, as a friend of mine likes to say.”

“I remember your discussion about the gifts of the Spirit to the Corinthians,” I replied. “But didn’t you also say that women should be subordinate to men, that they should be excluded from the office of teaching?” I opened my Greek Bible to 1 Timothy and pointed to the relevant passage. Paul squinted his eyes as he looked down to read it. I forgot he was losing his sight.

“I never said that,” Paul responded. “Where did you get this collection of writings?”

“Onesimus, the slave you freed thanks to the letter you wrote to Philemon, has been gathering them out of gratitude for what you did.”

Paul nodded, unsure of how to assess my explanation. He turned back a page to the first chapter of the letter. “Oh, I like what it says here,” he remarked, pointing to the verse that talks about how Jesus came to save sinners. “That’s good news,” he said, confirming the letter’s value insofar as it contains at least glimpses of the gospel, the good news concerning how God in Christ has freed us from sin and death.

Paul continued to thumb through the other letters attributed to him. He stopped at Ephesians 2. "I didn't write this," he said, "but the person who did understands the gospel of grace almost better than I do. I couldn't agree more."

Paul's comment confirmed for me the nearly unanimous position of contemporary mainstream scholars: the apostle indisputably wrote seven letters in the Bible, the most influential of which are Romans and Galatians as well as First and Second Corinthians. Others came from students of Paul who wrote in his name, in some cases clarifying what he taught, as evident in Ephesians 2, while sometimes contradicting what he taught, as evident in what 1st Timothy 2 says about women in the ministry.

Having glanced at the letters a little more, Paul gave the Greek Bible back to me. "You are a strange man," he said. "Your accent, your mysterious origin, and your copy of my letters makes me wonder if you are an angel, or perhaps a visitor from another time in the future."

"Oh no," I assured Paul, "I am certainly not an angel."

"Very well," he replied. "Now as you might guess, I have other duties here that require my attention."

"I understand, but may I ask you one more question."

"Sure," Paul replied graciously. "What is it?"

"I have heard about your transformative experience on the road to Damascus, how you heard not just a voice but the voice that changed your outlook as well as your life."

"Yes, it certainly did," Paul said, smiling.

"I understand how it changed your view of God, how He came near to us in Christ Jesus and embraced us despite our sin. But how did it change the way you see other people, especially women? Are they truly equal partners with you in Christ or should men be in charge?"

Paul looked surprised. "Take a look around you," he said. "What do you see?"

"I see people regardless of gender or ethnicity working together, building one another up in Christ. I see men like Aquila in leadership roles, but I see women like his wife, Priscilla, in charge as well."

"Yes," Paul said, "and the reason you see these things is because when I encountered Christ, I learned that his kingdom turns the world upside down, erasing all the distinctions we receive from society and culture. When God, according to the Prophet Isaiah, says 'behold, I am doing a new thing,' we believe he was speaking about us. God in Christ Jesus invites us to live in a new way, one that anticipates the new world God promises to create paradoxically in the here and now."

I thought once more of Cahill, the author I mentioned earlier. He argues that even when Paul disparages women for not wearing veils due to Roman custom, as he does in 1 Corinthians 11, “his view of Christian community has no precedent in Western history” (148). Why? Because he obliterated power relationships in the faith communities he established (148). Thus, “women were as free to speak, to evangelize, and to administer in the Pauline churches as any man” (148).

What an incredible irony, I realized. Paul, the alleged misogynist, was in fact what Cahill calls “the New Testament’s ultimate democrat . . . the first person in history to exclude consciously all social grades, isms, and biases from his thinking, believing that nothing – not birth, nor ethnicity, nor religion, nor economic status, nor class, nor gender – makes anyone better than anyone else” (156).

How could what Paul teaches be anything but good news, the kind perhaps none of us would have ever expected to hear? “The primitive church was the world’s first egalitarian society,” says Cahill, and we owe virtually all of it to Paul and the transformative experience he had of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus” (157).

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My epiphany did not last long. Upon learning that Paul had arrived from Ephesus, other members of the church began pouring through the front door. I looked for Phoebe, wondering if she would guide me back to Cenchrea so that I could locate my time machine and return to Queen Anne. I had so much to tell everyone.

“Dan,” I heard someone say behind me. “Are you ready to return to the north?” It was Phoebe.

“Yes,” I said.

“I was guessing for some reason that your time with us might be coming to an end. Did you get the answers you were seeking?”

“Absolutely,” I replied. “You probably know that Paul is teaching something radical, something new, something unprecedented.”

“Why do you think I have such high regard for him?” Phoebe replied. “He gave so many of us new life in Christ, the kind that brought with it dignity – something Roman society does not offer to women unless they are rich.”

“I see that now,” I said. “But who will believe me when I return home?”

“We have a saying about preaching and teaching at my church in Cenchrea: ‘after you’ve done your best, let the angels do the rest’” (E. Stokes).

I thought about Phoebe’s gracious words throughout our journey back from Rome. The stars lit our way until, shortly after dawn, we arrived at the church where we originally met. She bid me farewell at the door, watching as I continued to the

dimly lit valley above the hills. There I found the time machine just as I had left it. I sat in its saddle, turned the dials to set my destination, and pushed the levers forward as the world around me began to spin.

It was yesterday evening (Saturday) when the spinning slowed and finally stopped. After tucking away the time machine, I returned to my office. I still had to prepare a sermon for tomorrow's services. What would I say? What would I tell everyone about Paul?

"Perhaps you should start with Peter," an unknown voice whispered to me as I glanced down at the first of our three readings in the bulletin on my desk. It was from Acts: Peter could not overcome the stark difference he perceived between Jews and Gentiles when it came to the kind of food they eat. But then, "the Spirit told [him] to go with [the Gentiles] and not to make a distinction between them and us" (Acts 11:12).

Not to make a distinction? That sounds exactly like Paul, I thought to myself. Would this justify another trip back to the first century so that I could conduct another interview, now with Jesus' chief disciple? Probably not. The congregation – and you, the reader – will have heard enough from Paul and Peter to make up their/your own minds about the status of women in the early church. Besides, I have other trips now I want to take.

Tune in next week when I share what it was like to meet the king of the dinosaurs, Tyrannosaurus Rex – assuming, of course, that I make it back.

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