

We Believe: Life Together
I Corinthians 14:26-40
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
June 24, 2007
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The phone rang – it was close to midnight. Usually, that means that something serious is going on. “Hello,” I said in my best ‘of course you can call the pastor whenever you need to, but I’m telling you now, this better be good’ kind of voice.

The woman on the other end of the line was not impressed by the delicate blend of humility and irritation with which I spoke. She and her husband had just become Christians and I had given them Bibles. They had decided that they’d read it before bed as a way to get to know the faith and grow as Christians. I have to say, she didn’t sound happy. “Who does Paul think he is, anyway, Pastor Dave? He sounds pompous and arrogant. This is really ticking me off!”

I LOVE that. Here she was, reading the Bible, and taking it seriously. How cool is that? So often, we read it and then go on with our day – not pausing to think what life might be like if we actually let it sink in enough to disturb us.

By the way, did anyone else catch the irony during the Bible reading? I mean, here’s Eve, obviously a woman, reading Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Out loud. In worship. Uh – oh...better check the ceiling plaster...

So what is up with Paul, anyway? There are many folks who know Paul as a misogynist – a woman-hater. A chauvinist. They look at passages like this and say, “You can’t take this guy seriously. He obviously has a problem.”

But if we read a little more of the New Testament, we see that Paul actually worked pretty well with women. He was a business and teaching parter with one woman (Priscilla). In many of his letters he wrote little “shout-outs” to women who were in leadership, like Phoebe, and Junias, and a dozen others. Paul did not hate women.

But here it is: women are not permitted to speak in church. Why would he say that?

Let’s look at the situation. Corinth had quite a reputation in the old days. If you were to say that someone was a Corinthian, you’d be saying that that person was a hard-drinking, sexually promiscuous, irreverent person. That didn’t stop Paul from showing up there and sharing the Good News about Jesus with the folks. With two of his partners (one of whom was a woman), he started a church, and pastored it for 18 months. The team moved on, trusting that the church would grow. Not too long afterward, Paul hears that the church has gone to pot. It’s a real mess – the people have reverted to their old habits. There is partying, sexual immorality, selfish behavior, backstabbing – you name it.

So in the first 12 chapters of I Corinthians, Paul walks through the issues. He calls them out, and tells them how to act faithfully towards God and one

another. He culminates this in Chapter 13, which many of us think of as “the love chapter”: “Love is patient, love is kind, etc...” Only he’s not reading this at a wedding, is he? He’s giving it to them because they are not loving each other. They are messing up, big time. And after teaching them about the issues, he then talks about the need to act in love towards each other.

Then in chapter 14, he gets around to the topic of worship. Apparently, some of the Corinthians have become fascinated with some of the “miraculous” gifts of the Spirit, including speaking in tongues and prophecy. And evidently, what happened is that folks would gather for worship, and then three or four at a time people would stand up and start to speak – some in the local language, others in a special “prayer language” – and the worship service itself was getting chaotic. In our reading for today, Paul essentially sits them down and says, “Look, folks, here’s how it’s going to be. If you’re going to call yourselves Christians, you’re going to act like it. You – sit down. You – be quiet. And everyone over here on this side of the room – just give it a rest, all right?”

OK, so why would Paul say THAT? Does Paul’s writing indicate that he believes that heaven is like that – that heaven is a place where women don’t say a word? Does Paul say that because God’s eternal intentions for the female of our species include perpetual silence?

No. In that place and time, women and men sat on separate sides of the worship space, and so if a woman wanted to ask her husband a question during worship it would be about like having Linda stand up and talk with Dennis during church. You can do it, but it’s not helpful to everyone, that’s for sure.

Paul’s not, so far as I can tell, revealing God’s hidden plan for women in these verses. He’s talking to a group of people who are in some degree of disruption and he’s saying, “Look, there’s a more important issue here. God is here. The most important thing that we can do in worship is to honor God. Sometimes, in order to do that, we’ve got to subdue our own intentions and desires if those inclinations lead us away from God – or if they lead others away from God’s best.

I love the way that Eugene Peterson translates verse 36: “Do you – both women and men – imagine that you’re a sacred oracle determining what is right and wrong? Do you think everything revolves around you?” Of course not. It revolves around God. We revolve around God.

We’ve been talking about what Presbyterians believe this month, and it seems to me that this emphasis on the centrality, power, and authority of God was captured well by our ancestors in faith. For instance, our own church’s constitution, the *Book of Order*, reads:

In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (USA) expresses the faith of the reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God’s sovereignty are other great themes of the Reformed tradition:

1) the election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation
[remember – we did this last week!]

2) Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God. [G-5.0500]

That second emphasis – the concern for order in the church – is what Paul was getting at in Corinthians. He's saying, "Look, the church is not here seeking merely personal agendas. We're not here to accomplish our own business – there is something incredibly important at stake here."

That means that if I see you in a bad place, I can't love you with the kind of love that 1 Corinthians 13 talks about and then pretend that I don't see you in that bad place. It means that I must love you enough to speak to you there.

It means that worship and indeed all of our life together is not about "my" rights or "your" rights – it's about pointing people to help and hope that is God's intentions in Jesus of Nazareth.

So for Paul, writing to an argumentative congregation two thousand years ago, it was easy to say, "Look, all of you – just settle! Be quiet. Don't talk. Don't even talk."

How do we understand that emphasis on order in the church today? Most of you weren't threatened by the proceedings of worship so far – we are pretty predictable. What is going on now?

There is a great deal of controversy in our denomination over another part of our constitution – one that relates to how we order ourselves, how we arrange our lives together. It comes in the part of the constitution that has to do with leadership in the church, and it says,

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to life either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. [G-6.0106b]

What does that mean? It means that when the church selects leaders, it can only select from among those men and women who have submitted their lives to the orthodox Christian teachings regarding marriage and sexuality.

I'll be honest with you – historically, the church has done a much better job at keeping the homosexuals out of the pulpit than they have at keeping the adulterers, or the racists, or the liars at bay.

However, I'm not really wanting to preach about any of those topics – and I know that some are saying, "Oh, praise the Lord! I thought he was going to mention sex again" and others are saying "Man, just when I thought it was

getting good...” Instead, I hope to lift up the truth that the most important thing in the room is not the pastor. It’s not the music. It’s not the stained glass, and it’s not even you. The most important thing that can happen is that we, as a body of Christ, are honoring God. Another way of saying that is to say that our life together is bound to be a sign of Christ’s love to a world that is pretty broken.

When we are confronted with problems and with sin – as every church is, has been, and will be – do we love each other enough to work through it? Do we refuse to stand on our “rights” and instead, submit ourselves to God’s word and God’s guidance?

I believe that the church has the right – and the duty – to say, here are behaviors which are not acceptable for anyone in a position of leadership. I believe that the church has the obligation to follow through on that in the spirit of love that can be found in I Corinthians 13.

And I’m here to tell you that that is hard work. It is messy. It is, in many ways, simply un-American. We want to call our own shots and we refuse to let anyone else get between us and what we want to do.

But here is the truth: we cannot be the church unless we have the willingness to listen, to submit, and to love each other *more than* we love our desire to fulfill whatever personal “need” we experience at the moment. You have elected elders and deacons here. And you have said to them, “Look, I know that there may be times when you are tempted to behave unethically. But I am asking you to refuse to do that. And I am expecting you not to hold up a sinful behavior and pronounce it a healthy one.”

Here’s the truth: the church in Corinth was a mess. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is a mess. Pittsburgh Presbytery is having some hard times right now. And we are the Body of Christ in this place at this time.

Let us love one another enough to expect honorable behavior.

To speak truly to each other.

To call for the best from one another.

And to keep the main focus on God’s concern for the world he loves. God bless you. Amen.