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July 8th 2012 @ First Presbyterian Church of Allegan

Gender Equality: Equal but Different?

I Tim 2:8-15

Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.

⁹ I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, ¹⁰ but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

¹¹ A woman^[a] should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man;^[b] she must be quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. ¹⁵ But women^[c] will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Gal. 3:19-29

¹⁹ Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. ²⁰ A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.

²¹ Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. ²² But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

²³ Before the coming of this faith,^[i] we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

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Today we continue our Summer sermon series of things that Christians disagree on with a discussion of Gender roles. And our premise today is that how we view the Bible and how we believe or do not believe the views that we are taught by our church really do have an effect how we can see or not see God's potential for our lives in respect to our gender roles. Today's sermon is a deeply personal one for me; because it is the story of my life, and how my views about if I could be a woman in leadership in the church have changed.

When I was a little girl, I had three major spiritual influences in my life. The first was my grandmother, my beloved Oma who lived right next door. The second was my North American Baptist church that we faithfully attended every Sunday morning, Sunday night and every Wednesday night, and the third huge influence was my very conservative Bob Jones inspired Christian school. --All three of these spiritual influences in my life were in complete and total agreement: Women were and could be many things. ---But women were not to be the spiritual leaders in the home, church or in the community. That duty was reserved for men. *That was the way that God had ordained it in the beginning, and that was the way God wanted things to be.* --For men to be in spiritual leadership was for me, as a little girl, a truth that was beyond questioning. And who would

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question God? Certainly not me. I was a smart and good little girl, one who always tried hard to please people. I tried to be good and to please God too ---by following all of God's rules. But that didn't stop God from tugging my heart in a different and unorthodox direction.

One day when I was about eight years old, I was down at the soccer field at Grace Christian School. The sun was shining, there was a blue sky and the boys on the field were playing hard. But I wasn't that interested in the game, and I was kind of wandering around when one of the teachers struck up a conversation with me. "So Karen, what do you want to be when you grow up?" I still to this day remember my answer. It simply came out of me like a huge truth from the bottom of my soul. I said, "If I were a boy, I would be a pastor; but because I am a girl, I will be a pastor's wife." The man smiled and expressed his approval for my good and wonderful answer. And he said that someday I would make some pastor a very good wife. And I, basking in the attention and the approval of those who cared for me, couldn't even imagine that someday that question and my answer to it would become much bigger and more complicated.

You see, Christians come from all sorts of different perspectives; some believe that the Bible is a product of human spiritual experience, and

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that errors have crept into it over time. But other Christians believe that the Bible was literally dictated by God and that it is completely without error, even in its smallest detail. This last perspective was the one that I was raised in. Every day in school during Bible Class we had to stand and recite a Christian catechism by the Primitive Baptist Pastor, Zach Guess. Among the questions the teachers asked us was: "Is all of the Bible true?" And the entire class would drone together, "Yes. Every word is true." The teacher would tell us every day how God wrote the Bible: "God told some men who were his children what to write, and they wrote it down." All through elementary school, I was indoctrinated with this perspective and everything I saw and questioned was explained to me from that same theological context. ---I had no other frame of reference that women could be in spiritual leadership. Except for one small exception.

The church of my childhood, Oakridge Baptist in St. Joseph, MI has a long history of supporting missionaries and their families. On the wall in the narthex of the church, near the coat racks, there were always pictures of our missionaries. All of them were pictures of husbands and wives together with their families, except for one. There was one woman who was alone. I don't even remember her name, but I do remember her picture, and I remember that she served as a Missionary to Africa. As I

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grew older and I begin to question the status quo more and more, my answer to the question of what I wanted to be when I grew up changed. By the time I got to Jr. High, I began to say that *“When I grew up, I was going to be a missionary because they let women preach in other countries.”* --- This sentence usually caused wide eyed shock on the part of my Christian School teachers, but little was said to me except that whatever I did as a missionary would need to be approved by a mission’s board.

Time marched on, and my theological questions for my teachers in my Christian High School began to get sharper and more pointed. I began to read the Bible carefully, underlining and taking notes, and I got very good at arguing my points using little snippets of scripture in the “proof texting” style which so many of the guest preachers in our chapel services used. One day in Bible class, I was arguing that women could be in leadership over men in the career world, and I was using the example of the Judge Deborah from the Old Testament. Chatting with my teacher after class, he asked me why I didn’t use Gal. 3:28 as part of my argument. I said, “What is Galatians 3:28?” And he quoted: **“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** If there could be a

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sound that describes mental slamming of brakes, it would have screeched through the classroom room at that moment. In all of my years of going to church and being in Christian school; **I had never heard of that scripture, ever.** It was never part of any of our curriculum and it was never the text of any sermon that I had ever heard at church or at school. I began to wonder what else was in the Bible that they had never told me, and I read the Bible cover to cover. I began to note that there were disagreements between different parts of the Bible and that there were discrepancies in some of the stories. –That both of the Biblical accounts couldn't be literally true in every word! One day I pointed some of the discrepancies out to the same helpful teacher who told me about Galatians 3:28. He said. "Of course there are discrepancies. The most famous is fact that the Gospel of Mark has two endings." My mouth dropped open. In fascination, I turned to the end of Mark. My leather bound King James Bible had glossed right over Marks two ending fact with merely a brief footnote, while my teacher's Study Bible had delineated it clearly. The teacher then explained that the Bible was only inerrant and completely true only in the original versions, the autographs, which we don't have any more. I immediately saw the hole in that argument. "So how do we know which parts of the Bible that we have now are true?" I asked. He looked uncomfortable. "We examine scripture

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in light of scripture, and we have to have faith in the Holy Spirit and our leaders.”

From that point on, my view of scripture had changed. While I had grown up as a Christian with the perspective that the Bible was literally true and accurate in every word, and I had accepted on faith the word of my pastors and teachers what God's rules were for me as a woman, I began to question everything that I had been taught. At my school, my reputation began as a theological rebel, because I wouldn't hesitate to challenge my teachers right in front of the class. And also in a spirit of independence, I decided that I was going to go to Calvin College in Grand Rapids. With my classmates and teachers fearing for the state of my soul at such a liberal college, I was shocked during my first semester there. The other students had very different world views and different understandings of world history than I did. They had read books that I had never heard of. But for the first time in my life, especially in my philosophy classes, what I said and the arguments that I made were not immediately discredited on account of my gender. I loved the intellectual and theological freedom of college. I read anything I wanted to, especially any book that was banned, and I started to attend churches in different denominations, always asking questions and trying to figure them out.

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It was while I was at Calvin College, that I met Bill who was going to Hope. And he and I fell in love over our long theological conversations and bitter games at the chessboard. I transferred to Hope. We were married in 1991, and I graduated from Hope in 1992, and I was immediately was drawn to take classes at Western Theological Seminary and GREEK back at Hope after I had graduated. I was still investigating what the Bible said on various topics, and my new skills in Greek just sharpened my questions further. While I told myself and everyone else that I was simply taking seminary classes to be a professor some day, there was no doubt that I kept feeling drawn toward ministry jobs, and it was a part time youth director position at Port Sheldon Presbyterian that caused us to discover the Presbyterian Church USA. Bill and I were both delighted with this denomination. I loved the fact that the denomination was hugely committed to education and did not shy away from dialoging over tough questions, while Bill especially appreciated the democratic representative form of church government that we enjoy.

But even though I had now joined a denomination that allowed and encouraged women to be ministers of word and sacrament, I was still very hesitant to follow God's call in my own life. I was afraid to listen to that sense of call that God kept giving me and to put away as false all of the

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things about the limited roles for women that I had been taught as a child. I was literally afraid that at the last judgment, that God would shake his head at me and say, “Sorry, Karen you were wrong. Women are not supposed to be pastors. You will burn in hell forever.” My fear of eternal punishment by an exacting and authoritarian God held me back like I was in shackles for years; despite the continued yearning that I felt to do ministry, despite the obvious gifts that God had given to me for preaching and leadership.

It took years, but finally, I stopped running and I said yes to the call of God to be a pastor, and I went back to seminary full time. By the Grace of God, I did an independent study with Diane Maodush Pitzer and the Women’s Leadership Institute. And it was through that opportunity that I learned some new and different theology, and I processed all of my fears and the anger that came along with it. And it is through the grace and the will of God that I honored and blessed to be standing in front of you today, ordained as a Presbyterian Minister of Word and Sacrament, and as your servant leader in this church.

While my heart and love for Christ has not changed over the years, my thinking and my understanding of what God could be calling me to do with the gifts that I have been given has been stretched far beyond anything I could imagine as a little girl growing up in a very small theological box.

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For while I used to believe that the phrase that men and women were equal in Christ but called to different roles in the church based on our gender; I now believe that everyone is equal in Christ, but called to use all of the different gifts that we have been given without the boundaries of any human categories. Today I believe that God does not make those limitations. We do. Young or old, male or female, black or brown or white, gay or straight, rich or poor, educated or not; God gives us gifts without discrimination, and calls us to use those gives to serve the world and to show everyone the love of Christ! May we open our hearts to the call of God in our lives every day and serve the world in love with all that we are. Amen.