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A Heart for God: Luke's Special Witness
Sermon 2 - Women

a sermon on Luke 8.1-3; 10.38-42
by David C. Mauldin
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

You can learn a lot from children's cartoons. More than you would think – if you pay attention. I was at a restaurant and they had a television on. It was on a kid's channel, no doubt to keep the younger patrons quiet. The show was "The Flintstones." I'm sure we've all seen "The Flintstones," that modern stone-age family. I was amazed at how the interactions between men and women were portrayed. Loud-mouthed Fred ruled his family with iron-clad authority. His wife, Wilma, seemed to need his permission for the smallest things. Of course, Wilma was brighter and usually more perceptive than Fred, and she controlled things behind the scenes. She and Betty manipulated Fred and Barney to do what the girls wanted, though all the while the boys thought it was their idea.

"The Flintstones" is a product of its times. I know my family was that way when it was intact. My father called the shots, but my mother usually managed to get her way. That's the classic patriarchal model. For many centuries, that was the model the church used. The church didn't start out that way, but for a very long time, men controlled everything. In many denominations, they still do.

An image we can use to picture this patriarchal model is a march. Men are out in front, leading the way, calling the cadence. Women march along obediently behind.

In the time since "The Flintstones" American society has become more egalitarian. Men and women are viewed as equal, which is a good thing. But progress has come at a price. Men and women compete now, for turf, for authority. We often find between the sexes, not harmony, but rivalry. Now it's men vs. women and women vs. men. The march has become a race.

Is there another way for men and women to relate? Must one sex dominate the other or must they be forever in competition? Why can't we have, instead of a march or a race, a dance? In a dance the two sexes move together, not in competition, but with each complementing the other. I believe this is possible, at least in Christian marriages and in the church. I believe this is how God intended it to be. God did not want the relationship between men and women to be marked by dominance or competition, but with mutual respect and submission. God wants a dance, and a dance is possible. The

secret to it is really simple. The secret is nothing more than good, old fashioned Christian discipleship. Christian discipleship is the foundation for right relations between the sexes. When we follow Jesus Christ, and we understand things like leadership, authority, and greatness the way he does, our homes and our churches will not look like a march or a race. They will have the beauty of a dance.

This is the second sermon in my series called “A Heart for God.” It is about the special witness of Luke, those things Luke cared most about and wanted to make sure we do not miss. Luke worried about his Christian friends because they didn’t fit in anymore in their communities. That was last week’s sermon. The other two will be about money and prayer. This one is about women. Luke cared deeply about the place of women in the church. And he expressed that concern in a clever way. He did not write a manifesto about the rights of women or a theological treatise arguing for their importance. Instead he shared stories of actual women who were disciples. Luke told the story of Jesus in a way that takes seriously the experiences and the roles of women. And he shows us that Jesus himself cared deeply about these things. Luke does not define discipleship for us, he shows us what it looks like. And he does not define women’s roles in the church. He shows us.

Luke begins his gospel with two pregnant women sharing their joy, Mary and Elizabeth. The Virgin Mary is the first to hear the Good News about the Savior. She is the first disciple. When the angel tells her she will bear a Son, she believes God’s promise and she responds by saying, basically, “Thy will be done.” That’s discipleship.

Anna the prophetess, the forgiven woman who anointed Jesus’ feet, and Mary and Martha are just a few of the women who figure prominently in Luke’s gospel. The book of Acts continues the theme by introducing us to women like Priscilla and Lydia. My favorite moment from Jesus’ ministry is this: On his way to heal a little girl, Jesus stops suddenly and demands to know, “Who touched me?” A woman who had suffered for many years came forward, terrified. She had reasoned that if she just touched Jesus’ garment, she would be healed. She had not expected Jesus to take notice. Jesus, however, looks on her with compassion and says, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace” [8.48]. Jesus called her *daughter*.

Women figure as main characters in some of Jesus’ parables in Luke’s gospel, including the woman who lost her coin and the woman who pestered the judge. Throughout all the gospels, Jesus’ male disciples constantly misunderstand and fail. They argue about who is greatest. Often they show us exactly what discipleship is not. It is not about power and privilege. Jesus has to explain to them that the greatest is the one who is the servant of all. That he himself came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. The men struggle with this. Peter still doesn’t get it when Jesus tries to wash his feet – though that account comes from John’s gospel. In all the gospels, Jesus calls men and women to radical discipleship. Discipleship means believing the

promise, serving others, and taking up a cross. His male disciples have to choke this down and learn it the hard way. It is not what they are used to. The women tend to get it right. The women understand grace. The women respond appropriately. And when the men run away, the women gather at the cross.

Mary Magdalene becomes the first apostle, for she meets the risen Lord, and he sends her to tell the other disciples that he is alive. She is the first to bear the Good News. This was very appropriate. It was as if God were reversing the Fall in Eden. There the woman ate the fruit and gave it to the man. Now a woman would give the life-giving Good News to men.

In first century Jewish culture, women were second class citizens. Many men in that time and place believed women should not even be seen, much less heard. Women could not testify in court. Most rabbis would not teach women. That culture considered women inferior to men. Against this background, Jesus' attitude toward women is astonishing. He valued their experiences and gave them a prominent role. He called them to the same radical discipleship as men. We see this in our scripture readings.

You ought to know, these readings are not really about women. In a secondary way they are, because women are the main characters. Actually, though, they are about discipleship. Remember, Luke doesn't tell us, he shows us. Look at the first reading.

It says the twelve were with him, as well as some women. Being *with* Jesus is a code word for discipleship. That's what discipleship means, being *with* Jesus. Jesus traveled around with more than just his twelve disciples. At one point he sent out seventy of them on a mission, so we know there were a lot more. Both men and women. Three women are named here: Mary Magdalene (and scripture never says she was a prostitute; it only says she had been possessed by demons); Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward (so we see Jesus reaching both rich and poor); and Susanna. Luke tells us there were many others. They supported Jesus' ministry from their own resources.

That's discipleship. Discipleship means giving, generously and sacrificially. These women understood that. They were not trying to pay Jesus back for whatever good he had done for them. They had received grace, and they wanted to give. They were excited about Jesus' message, and they wanted others to hear it. They gave with glad and joyful hearts.

So these women were with Jesus. They believed. They followed. They listened to his teaching. They gave generously. We are starting to get a picture of discipleship.

In the other reading, Martha fulfills the traditional role for women in that society, hospitality. Mary chooses something new, to sit at Jesus' feet and learn. Both women

show us discipleship in action. Jesus does not criticize Martha. This passage is about priorities. It is about choosing between what is good and what is better. That's a big issue in discipleship. When you try to follow Jesus with all your heart, you run into this sort of dilemma all the time. It's not the choice between good and evil. That tends to be obvious, even though evil can be awfully tempting. No, it's the choice between two things that are both good, and which one is better? Mary chose what is better. She sat at Jesus' feet with his male disciples and listened to his words. The word *disciple* means learner. A disciple of Jesus learns from him who God is, who we are, and how we ought to live.

OK, let's pause for a moment to get our bearings. What have we found out so far? Two things: One, Jesus cares deeply about women's experiences and their roles. Jesus had compassion for women. He included women among his disciples. He broke with convention and tradition to give women roles they did not usually have, including studying with a rabbi and giving testimony to the resurrection. We get from Jesus the idea that God does not intend women to be in the background. They are important. Jesus does not intend the relationship between the sexes to be characterized by either domination or competition. He obviously has something else in mind. Cooperation. Mutual respect. Mutual submission. An equality measured not by power but by service.

Two, when we start trying to describe how Jesus intends the sexes to get along, we end up talking about discipleship. "Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus commanded on the night before he showed us what true love looks like. At that same Last Supper, the twelve argued about which of them was the greatest. Can you imagine Jesus' frustration? He's about to die, and he's trying to prepare them for this. Meanwhile they are bickering about which of them is greatest! He told them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

Jesus defines things like power, authority, and greatness *very* differently from the way his culture and ours define them. As long as we use the world's definitions of these things, the relationship between the sexes will always be either a march or a race. When we start to live and think like Jesus, a new possibility opens for us. A dance. Instead of seeing one another as competition, we realize we are on the same team. Instead of grasping for precious power to get my way, we discern together what is best. Instead of asking, "What do I get out of this?" we ask, "What can I give?" Mutual respect. Mutual submission. Unselfish love. God's kingdom and glory, not my personal happiness, as the highest goal.

OK, that's what we've got so far. Now what are we going to do with it? For now, I'll leave it to those of you who are married to work out discipleship in your relationship with your spouse. I am sure there's not a marriage among us that couldn't benefit from more thorough discipleship. My concern today, though, is the church.

As I look out at the congregation this morning, I am pleased to see so many young women and girls among us. What I say next I say to you: God is calling you. God may call you to be a pastor. God may call you to be a deacon. God may call you to be an elder. Even if God does not call you to ordained leadership in the church, God will certainly call you to ministry of some kind – serving others in his name. I want you to be open to his call. Listen for it. Answer and obey. You parents of girls, especially those little ones who are back in children's church: Remember this sermon! Make sure your daughters know the hand of the Lord is upon them! He will call them. Encourage them to listen. I can see some parents with an apprehensive look. You may be thinking, "I wouldn't want my daughter, or my son, to be a pastor!" It's not a vocation we choose. God calls. And God has a way of getting us where he wants us to be. You girls, you young women, keep yourselves open and ready for God's call.

One more thing about the church: You know I am not calling for major changes because our denomination ordains women to every office in the church: pastor, elder, and deacon. Here at Westminster our pastor happens to be a man, but most of our deacons and many of our elders are women. I believe this is a wonderful thing. I consider it a strength of our congregation. And I believe this is how God intends for things to be.

That last thought is the most important, that *God intends* for women to have leadership in the church. Most denominations do not allow women to serve in all leadership positions. They believe they are holding firm to God's will as revealed in scripture. They think we have sold out to the culture. This is why we have to be very clear that the reason we ordain women to every office in the church is we find warrant to do so in scripture.

Beeson Divinity School, where I study, is ecumenical. My cohort started with ten students, and we represented seven different denominations. There are women on the faculty and among the student body. There are women pastors in the doctor of ministry program, though not many. Many of my colleagues believe in ordaining women, many do not. Some believe it is OK for women to be deacons or elders, but not pastors. Others believe it is wrong for women to teach men in the church, even in a Sunday school class. We discuss our differences in a very friendly, loving way. That's one of the things I love about the program. We don't fight, and we don't argue; but we do discuss, and we do press one another pretty hard.

A few of us were discussing this issue one day, and I was arguing from scripture why the church ought to ordain women. I asked, "Did women receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost or not?" That's the argument Pentecostals use; they've been ordaining women for 150 years. If God gives women the Holy Spirit, why can't they preach? Isn't the Spirit what matter most? I also asked my colleagues, "What about Galatians 3.28, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'?" "What about the role women had in Jesus' ministry, in the church in Acts, and in Paul's ministry?" One guy pointed to 1 Corinthians 14.34, "Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says." He thought that ought to settle it. I directed him back just one page in the Bible to 1 Corinthians 11.5, where Paul wrote in that same letter, "Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head." I asked him, "How did they pray and prophesy and keep silent at the same time, I asked. Were they mimes?" Whatever is going on in this letter, it is not so simple that you can take one verse and settle the issue once and for all.

We have to be clear that when we ordain women we are trying our best to be faithful to scripture. That's so important. The church does not belong to us. We can't do with it whatever we want. Some church leaders think it does, and we can. And usually they want to change the church to suit the trends of the day. But this is exactly what we are not allowed to do. The church belongs to God. Jesus Christ is its head. Any change we make must therefore be rooted in our best understanding of scripture. We ordain women because we have found warrant to do so in scripture.

We didn't change the church because society changed. We changed because we always want to be faithful to scripture. The times we live in may make it easier or harder to hear what the Bible says, but the Bible remains our authority.

In conclusion, our church gives women an equal standing with men because of scripture. It's simply our way of living out our discipleship. God wants the relationship between men and women to be like a dance, not a march or a race. Marches and races are how the world does things. Jesus does things differently. All relationships within the church should be characterized by love, mutual submission, unselfish giving, service, and a shared concern for God's glory. That's what discipleship is all about. And when we get it right, our life together is beautiful. Amen.

rev_mauldin@yahoo.com