

“Women & Justice” (15July18)
Genesis2; Galatians3:26-28,4:7; Proverbs3;
ELCA Social Statement draft*

With this draft social statement, more Bible study may be a helpful approach. How we hear from the Bible and how we warp it to our own perspectives has been a major factor in the injustices and dismissiveness for women and girls, but the Bible also has extremely strong resource for resolution.

I want to commend again the chance to read more of the statement. First, because this good strong biblical study and examination is in the document itself, so you’re not just hearing me reflect on our faith and gift from God.

But I also suggest reading it to offer your input. The ELCA will have been working on this project for nearly a decade by the time it comes to a vote at next summer’s Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee. Some of you were part of the process in three study sessions we did last summer. Through September, you can submit comments on what you like or struggle with in the draft.

One other note on process: I want to pause and observe that I’m a male talking about the Women & Justice social statement. At first, I felt awkward about that, as if it doesn’t really relate to me. But of course, it relates intimately and deeply. In the end—just the reverse—I was sad we didn’t have more male participation in our studies and would be nervous if men were not talking about this, since it in some way would fail to own our place either with the problem or the solution.

Recognizing this is something that we all need to work on together, let’s approach it with the Genesis passage we heard. It probably sounded different than what you are used to hearing or how you usually think of this. This is one of those Bible stories that has come to define even our cultural perceptions; although, I’d be quick to say that it isn’t so much the Bible itself that has shaped—or warped—us, but a particular translation and interpretation.

See, as we heard it just now, it was a more authentic translation from the original Hebrew. This has wordplay throughout, so you get to learn some Hebrew. The first word to know is *adamah*. That means earth. The second Hebrew word you already know: *adam*. But you probably think that means, what? Actually it is more like “earthling.” God took earth and made an earthling. It’s not a proper name, “Adam,” and is not at all helpful to translate it as “man,” which disconnect the human from the humus, separates us from the land as our origin, and also can be applied to put men (meaning males) first, before all the rest.

Our problem is that since the King James Version at least, that male-centered application of this passage has dominated. The translators did their own picking and choosing to warp things that weren’t in the Hebrew. Right away they started putting in the word “man,” and eventually there gets to be a capital-A guy named Adam.

And after he’s done tilling up the land and categorizing the beasts, this Adam is on a hunt for a wife as a helper. She gets subordinated as being made from a small piece of her husband. That’s a big difference from how we heard it, not as how a man finds a wife, but as a human being the most fitting companions for each other. We might paraphrase the point of Genesis that while a dog may be man’s best friend, that pales next to general human relationships. As the draft statement phrases it, “God creates community and family, not a hierarchy based on... sex (what our bodies look like biologically) or gender (how people express themselves)” (13).

So there we have an enormously influential example of how patriarchal structure and sexist presuppositions have taken what was originally a gender-neutral passage about our connections to earth and the goodness of shared companionship with each other and instead twisted it into a domineering masculine blueprint which, by the end of the next chapter, blames females for all evil and brokenness. That’s abusive not only to women, but also to scripture itself.

The second part of our Bible study, has to recognize that there, of course, too many of parts

* <http://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Current-Social-Writing-Projects/Women-and-Justice/Draft>

of the Bible that are ugly to begin with, where it's not the fault of later translators or misguided theologians but is bad from the get-go.

I'd like to hold these in two categories: problems with old culture, and problems still with our culture.** I was thinking about including a problematic Bible reading, but since I even got pushback last week on Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, I figured it was maybe going to be too much to ask somebody to read such hard words from the Bible.

There are too many of them, but an especially striking one mentioned in the draft is from 1st Timothy. Brace yourselves. "Women should dress modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty." (2:9-15)

I agree that you should never have to hear from 1st Timothy in worship. Yet this horrible stuff has had various influence in the church. It may not have affected whether you're wearing gold today or how you did your hair, but may have contributed to the sense of being dressed in our "Sunday best." Worse, in some denominations women aren't allowed to teach Sunday School beyond 5th grade, because then a woman would be teaching a so-called man. Passages like this are still used to say women can't be pastors.

What may hit closest to home and be the most insidious is the end, that says women will be saved by childbirth, as long as your kids turn out okay. I know many of you already feel that judgmentalism much too strongly, without extra theological pressure, questioning how good of a mother you are, and how good of a person, and how good of a Christian. Yuck. Awful. Wrong.

I want you to understand that that passage should not speak to us here and now. It reflected standard Greco-Roman culture. It makes me even angrier that this wasn't supposed to be Christian

practice, even back then. This claims to be written by Paul, but is exactly the reverse of what Paul really believed and taught, as we'll hear at the end. Instead, this was the dominant culture trying to subvert Paul and undermine Jesus and keep the women subordinate and submissive while reasserting the old cultural power of men, to displace the true teaching of the church.

So that's a passage from the Bible bearing the marks of a former society, and is problematic mainly because it keeps trying to influence our sense of how things should be now.

There are also really hard Bible passages that portray ongoing problems, where it may only make things worse when we don't hear them. I'm thinking first of some very disturbing stories about rape. We don't read those, but they could remind us the Bible speaks of our human realities, even when they're not pleasant. We may especially need to hear stuff like that to clarify what's wrong in our faith's perspective and yet that our tragedies don't ultimately separate our stories from God's. We have to notice, how we see our reality is closely tied to our perception of God, whether as bullying old guy on a cloud or with us in suffering and struggling for life.

In a similar way, this statement directly identifies problems and struggles—objectification, abuse, sexual assault, stereotypes, economic injustices, inadequate health care and the politicization of bodies, vocations from in the home to business leader or pastor, family roles and division of labor, immigration policies, human trafficking, jokes, media, legal processes, and so on. To these complex realities needing improvement, even though we don't have quick, perfect, or easy solutions, the statement commends to us that the church's role is to follow God in struggling against such problems and striving for justice and equity.

Finally, that points us to the clear and beneficial part of our Bible study. We've looked at where we've created the problem by adding sexist interpretations. We've looked at history of dominant cultures as persisting the problems. Now we arrive at some of the solution of

** see especially statement pp30-32, 49-50

scripture, including the good news Paul proclaimed: there is no longer male or female, for all are one in Christ, and all are heirs.

Again, to hear the richness of the biblical background, Paul was preaching this into and against that patriarchal culture where only males could receive an inheritance. He's not saying that differences between us don't matter. Rather, he insists that our differences don't preclude us from the fullness of God's blessing. Paul clearly identified the love of God for all, the relationship with Jesus as life-giving for all, the work of sharing this love and life as the responsibility of all, to change a sinful culture, bringing women to the same standing as men.

The statement faithfully identifies that we put more weight on passages like this than on the crap from 1st Timothy (though the statement doesn't quite label it that way). This is the sort of belief and attitude that we can hold to for the sake of our own life and wellbeing and also which is our resource to offer to the world, that our sense of God isn't limiting but expansive and diverse, that we aren't confined by rigid orders of what's acceptable as our pre-ordained potential but instead have at our core an identity of belovedness, of connection, of equity and equality. Our belief is in fully honoring and supporting, celebrating and affirming each other and our own lives, and that becomes our practice to embody Jesus in value and grace and reconciliation and understanding and care. That is what the Holy Spirit is accomplishing and what God intends for all, for us, for you.