

In Search of an Unknown God, Part 1
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Ok... so WOW.

I can't say that word has often come to my mind, when reading the words of Paul, but it's been happening more and more, lately.

I was off-standish with him for a while, and it was because of this fact that people had mis-used his words so long to keep people *away* from the church. For so many years of my own life, I harbored this silent bitterness toward Paul, Which I never really spoke of, out loud, but felt deep in the gut.

And the reason was this: People had used out-of-context statements made by Paul, To wrongfully keep women from positions of leadership in the church.

The worst living example of this I'd ever seen was one evening I spent in "Christian fellowship" with a bunch of ladies down in Texas.

---The night which made me feel so disillusioned toward the way people used the bible to support Immoral, improper agendas, that I actually didn't pick the book up again for another THREE YEARS, afterward.

(And yes, this was *after* I'd received my call to ministry.

I refused to read the bible for roughly a third of a decade. Amazing—and horrible--- huh?)

I hadn't decided against going into the ministry, during this time.

My call from God was clear. Loud.

...One of the most certain things I'd ever known or experienced then, and still to this day. It wasn't because of what the bible **says** that made me not want to pick it up, but because of what *people*---what **we** had done with some of the words.

So here's what happened. Some of you have heard this story before, but not yet from the pulpit.

Just after receiving my call to ministry, I spent a lot of time at the church, of course.

I'd made some of the most wonderful friendships

I'd ever experienced in a congregation

(until I came to this one...and no, I'm not just saying that. It's the blessed truth).

Anyway, one night, a few of the older ladies invited me

to go out with them to a Women's Spiritual revival.

I was just a teenager at the time, but wasn't too into the big parties until I went off to college,

so to me, this sounded like a grand old time. I very enthusiastically agreed to go along.

Now, this event was **huge**. Took up an entire coliseum, near downtown Houston.

It wasn't a Methodist event... actually, it was Baptist...

...but we all figured (maybe a little naively, at the time)...

'Eh---Christian's Christian, right? What does it matter?'

(ha! Some of you might already know where all of this is heading)

We find our seats inside, squished like sardines between shoulders.

---All women. Wasn't a man in sight. And if there was,

they were too squished between large bosoms to notice.

As we settled, in my head, I was so *eager*, because a *woman*

was also going to be *leading* the event.

---Preaching. Talking, to this *huge* crowd of people!

I'd actually never seen a woman preach before that night (I'd met *one* female pastor, before,

but never heard her preach, or watched her do her job;

and because I was a small woman myself, I thought it might be empowering to listen to her do the work of ministry.

I remember the night started out okay. She got up there---

---so vibrant and passionate with her words.

And I was filled with hope. Energy. Excitement.

Listening, I imagined what it might be like to be in that sort of position, talking about God in front of people who were actually listening.

And boy was I scared at the idea of it, but also so deeply enlivened, at the same time.

Now, you might be thinking... 'well, this doesn't sound too bad.

How on earth did this lead you into letting your bible collect dust for three whole years?'

And here it is... smile still spread across my face,

This *woman*, standing in front of this massive crowd of *thousands* of *women*,

In the middle of her sermon, started going off about how it is our biblical obligation,

As women, to be submissive, to our men.

Ugh--- Wow. Okay. Red flag. Red flag. Red flag!

Absolutely archaic, right?

Geez, you'd think she was just mindlessly repeating words
out of the mouth of a *man* from the first century or something.

...And yes, of course, she was.

She was repeating the words of Paul. But she went further, even, going past the,

'oh honey, let me iron your shirt and massage your feet
if you promise to let me see my friends on Saturday,' bit.

As my wide smile wilted, this woman, speaking to thousands of *women*,

Then started on this tangent, about how it is a "sin"
for a woman to be in leadership in the church!

And it went on, from here! In this obvious position

of leadership in the church, at the altar, she then got on her *knee*,

And started shouting about how we are supposed to "bow down! Bow down!"

To the authority of men, in our spiritual homes. In our congregations!

And maybe the *worst* part of all of this, was there was no *grumbling*
amongst these women so closely surrounding my shoulders.

There was no uproar, or massive evacuation of the coliseum!

Not only did the women *stay*...but they cheered.

(Felt kind of like Princess Amidala in that scene from the Star Wars prequel...

when the senate applauds for Palpatine. "So this is how liberty dies... with thunderous
applause!")

I was just young, but I can right now see it and hear it, as if it were still all around me.

Just as short then, my memory of this is at shoulder-level.

---All of those shoulders bent as the arms raised high in *praise* for what she'd just said.

And again, her justification for saying such a ridiculous thing,
was founded in the words of *Paul*.

I left that place feeling emptier, more helpless, more lost, more confused,
and far **angrier** with organized religion than I'd ever before felt in my life.

I left that place feeling tossed away, and weak.

I left that place which was supposed to be a place of *empowerment* for women,
Feeling rejected. Turned away. Crippled. By the very faith which housed me.

And so no. The cover of my bible lied flat and untouched for quite awhile, afterward.

And in fact, not only this, but I decided for the first half
of those three years that those pages went unturned,

To just stay away from the inside of a church---period---

---until I got a little closer to being a minister.

I didn't want to have anything to do with an institution which oppressed in the name of
love.

At least while I had no place there, to be able to do anything about it.

It wasn't the *right* choice, but it was the choice
I'd made in anger and disillusionment, at the time.

So, now... this story of "biblically based" exclusion...

...does it sound familiar to anyone here, at all?

Do any of the moments I just described, strike a chord, ring a bell...

... concerning some of the issues presently facing the United Methodist Church
(as well as every other denomination in the Christian community)?

I hope so.

Friends, we're now standing, once again, on the precipice of *change*.

And a much needed, long delayed change, at that.

(Dear Lord. Forgive us for taking so long to live into *Your* word.)

There isn't a female pastor standing at the pulpit this morning,

who doesn't owe her robe and stole,

to the efforts taking place right now to make the Christian church

fully inclusive toward all people.

Sure, *now*, at the seminary I attended (Iliff School of Theology—

---God bless Vincent Harding's soul),

51% of the seminarians are now WOMEN.

Amazing. Such a shift.

Something beautiful---and *necessary*,

if we don't want to consider ourselves an absurd farce of God's love.

But this definitely was not always the case, was it?

It was only as recent as the early 80's (right around the time I was born),

that women really started being allowed to trickle up to the altar.

Sure, NOW, it doesn't seem that odd to see a short woman wrapped up in vestments

(still often too big or long for us to wear, because Cokesbury

is still seriously lacking in an assortment of women's clergy attire)...

... but nonetheless, we're here. And we're living and working

into the call of God to spread God's love through the world.

And it's not all that shocking, or outlandish for people when they notice, anymore, is it?

But it wasn't always the case, and for all of those hundreds of years, it wasn't the case,

Because of a few passages, taken out of context from this beautiful book.

If some of you don't know what I'm referencing, the justification

people used for so long to keep female people from the pulpit

came from Paul's words about how women should stay silent in church.

(Ha-ha)! ...Really, it's hilarious to me, the way this even came about.

I won't go into it for too long, because the sermon would go on for over an hour if I did,

But it's crucially important for us to remember

that each of these letters we read from Paul,
are by nature, out of context.

Even before interpretation comes, we **must** remember these letters

are only **one** side of a *conversation*.

---Answers to words and questions we will never hear. Never really be sure of.

Reading the letters of Paul is like when you were a kid,
 listening to your mom talk on the phone with a friend,
 Trying to piece together the conversation from the family room couch.
 You only hear what *Paul* is saying in *response*, not what was asked of him,
 or the situation sparking the words.

So you have to be so, so careful when reading, not to
 apply your own wishes and standards to his words.
 ---Not to apply our own biases and preconceived notions, to what's written.
 ...It's easy to do, but it's the wrong way to do it.

Anyway, scholars now lean toward the possibility
 that Paul was actually addressing an issue of **noise** during the services---
 ---Women, in the crowds, chatting during the sermons---
 ---Not the issue of Christian *leadership*,
 when he spoke of the need for women to be silent in the church.
 And they believe this, because women were actually in positions of spiritual leadership
 before and during Paul's time!

Prophets and teachers!

The prophet Deborah, from Paul's own religious tradition, in the Hebrew Bible—
 ---the book of Judges! She's one of my favorites, because it was far further back in time,
 yet Deborah was in an *incredible* position of spiritual leadership amongst God's people.

And in Paul's other letters--- in 1 Corinthians, itself---he makes casual references in chapter 11

to the fact of women prophesying, about how when men prophesy,

They should leave their heads uncovered, and not *if*

but *when* women prophesy, they should do it with a veil.

And what does it mean to prophesy? ...It means to speak the word of God.

Loud. And in public.

So... kinda settles that, huh?

But guys---ladies---I'm not bringing this up to prove

why it's okay that women preach in the church.

I'm mentioning it to remind us of the ways people misread,

misuse, and misinterpret the bible all of the time.

And the ways people also piggy back off of the *ancient* ways,

of understandably restricted thinking, displayed on these pages---

(naturally, because these pages *are* ancient!)

---To justify unholy causes of hate, and bigotry, and exclusion.

How people use these texts, sometimes, to anything *but*

what the people on these pages *plead* for us to do.

And especially what Christ, himself, begs of us all, as his followers.

See, but it actually doesn't even matter to me...

even if Paul directly said women didn't belong in the church, period.

(Which he didn't. But if he did...)

.. . I follow the teachings of Christ.

Paul is just another follower of those words, like me and like you.

We are Christians, not Paulists.

And there wasn't a moment in the bible when Jesus ever---EVER---

---worked to move anyone into a sense of exclusion or isolation, from the heart of God.

No. What Jesus practiced was the act of radical acceptance.

---Radical *inclusion* of the most oppressed, and most often pushed away.

And Jesus Christ didn't exclude a soul from the work of God's ministry

or from the experience of God's love in their soul.

So... where does that leave us?

It leaves us standing here, again. Same old story. Same old song.

People using this book, to push people *away* from the love of God.

To send people home feeling rejected.

And powerless, and hopeless, and simply turned out,

from the very spiritual home which houses their soul.

And it's not right. ...And it's not okay.

And it's not something we can allow to continue in this body of Christ.

Because that kind of thinking only destroys and dismembers, what is meant to be a holy whole,

Amongst **all** of God's people.

And that means, **everyone** friends.

So... what are we gonna do about it?

Our own United Methodist Church is facing some division, right now.

Not Deer Park--- but the BIG UMC, as a whole....

Because our LGBTQ brothers and sisters---just like me,

and every other female pastor, not too long ago----

---have **still** not yet been **fully** welcomed into the house of God, have they?

(Feels so ridiculous to even speak the words out loud. WHY?)

It's like hearing someone still hold to the argument that the world is flat. ...*Really?*)

Just like so many women, for so long, people in the LGBTQ community,

called into the ministry by the All Powerful Spirit of Life, Itself---

---by God---have been turned away from God's altar.

I can't tell you how many amazingly talented preachers I've watched walk away,

because they've been denied access to the pulpit

to speak the words God's placed in their souls to share.

Do you know how many life changing, soul-stirring sermons we're missing?

How many moments of *healing* in the warmth of God, people have been forsaken, by this fact?

It breaks my heart to even consider.

Do we---all of us---and all of those people sitting on the boards...the higher ups....

.... Do we not realize that we are killing the body of Christ by tearing it apart?

And for no real reason at all... right?

For a moment, let's think on the randomness of this exclusion that's happening right now.

I heard a pastor, the other day, reference this truth

that the same words which people draw from

to push only select groups of people away, also speak against people who are divorced!

What would happen to the church, if all divorced people were sent away from the pews?

--From the pulpit? ... What would happen to all of us, in this room, alone?

Empty altars. Empty seats.

Is that what Jesus had in mind, as he gave the keys of the church to Peter, the rock?

We all always feel safe and comfortable,

when it's only *others* being unjustly and randomly oppressed.

What happens when it's us?

The church dismisses logically dismisses away those words on divorce,

as ancient practice that no longer applies, right?

Why's there an exception for some, but not for others?

It's because of things that have nothing to do with the words on these pages,

But instead, what's inside our own hearts. Our willingness to love, and our quickness to hate.

No, it has really has nothing to do with God, at all, but with *us*.

--What's in here [head] and here [heart].

Our church, here—our Deer Park congregation---

--is already a fully accepting place, as the gospels call the church to be.

I know I'm literally preaching to the choir, right now,

as we share these thoughts in the heart of God.

But this isn't the case for all churches, and it's sadly not true

for the Methodist church, *yet*, as a whole.

We're thankfully moving toward the necessary changes...

... but each of our churches which have already arrived, are called to lead the others forward,

Down this path we walk on our spiritual journey

to grow ever closer to the heart of God.

We're the ones calmly standing with the glass of water in our hand,

While the others struggle and flail, overwhelmed by confusion.

It's our work, as a fully inclusive church, to help others find the peace, and the clarity, and the comfort of the love of God.

...And to help the other churches, to not only feel, but to give that love too.

Now, sadly, I can't go on about this any longer, today. We've run out of time.

But I promise we'll be talking more about this in the months to come.

---What we can do with Reconciling Ministries, to help the church heal.

And to prevent us from adding to the number of people

laying their bibles on their dressers to collect dust,

Feeling uninterested in coming together to worship their loving God,

because of the hate they feel from God's people.

This sermon, itself is going to be a two-parter.

There was way too much to cover this morning, alone.

We could go on for a year, actually, talking about this...

... but we'll keep this particular part of the discussion to two Sundays.

Next Sunday, we'll come back to what [our liturgist] read from Acts, this morning,
And why I was forced to say "Wow," to the words Paul spoke in Chapter 17.

For now, I'd like to ask that maybe, if you have some time to read and study, and meditate,

That you'd read this passage again, to yourself,

in your quiet time, and think about what it means for the life of the church.

---What it means for where we were intended to go, from the beginning.

This week, let's open our hearts, and our minds, to how open our doors really are,

And ways we might find to open them a whole lot wider.

This week, let's focus our hearts on the love of God,

and who exactly God's love is meant to be felt by.

Who God's love is meant to lead and guide through their lives.

And who God has called to spread that love, to others.

...Does anyone, even just now, have an answer brewing in their own soul
that they'd be willing to speak out loud?

Who is meant to feel and spread God's love in this world?

[wait for the answer: everyone].

Amen.

(We'll continue with this, next week)

