

**Sermon – 9/30/18**  
**Women of the Bible Say #Me Too**  
**Esther 7:1-6, (7-8), 9-10; 9:20-22**  
**19th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC**  
**Scott Kenefake**

This has been a hard week for a lot of people and events have triggered traumatic memories for many.

Retired Presbyterian Minister, Tom Eggebeen, wrote this on Facebook earlier in the week:

*"It was 1976, or so; I was a minister in Northern Wisconsin, visiting a nursing home. A church member, very elderly, bedfast.*

*I had visited before, but on this occasion, while holding my hand, she said, "I've never told anyone this," and then related the story of her childhood sexual abuse and the shame she felt (I haven't thought of this for years, but a friend's comment triggered what memories of this I have left). I don't recall who the abuser was, or anything more than what I've mentioned.*

*As I write, I recall that she thanked me for listening, and said something about "feeling better."*

*I wonder how many women carry these terrible memories."<sup>1</sup>*

I have heard similar stories countless times over the course of my more than 30-year career in ministry and they are all equally heartbreaking.

But, thankfully, millions of women (and lots of men, too) today are saying, "Enough!"

Back in 2006, Tarana Burke, a social activist and community organizer, began using the phrase "*Me Too*" on the Myspace social network as part of a campaign to promote "*empowerment through empathy*" among women of color who have experienced sexual abuse, particularly within underprivileged communities. Burke, who is creating a documentary titled *Me Too*, has said she was inspired to use the phrase after being unable to respond to a 13-year-old girl who confided to her that she had been sexually assaulted. Burke later wished she had simply told the girl, "*me too*."<sup>2</sup>

Then, on October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano, encouraged spreading the hashtag #MeToo, in an attempt to draw attention to sexual assault and harassment. It had been used more than 200,000 times by the end of the day and tweeted more than 500,000 times by October 16. On Facebook, the hashtag was used by more than 4.7 million people in 12 million posts during the first 24 hours. The platform reported that 45% of users in the United States had a friend who had posted using the term. Tens of thousands of people replied with #MeToo stories of their own in this country—and around the world. Milano later acknowledged earlier use of the phrase by Burke.<sup>3</sup> #MeToo is now a growing, global movement, with no end in sight.

And it is making a positive difference. In recent years a number of powerful, high profile men, have lost their positions—and some have been prosecuted and imprisoned—for their abusive/criminal behavior toward women. It's a good start, but there is a long way to go until true equality is achieved between men and women—and that has primarily to do with the deep roots of patriarchy, misogyny, and male privilege (pro-male, anti-female bias) that exists almost universally in human cultures (historically)—and particularly in the world's major religious traditions, including Christianity.

For example, one has only to examine quotations from pre-Christian philosophers and from the sacred writings of each of the world's great religions to glimpse the universalism of a patriarchal understanding of life:

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Eggebeen, *Facebook*

<sup>2</sup> "Me Too Movement," *Wikipedia*

<sup>3</sup> *Me Too Movement*, *Wikipedia*

Plato, in the *Republic*, recorded Socrates as saying, “Do you know anything at all practiced among mankind in which the male sex is not far better than the female?”

Xenophon stated, “The ideal woman should see as little as possible, hear as little as possible and ask as little as possible.”

In the sacred text of the Hindus, we learn, “It is the highest duty of a woman to immolate herself after her husband’s death.”

In Buddhism one is reborn as a woman because of one’s bad karma. Buddhist prayers include: “I pray that I may be reborn as a male in a future existence.”

Some Jewish men are taught, in a book of Jewish prayers, to say, “Blessed be the God who has not created me a heathen, a slave or a woman.”

In the Muslim Qur’an (Koran) we learn that the woman is regarded as “half a man” and that ... They are inherently weaker in rational judgment.”<sup>4</sup>

And in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, literal readings of the Genesis 2 Creation myth (Eve being created from Adams rib) convinced men that they had the “God-given right” to exercise authority over both the bodies and lives of women.

But there are other voices within all of these traditions that recognized patriarchy as a “sin”—as missing the mark--as something less than God’s intention for the full flourishing of humanity—(and terribly damaging to girls and women) and in the time remaining I’d like to share with you a few brief examples of these “countervailing” voices from the Judeo-Christian tradition: Esther, Paul, and Jesus.

First, Esther. The book of Esther—like the Book of Ruth (and the Prophets; particularly the Minor prophets like Amos and Hosea)—is (in a sense) *Protest Literature*. Protest literature looks at the world as it *is*—and then imagines the world as it *could be*. The book of Esther is a protest against the discrimination and oppression of *minorities* by *majorities*.

Esther is a fictional story—a novella—in which the heroine, Esther, is a female Jewish orphan, the least powerful gender (female) of a powerless people (Jews) in the mighty Persian Empire. Yet she reaches the heights of power, and the powerful man who attempted to slaughter her and her people ends up dead himself.

Esther, precisely because she was a woman and therefore basically powerless within Persian society, was the *paradigm* of the Diaspora Jew, who was also powerless in Persian society. Because she was successful in attaining power within the structure of society, she served as a *role model* for Diaspora Jews (then and now) seeking to attain a successful and meaningful life in a foreign society, but also as a model of *self-sacrifice* if circumstances demanded it.<sup>5</sup> That is what the celebration of Purim is all about.

Second, Paul. A lot of people have a “love/hate” relationship with Paul. Paul, as an author, was a man of great ability, great passion, great energy and, let it never be forgotten, great inner conflict—the two sides of this man were never to live in reconciliation.

For instance, his writings reveal his turmoil again and again. He came out of a rigid and traditional patriarchal background that he reflected over and over when giving instructions to his churches:

- Women were to keep quiet in church (1 Cor. 14:34)
- Men were not to marry unless they could not control their passion (1 Cor. 7:9)

<sup>4</sup> John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture*, Harper, San Francisco, 2005, pp, 71, 72

<sup>5</sup> Sidnie White Crawford, *Esther*, Women’s Bible Commentary (Revised and Updated), Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2012, pp, 203, 204, 207

- Women had to have their heads covered as a sign of respect (1 Cor. 11:5ff)

And to make things worse, a disciple of Paul's, writing in the name of his master, extended Paul's patriarchy when he wrote:

*"I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man." 1 Tim. 2:12, NRSV)*

But, remember, Paul was not single-minded on this subject or any other. He is defined both by the prejudices he possessed, the rigorous religious training he had undergone, and the binding rigidity of his pious practices; but he was also defined by the *freedom and love* that he discovered in his *conversion experience*.

You see, the most overt *countering text* to Paul's perceived negativity toward women occurs in Galatians, which is probably Paul's most passionate and therefore most revelatory epistle. Dated around 50-51 CE, it may reveal the real Paul because he is so angry he does not take time to think about what he is saying and edit his words. His Christ experience, he ecstatically proclaims, is so powerful that the barriers erected to keep human beings secure in their self-knowledge, their prejudices and their perennial struggle to survive their evolutionary history can be transcended. He lists those barriers as tribe, gender, and economic bondage. The words: *"In Christ ... there is neither male nor female"* (Gal. 3:26-28) are the part of the text that I want to now lift up into consciousness. As a result of the Christ experience, Paul says, the power equation between men and women—an equation presumed in the past to have been built on the will of God as expressed in the story of creation and used as the basis to impose second-class citizenship—has now been irrevocably broken.<sup>6</sup>

Friends, we have choices about which parts of the religious traditions we have inherited most closely reflect God's inclusive love for all. Remember that Jesus—the one whom we Christians call "Lord"—intentionally broke every cultural barrier with regard to interactions between men and women in his society—he understood that sexist prejudice also warps men and diminishes their humanity. Treating other human beings as sub-human always makes the perpetrators subhuman. It simply does not work.

To illustrate, Luke's gospel gives us the story of Jesus visiting the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha (10:38-42). John's gospel tells us that these sisters lived in the village of Bethany, near Jerusalem (12:1). With Jesus as the guest of honor, Martha, apparently the older sister, accepted the role of the woman imposed on her by society and busily scurried around in the, preparing the meal. Mary, on the other hand, stepped outside the box of female expectations and positioned herself in the role of a pupil, perhaps even a rabbinic student, sitting at the feet of the gifted teacher and daring to assume that she was capable of learning. Martha, feeling the hostility that always seems to be present in those who are not free, entered the room and demanded of Jesus that Mary be forced to return to the [realm of "woman's work" in the kitchen. Luke tells us that Jesus declined that request, consoled Martha (trapped as she was inside role expectations) and held up Mary's choice as "the better part that will not be taken away from her." It is a stunning story of the patterns of imposed definitions bring broken open by the call of a new understanding of what it means to be both female and human.<sup>7</sup>

As William Faulkner said, *"The past is never dead. It's not even past."* And that is certainly true for the *patriarchy*. It colors the ability of some to hear the truths spoken by the millions of women around the world who are saying #Me too.

My Facebook page photo this week is framed with the words, *"I believe survivors."* I encourage those who need help to reach out to our pastoral staff and to our Stephens Ministers or to Professional Counselors. Not only do "I" believe you, but "we" believe you.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 102, 103

<sup>7</sup> John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, Harper One, San Francisco, 2007, p. 260