

February 27, 2022
The Rev. Linda Maconochie
“Context is the Key”

1 Timothy 2:8-15

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. 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. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

It's a surprise! Its unexpected! It doesn't seem to make a lot of sense in this place a Presbyterian Church at this time the year 2022 with a woman preaching this text.

How many of you got angry when I read that scripture passage? It is one that we don't hear often, maybe we've never heard it read aloud, But I can tell you that I have heard this passage over and over again as a woman in ministry.

I was ordained as Minister of Word and Sacrament in 1983. That was some years ago. The road to ordination took several years and a lot of determination. I felt called by God.

I felt called by God when I was a church. I grew up in a Presbyterian Church in Southampton, New York. I loved going to church and youth group. Sitting in the pew on the left side of the sanctuary about halfway down on a typical Sunday morning, the thought occurred to me that “I could do that” not in an arrogant way, but as an idea for my future. But I said nothing to anyone...I had never met a woman pastor; I didn't know that it was even a possibility. So, I kept on my career path to becoming a pharmacist. I had never met a woman pharmacist, but somehow that seemed more likely. Until the summer after my senior year in high school when my home church called a woman as assistant pastor.

That awakened the idea in me again that maybe I was called to be a pastor. But in the fall, I headed off to college with pharmacy as my goal. At college I became very active in campus ministry and in the local Presbyterian Church. When I returned to campus after Christmas break, I was walking and had another sense that God was still calling me into the ministry. I called my mother and only told her that I was quitting college. You can imagine how that went over. Over the course of that week, I finally decided to talk about my feeling of being called into the ministry. My mom was not surprised. Most people that I knew were not surprised and were very supportive. There was a great sense of relief after I started talking about how I felt called.

My own questioning of call was a hard journey, but then there were people who began to question what I was doing because women had to be silent in church.

Between college and seminary, I did an internship at a very conservative Presbyterian Church. I lived with a church family. One time after a very difficult day the Mom in the household asked me if I should really be going into the ministry.

When I began to search for a call to a church after seminary the question would be asked and often the scripture lesson would be quoted. Aren't women to be quiet in church.

I had to learn how to answer this question because it was asked often enough.

So how do we deal with this scripture that seems to say very clearly that women are to be quiet in church? We must look closely at the text of the verse, is this what is really being said. Then we need to look at the context of this verse. Does the context support what seems to be the obvious point? Understanding the context and history of this verse of scripture will help us understand what is really being said here.

This scripture is part of the letter to Timothy. It is part of the pastoral epistles or letters that include two letters to Timothy and one letter to Titus. The purpose of these letters is to help these young pastors as they begin new churches. The church was new at this time and there were lots of questions about how a church should be organized and function.

The author of the letter is wanting to preserve the reputation of the church and want the church to lead a quiet and peaceable life. The church must be socially conservative and obedient to the state. The church must also conform to the Roman ideal of a patriarchal household.

In other words, the author of the letter to Timothy, wanted to make sure that the church didn't create any waves or cause any issues. Timothy was the leader of the Church in Ephesus.

There was a lot going on in Ephesus. The biggest Temple in that city was a female only cult. The author did not want any confusion between this cult and the new church that was forming.

There were also certain women in Ephesus disturbing services of worship in some unspecified way under the influence of disruptive teachers

Joanna Dewey in the Women's Bible Commentary says the fact that the author felt the need to instruct women to be silent suggest that women were speaking and teaching.

In the culture of the time Jewish women were not allowed to prophesy or read the Torah and Greek women experienced even more limiting conditions.

In order to understand scripture, we need to look at the context of the sentence or paragraph to determine its meaning.

We also need to compare the message of the scripture passage with all the New Testament. What do the other books and letters say about women? What did Jesus say about women?

In other letters known to be written by Paul, Paul views people equally by gender. We look at Galatian 3:27-28 that says There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, there is neither male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Women were the witnesses of the resurrection. Paul speaks of women as apostles and deacons where he expects them to teach and pray. Jesus also valued the women around him and allowed them to learn. Remember Mary sitting at Jesus feet. She was listening to what Jesus was teaching.

If we look at the context of this one verse of Scripture that many use to say women can't preach and teach, we learn that it is written to keep the church from standing out in the society. We learn that there are many verses and stories that demonstrate the opposite of this one verse. That it was written to a specific situation where women were disturbing worship.

All month in worship we have been talking about how to read scripture. It is important to always look at the context of the passage. There are many other passages that have new meaning if we take the time to examine more closely the history and purpose of the writing. If we look at who was writing the letter or book. The Pastoral Letters, although attributed to Paul, were not written by him. They were written by someone else using his name. We learn this by looking at the language that he uses and his style of writing.