

March 2005 International Women's Day: Rev Sharon Ferguson
Theme: The Value of Women

At a service celebrating International Women's Day you may be wondering why I have chosen a story about a woman who was not only scorned in the time the Bible was written but who would be scorned today. Why have I not chosen a passage from the book of Ruth or Esther, or Miriam's Song from Exodus, or highlighted the position of women disciples like Priscilla, or the contribution of women to Christ's ministry. What can a story that is traditionally used to highlight that we all sin or Christ's forgiveness of sin, or the hypocrisy of the Pharisees contribute to celebrating the contribution of women to our world and our faith?

Today, I want to look at the value we give to women, the value we discern from our sacred writings, from the church, from how we all live our lives.

In the Old Testament we find the Law of Moses as mentioned in our reading, the law is the backbone of Judaism and Jewish life. In the Torah – the law books – we learn that women are no more than property and so could be divorced by a husband simply by him saying a few words if she displeased him or he found anything wrong with her and especially if she should prove infertile. When the Torah was written women had very limited ownership of property in their own right. Inheritance was only passed through the sons and not the daughters and only men were allowed to be priests.

Women did not feature highly so there are not many references to women. Legally women had very few rights and practically no voice, two women would need to give witness to equal the testimony of one man. So the Old Testament is usually silent about women but all too often when women are mentioned it is in terrible stories of violence. Violence against women, such as rape, murder, dismemberment and incest.

On first glance the New Testament doesn't treat women much better. There are many famous (or should I say infamous) passages, most of them written by the apostle Paul, which are used to argue against women being recognised as of equal value as men in the eyes of God and keeps women from having a voice. For example, Paul says that women are to keep silent in church. It seems that Paul gave this advice to the Corinthians because – as he saw it- the first woman, Eve, was weak-minded and responsible for bringing evil into the world by tempting Adam to sin. Women were seen as a threat to the spirituality of men. Although it is not clear if the Corinthians heeded Paul's counsel, certainly the church has far too often taken him literally. We do not have to go very far back in our history to find the time when women were thought of as being servile or incompetent, and – as with children- they were to be seen and not heard, especially when questions of religion were being discussed. Passages like this are still used today to argue against women being ordained.

When we add to this how the Scriptures predominantly speak of God using male terms such as King, Father, Lord and Master even though God is spirit, women are further excluded from the *imago dei*, the image of God. Again Paul makes this point explicit in his letter to the Corinthians when he writes: 'For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is in the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man is not made from woman, but woman from man.'

And this view of women as having little or no value other than in providing for and enhancing the lives of men continued on in church history. Even Martin Luther, who argued against so many discriminatory practices of the church in his day, is attributed with saying, 'Women are on earth to bear children, if they die in child-bearing, it matters not; that is all they are here to do.' And if you think we have left that type of view behind then listen to the words of Karl Barth, a great 20 th Century neo-orthodox theologian, as he insists that 'women are ontologically inferior to men.' That means in our deepest essence, at our deepest core.

If we believe that women are supposed to find their true identity and value in God, why does the Word of God include such difficult passages?

Well, **first of all we need to put things in context.** Although I would agree with 2 Timothy 3:16 that 'all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,' I also believe that God reveals God's truth in a progressive way. Coming to us in our time and culture to reveal a new standard to live by.

The instructions that Paul gave to the Corinthians – are they universal for all time or just for that particular situation?

I also believe that texts are used selectively – am I not doing just that to highlight the points I want to make! Yes, many passages in which women appear as examples of faith were excluded from the common lectionary used in many churches and yes, many uses of feminine imagery for God in Scripture are often ignored in the language of worship, but there are other passages, even ones written by Paul, which affirm the value of women in the eyes of God and we can also read between the lines to discover other ways that women were valued in the Bible.

For example in Exodus, the Israelites are slaves to the Egyptians. They're suffering but growing in number so the King of Egypt tells two Israelite midwives to kill all newborn baby boys. These women do not carry out this instruction and God protects them. What is interesting is the fact that Moses remembers and records their names, Shiphrah and Puah. Moses honours these women by remembering their names especially as they would have been considered of low social standing in that time. And what's more, by contrast, Moses never gives us the name of the king of Egypt.

I don't want any of you to think about elephants.

Okay, how many of you just had the image of an elephant in your head. As soon as something is mentioned it automatically gets processed in our brains. If we spend all our time talking about how negative the treatment of women has been we are going to keep conjuring up negative images of women. We need to find the positive stories in the Bible, we need to quote statements from theologians that value women, we need to hear from women themselves. We need to be like Moses and name the women in our lives that make a difference.

Secondly, we need to remember the purpose of what has been written. Sometimes God needs to give us a wake up call. The stories of violence and harsh treatment of women in the Bible reflect on human nature not God. We all have the potential to hurt others. Sometimes we need to be shocked into realising the devastating effect our behaviour has on others in order for us to change.

There is a very hard hitting advert on the TV at the moment of a young girl who has been hit by a car doing 40mph, and it then gruesomely fits all her broken bones back together and depicts the lesser injuries she would have incurred if the car had been going at 30mph. The images are intentionally horrifying to shock us into the reality of what we are doing when we exceed the speed limits.

I believe that the stories of violence against women can have the same effect. They remind us of how wrong and abhorrent this type of behaviour is to God and hopefully stop us from doing it again. But does it?

Do we value women any differently today after years of feminism and laws of equality or do we still operate out of a system of double standards where the woman isn't given equal status and is still seen as either the tempter of men or the innocent virgin in need of protection?

How many times do we hear the term 'jail bait' used about young girls who look older than their years, it is rarely used about boys who haven't reached the legal age to have a sexual relationship. Or when seeing a rape victim was wearing a short skirt or low cut top at the time of the attack that she was 'asking for it', and how so many reported rapes never make it to court because the testimony of the man is given more credence than that of the woman. Think about how if a woman has several sexual partners she is called a 'slapper' or worse, but a man doing the same thing is viewed as a 'stud' and rightfully sowing his 'wild oats'. If a woman is successful in business she is accused of 'sleeping her way to the top', but a man will have got there from hard work and ability.

Are we inadvertently buying in to these double standards that are prevalent in our society today?

The only way to avoid doing this is to follow Christ's example. Jesus breaks all the rules when it comes to social and religious convention. He treats women with dignity and value and I think the passage we heard read to us today displays Christ's love and compassion for the oppressed and marginalized and supports the doctrines of grace, mercy and justice, not just to women but to all people. It is also an example of the selective use of Scripture against women and models behaviour that shows equal treatment of all people regardless of sex, social status, education or age.

It is quite a controversial passage to choose as some theologians argue that this passage doesn't belong in the Gospel of John as it doesn't appear in some early translations and much to my dismay Schussler Fiorenza in her feminist commentary doesn't include it!

But how do these 10 short verses teach us so much about how we can display the depth of our value of each other.

Just picture the scene – Jesus is sitting on the steps of the temple, surrounded by people eagerly listening to His teaching. They probably think like most of us that they're not bad people. They observe most of the religious codes - well at least they don't break any of the BIG laws. This guy, Jesus, though is saying some pretty radical things that are making some of them feel a little uncomfortable. For a start, there are women in the crowd and this teacher hasn't told them to leave and go about their business.

All of a sudden they hear a bit of a commotion going on down the street and when they look up, they see the elders and judges and most revered people in their community marching towards them followed by a couple of soldiers dragging a woman, only wearing her night clothes, along behind them. Much to the crowd's surprise this strange entourage stops in front of the teacher and the elders address the teacher asking what they should do with the woman. This was most confusing as the Law was quite clear on the punishment for the charges they brought against the woman and the Pharisees held the power to pass sentence. Why had they brought the woman to a common man on the street to decide what to do with a violator of the law? But more to the point, if they were able to catch the woman in the early hours of the morning in the act of adultery, why hadn't they also caught the man and brought him along for punishment as well? For the law in Deuteronomy 22:22 and Leviticus 20:10 states quite clearly that the man as well as the woman who commits adultery must be put to death. In this passage we find the Pharisees exercising a selective view of the law by only applying it to the woman. Having heard the Pharisees, the crowd around Jesus all picked up a stone in readiness, after all they are good Jews and eager to show the Pharisees how quick they are to obey the Law of Moses.

Maybe some in the crowd were expecting Jesus to ask for the man to be brought to him as well. They would certainly have expected him to stand up and answer the Pharisees question with the respect their status deserved. Instead, Jesus bends down and starts writing in the sand. Only when they keep on questioning him does he stand up and address them. And boy does he hit them where it hurts! The custom is that the elders and Pharisees would throw the first stones followed by the common people so all the crowd are waiting for them to act. Christ's response, 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her' places them in a completely no win situation. The Scriptures clearly state that all have sinned so for any of them to throw a stone would immediately condemn them as liars.

Jesus doesn't try to defend the woman or argue against the law, he knows the woman is guilty. What offends him most is their treatment of her, yes the law says she should be stoned to death but it doesn't say she should be dragged halfway across the town, partially dressed and humiliated in front of a crowd of people.

Jesus returns to his doodling in the sand as if he cares not what becomes of this woman. The crowd disperses. Only when everyone has left and they are alone does he look at her for the first time, he wouldn't add to her humiliation by addressing her in front of the crowd. Not only that but he treats her the same way as he treated those supposed dignitaries – John writes that when Jesus spoke to the Pharisees and when he spoke to the woman that 'he straightened up'. Jesus valued the woman just as much as he did the leaders of the community.

Of course Jesus was the only person who could have thrown a stone being the only one without sin but he chose not to judge her.

Do we show everyone we meet the same respect or do we judge some people as more deserving of our respect than others? Do we use language that devalues any of God's children? Do we as a gay, lesbian, transgendered, bisexual, asexual, community ignore discrimination against people who don't fit into our little box as not relevant to us? Do we stereotype people in ways that make us feel superior? Do we all too often see the label and not the person when we look at our brothers and sisters? Do we judge the book by the cover?

Jesus told the woman to go and leave her life of sin.

When we leave here today let us leave behind our lives of sin. The sin of judgement, discrimination and stereotyping and recognise that the value of everyone we meet comes from the fact that we have a sacredness given to us from God. This sacredness is so special that Jesus paid a great price to bring us back to God.

Let us remember to act as Christ would and value the sacredness in each and every person we met, every day and in every interaction with the world around us.

Amen