

Judges 4:1-7
Psalm 123

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

Vanessa McCutcheon Smith, a Presbyterian pastor in Oregon posed, on the Facebook group “Happy to be a Presbyterian, “At a ‘Bible Church’ I was visiting I heard from the pulpit that female pastors ‘are rats, they’re popping up everywhere.’ He was staring straight at me.” Perhaps it should not surprise us that there continues to be a significant resistance to the role of women in the church. There is an organization called the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. That Council was established in 1987 to help the church defend against the accommodation of secular feminism.” They subscribe to: “complementarianism,” the belief that men are the head of the household and women are to be submissive. The role of men is headship and the role of women is support. This precludes women from certain roles and ministries within the church. While women may assist in the decision-making process, the ultimate authority for the decision is the purview of the male in marriage, the family, and in the church. But we will see that in the Bible and in the history of the church, women have always been leaders. It is not secular feminism, but Biblical equality.

Our Old Testament reading today seems to contradict that thinking. Deborah does not fit into the stereotypes of women in ancient Israel. She was, in the words of Talitha Arnold, a “powerful woman who advised generals and led troops into battle. ... She was a leader of men when women could only be wives, sisters and mothers. A judge, when a woman’s testimony never counted as much as a man’s. On the front line, when a woman’s place was in the home.” Here is a woman described as a prophet, a fiery woman, a judge, and a military commander. Not exactly the barefoot, pregnant, and poor image we have of women in ancient societies.

Deborah was one of many judges. During this period of Israel's history, Israel was nothing more than a loose confederacy of tribes. There was no centralized government, and no standing military. The story of Judges is a cycle that repeats itself. The people of Israel do evil in the sight of the Lord. God responds by giving the people of Israel into the hands of the enemy. A judge rises up from the people of Israel who saves them from their enemy. And the cycle starts over again when the people do evil again. This time the enemy is the king of Canaan, Jabin, and his general, Sisera. This time God raises Deborah and Barak to rescue Israel

It is too bad that our passage does not continue for a few more verses. Deborah has told Barak that he will lead a military battle, Barak insists that Deborah go with him. She informs him that if she does, it will be a woman who will get the credit for the victory. For a woman to go to muster the troops is clearly a surprise. The book of Judges clearly portrays battle as a male sphere. Later in Judges, we read about Abimelech, who was a brutal and illegitimate ruler of Israel. He was evil in the eyes of God. A woman drops a large stone on him from a tower, crushing his head. Abimelech orders a soldier to kill him with a sword. To be killed by a woman in combat was an inglorious, even shameful death. The wicked Abimelech did not want to be known as having been killed by a woman in battle. A woman's role was not in a battle, but at home, barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. It was this woman, Jael, who is the one credited with the battle victory. A woman!

There are plenty of other places in scripture that refute "complementarianism." Last Easter season we were reminded that in all of the gospel accounts, the first people to see the resurrected Jesus were women. The proclamation of the astounding Easter

event was entrusted to these women! Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that there is no longer male and female. There is no distinction between male or female. They are equals. Four women are named in the New Testament describing them as leaders of house churches. In the first century, the house church was the only type of church, churches literally meeting in people's homes. The apostle Paul indicates that women held positions of leadership within the church. Women were significantly involved in the early growth of Christianity. Women have had leadership in the church throughout the centuries. One can make a Biblical case for the equality of all persons.

There is no doubt that our understanding of women has changed. Women got the right to vote in 1920. There were social taboos for women to smoke cigarettes. In 1908 an ordinance was passed prohibiting women from smoking in public. More and more women are working, but there still is the gender pay gap, which was about twenty percent in 2017. More and more positions in the military are open for women. In 1956, the first woman minister was ordained in the Presbyterian Church, Margaret Towner. The church has a changing understanding of God.

As Presbyterians, we affirm that women and men are called to all ministries of the church, and that all people are equal before God and should have the same human and civil rights. Presbyterian theology and polity affirm the fundamental equality of all persons before God and one another. And we believe that this equality is Biblical. Those who hold on to this complementarianism accuse those who hold on to an egalitarian view as accommodating to society and ignoring the Bible. In a sense, they believe those churches who hold on to the egalitarian view are succumbing to the peer pressure of our society and culture.

There is no doubt that over the course of history, attitudes toward the roles of women have varied greatly. It is because our understanding of God has changed. It is not that God changes, but our understanding of God changes. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, we, as Presbyterians, are reformed, and always being reformed. It is God who reforms us, and in that reforming the church does and must change, not for the sake of change, but for the sake of understanding who our God is, and what God is asking us to do.

That also speaks to us individually. Has our own understanding of God changed? I know mine has. Since my days of my faith being nurtured in my home church, I do not see God as a God of wrath, but a God of love; not a God who excludes, but a God who reaches out to include; not a God who waits until we come to God, but a God who comes to us before we ever respond; not a God who demands that we earn our salvation with good works, but a God of grace and mercy; not a God who is aloof and distant, but a God who came to us as one of us in Jesus Christ; not a God who only cares if we are saved and are going to heaven, but a God who cares about us in this life and wants shalom and justice for his people now. That is how my understanding of God has changed. Has your understanding of God changed? If so, how? What does that mean in terms of doing God's work?

Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.