

***The Problem with Paul: Teachings about
Women
1 Timothy 2:8-15
25 July 2021
Sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae***

Perhaps you have heard the story about the blind men and the elephant. Born blind the men relied on villagers to help them navigate the world and learn about what is around them. They were curious about everything, but nothing fascinated them more than the stories of the elephant. As they sat debating about what an elephant must be like, one of the villagers led them to the palace, to the elephant that the Rajah would travel upon. The first blind man

reached out and touched the side of the huge animal. "An elephant is smooth and solid like a wall!" he declared. "It must be very powerful."

The second blind man put his hand on the elephant's limber trunk. "An elephant is like a giant snake," he announced.

The third blind man felt the elephant's pointed tusk. "I was right," he decided. "This creature is as sharp and deadly as a spear."

The fourth blind man touched one of the elephant's four legs. "What we have here," he said, "is an extremely large cow."

The fifth blind man felt the elephant's giant ear. "I believe an elephant is like a huge fan or

maybe a magic carpet that can fly over mountains and treetops," he said.

The sixth blind man gave a tug on the elephant's coarse tail. "Why, this is nothing more than a piece of old rope. Dangerous, indeed," he scoffed.

The gardener led his friends to the shade of a tree. "Sit here and rest for the long journey home," he said. "I will bring you some water to drink."

While they waited, the six blind men talked about the elephant. Well, they argued about the elephant actually, each certain that the part they touched told the full story.

"Stop shouting!" called a very angry voice.

It was the Rajah, awakened from his nap by the noisy argument. "How can each of you be so certain you are right?" asked the ruler. "The elephant is a very large animal," said the Rajah kindly. "Each man touched only one part. Perhaps if you put the parts together, you will see the truth. Now, let me finish my nap in peace."

That little story is often used as a lesson about cross cultural engagement but it is a good place to start our discussion today because it introduces the idea that our perspective on things is often not the full picture. This seems to have

been a recurring theme really throughout our discussion about Paul, but definitely needs to be emphasized this morning as we look at one of what I find to be the biggest challenges with Paul; some of his writings on women, and the place of women. And the biggest problem isn't necessarily just the very difficult passage we just read, about how women should keep silent in church, but with the flip flopping different opinions he seems to have about women in authority, namely in ministry.

Before we even begin looking at this passage from 1 Timothy, I want to tell you about a woman named Pheobe, a woman that Paul

knew and spoke about in the book of Acts.

Phoebe was a first-century Christian in the eastern port of Corinth. In Romans 16:1-2, we learn a bit more about her as Paul gives her a pretty lengthy introduction. He goes on to greet 27 people in the chapter, 10 of which are women. He describes men and women as fellow-worker, apostle, first-fruit, fellow-countrymen, fellow-prisoner and beloved, but only women are called deacon, patron, hard-worker, sister and mother. The first time I encountered Pheobe it made me realize that contrary to popular opinion, Paul seems to highly value the women leaders in the early church.

Another interesting thing to note about Paul's comments about Phoebe is that unlike the people he mentions in the rest of the chapter, he is not greeting her. He is recommending her. Some hypothesize that the reason for Phoebe's special recommendation is that she was the deliverer of this letter to the Romans, his trusted messenger. This is supported by the fact that Paul says she is coming to Rome and he wants them to greet her well.

Paul uses two words to describe Phoebe that are not used of any other men or women on this list. The first word is a Greek word meaning deacon, and Phoebe is the only deacon we know

by name in the New Testament. She was a servant of the church (not just of the women of the church) in a highly respected and important position, and she served Paul.

We are also told that Phoebe was a patron – someone who provided support and financial help in return for the ability to wield considerable power and influence within the church.

So, knowing this, what can we possibly make of this section on the behaviour of women found in Paul's first letter to Timothy? It is hard to make sense of; no one today (at least not in the United Church) is going to agree with the admonishment that women should keep silent in

church, and should not teach a man. But, given that Paul had some obvious respect for the authority of women, as we see with Pheobe, why would this be written, or why would any follower of Paul write such commands in his name even?

While we may never really know, it could be that this stems back to a very particular problem occurring in this specific community. Scholars have dug deep into these verses and have come up with two hypothesis about what lies beneath this instruction. The first being that it is exactly as it seems. Women were being prohibited from teaching and holding authority

over men in this region, in this church. Obviously the least palatable of our options.

The second is a little more interesting. The second position insists that the passage contains a temporary restraining order issued to curb the activities of a group of women who (most argue) were teaching heresy in Ephesus. They were disrupting the church and perhaps even gaining their own group of followers, and so, they were relegated back to the role of learners, expected to be quiet and submissive, expected to learn more. Which means this passage was a local rather than a universal rule. It was an instruction written in regard to a very specific situation, a

very specific set of circumstance which has, in some circles been taken to be a universally applicable rule, and has prevented the leadership of women in many, many churches.

And what about the dress code written up in 1 Timothy? No braids or gold, pearls or expensive clothes? Of all the unusual comments made in this passage this is perhaps the easiest to explain in terms that make sense today. Have you ever gone somewhere and felt terribly out of place? Felt too dressed down? Like you didn't fit in? Like you couldn't quite run in that circle? Awkward and out of place? Well, so did some of the people who went to this church that Timothy

attended. It is one thing to feel that way at a cocktail party or at the opera, it is quite another to feel that way in worship, in a church where the primary focus should be on worship and on the acts of God in the world, not on what the Joneses in the next pew are wearing. Timothy was apparently trying to get some advice on how to bring together people of varied socioeconomic backgrounds into one worship community, so that all are comfortable together and no one is lorded wealth over another. It is pointedly directed at women, simply because it was the women who had the opportunities to dress in ways that showed their wealth, much more than

the men of the day. And it was directed toward the wealthy women, because only they would have the gold, pearls and expensive clothes.

The way things are written and read in our scriptures can be misconstrued and misinterpreted in today's context when they were written for a very specific context and time. The illustration I used at the beginning of this sermon points to how easy to misinterpret things, and we know this is especially easy with scripture. What made sense in one context two thousand years ago just cannot always seamlessly move into the 21st century. It is up to us to investigate, to read deeper, to learn a little more about the context in

which our scripture was written and shared, and to pray, in order to begin to make sense of some of these more obscure things.

When we do, I think we will learn how our modern church isn't so different from the early church – in that we struggle to relate to one another, we struggle to come together as people from different life paths and experiences, we struggle with how to solve problems and reach solutions. But hopefully every church community is committed to working together, respecting one another, and to keep learning, while focussing on the love of God made known to us in Christ. As long as we keep trying, as long as we keep

learning, we will keep growing. As long as we are open to learning, we will be healthy. And who knows, maybe our writings, our records will have something to teach the church in another 100, 500, even 2000 years. Wouldn't that be something? If they do, I hope the thing that stands out is that as a church in the 21st century all communities had the strength to adapt and change with the society around us, that we were truly committed to working toward a just and equitable community for all, that we delved into the scriptures and were committed to understand how the wisdom within applies to our life today, that – as has been needed with the truth about

residential schools – we have been able to admit our mistakes, work toward reconciliation, that we learned from challenges and grew in faith, even in this very challenging time. And that we did it all with our eyes on the calling that God has placed on our hearts and our communities, that we did it in order to bring ourselves more in line with God's vision of justice for all. Thanks be to God.