

THE TURNING

Texts on Sunday, March 27, 2011

1 Timothy 2:8-15; Genesis 1:26-2:4

Here in this season of Lent, we are committed to see our sin and its consequences. In our sermons this year, we are attending especially to sins we commit collectively. Here we are also in another season, at the conclusion of a month celebrating the history of women. By its very existence, such a celebration refers our thought to the context which gave rise to it: that men have so long constructed history as their own work, and women as critical to supply the children on which history depends; and men have so mismeasured the reality and power of women; and yet, the ground of their sin of history has been so turned by the plow of time and development; that we—men, that is—agree that her story in history should receive a special month, along with many changes. But first we must deal with Timothy. Sit-down-and-shut-up Timothy. Make-babies-Timothy. He is still here.

You have probably read about the efforts of Washington lawmakers to remove federal support for the work of the Planned Parenthood organization. They say that federal funds should not fund abortions, but everyone knows that only 3% of Planned Parenthood's costs pertain to abortion services. For literally millions of women, Planned Parenthood is their doctor and their counselor for every health matter. As Nancy Gibbs wrote recently in *Time Magazine*, the lawmakers' move against Planned Parenthood is just payback. It is "prejudice dressed up as principle"—for principled lawmakers would disclose that the funding cut will end family planning for millions of women. Men of principle would be troubled by the risk that their cuts will cause thousands of additional abortions. After their intended demise of Planned Parenthood, men of principle would stand up to fund the costs to states and cities of tens of thousands more children born to poor parents. But we do not live in a society that requires such honesty. No, "she will be saved through childbearing"—right? It's in the book. So the Bible is abused from generation to generation.

In February, a huge public outcry turned back these same lawmakers from an attempt to re-define rape and incest. In a bill to re-authorize Medicaid funding of abortions in cases of rape or incest, they inserted two qualifiers: only "forcible" rape was to be eligible (was there any other kind?) and only incest with a minor was to be eligible. *Once you're sixteen, honey, you'll be saved through childbearing . . . of your brother.* In Florida, such lawmakers plan to make every woman who seeks an abortion to view an ultrasound image of the fetus in her body. In Ohio, legislators caused two fetuses to "testify" in support of a regulation similar to Florida's. They had the sound of fetal heartbeats piped in live on the floor of the legislature. In South Dakota, women will be made to wait three days for an abortion. What! Three days? Did these men

suppose the women had not already turned their decision for weeks? Yes, but not under the watchful eye of men.

What is going on? None of these assaults on the rights of women aim seriously to reduce abortions. Rather, they assault women. They frame women as irresponsible moral agents who need guardians, who must sit down and shut up. These plans are not policy, but theater—the theater of oppression. This is sin, so to distrust the presence of the image of God, male and female made, as to withhold from women the dignity and powers inherent to human being. More than a generation ago, biblical scholar Phyllis Trible demonstrated that in the ancient word from Genesis, God’s differentiation of two sexes is not for purposes of procreation, but in order that God’s own image might shine in the creation. “In the image of God God created them, male and female. “The original unity [in humanity] is at one and the same time the original differentiation.” (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 18) Therefore, to send women back to the birthing bed and the hearth contravenes the full sense of the opening words of the Bible. Remember! *For freedom Christ has set you free; do not then again submit to a yoke of slavery.* Yet very much of Christian history has labored to fix that yoke upon women, to keep them from emerging in the public sphere as male and female. Let us confess this as our history and our sin. How did we get here?

To understand this, you have to choose between accepting evolutionary process or interpreting Adam and Eve as historical. If you decide for evolution, you get an account of such mystery and power, you might actually imagine its author divine, for the brevity of humanity’s sojourn on earth must astound even casual thought. Through hundreds of millions of years, huge, powerful lizards held this ground. Yet in the blink of an eye—a few thousand years—humans have come to believe that their dominion here is permanent. Only in the last 10,000 years or so did this creature organize stable communities and begin to record its awareness of existence. During this sliver of time, while our organism changed not at all, consciousness underwent a tornado of development. Evolution has undergone a revolution inside this bony vessel. And only during the last two or three thousand years did humans take hold of their experience of being as being-in-relationship, one with another. Karen Armstrong, among others, calls that time “the axial age,” (800 BCE to 0 BCE) for all across the historical world, it is as if the human creature suddenly turned on an axle to transcend its biology and give birth to an awareness for the self, for the other, and for the divine Other.

This is how we got here, by waking up just yesterday from our animal sleep. Genesis 1—male and female created together in the image of God—was written in the thrill of the turning of the axle of awareness. For yes, sometimes the Spirit of God leads a soul ahead of the times, to see and to receive light

revealed through a tiny crack, showing the way toward God's future. That is how we can understand the untimely holy wisdom of Genesis 1. Seen developmentally, then, Timothy's contradiction of Genesis 1, as well as all the contradictions throughout Christian history, came as a natural reaction of eyes unaccustomed to the light, to the pain of waking up, like an infant wailing in bewilderment at sleep's end.

But let us remember too that civilization required agriculture, and agriculture, like hunting in the prior age, required the strength of men at the horse-drawn plows to turn the ground to make the bread of life. Therefore men and women continued for centuries to rock together in the biological frame bequeathed to them by all creatures, where physical strength determines power and value. But here is a remarkable fact. Just a few decades after new farm technology rendered a man's physical strength irrelevant to agriculture, the women's movement began in earnest. That was in 1792, with Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. There has been no turning back.

You might think of the image of God in woman and man has been like a crouching tiger of light, just waiting for evolution to clear the path for transcendence. But if you decide against evolution and favor the literal Adam and Eve story, you get to deny the whole account laid out here of our animal nature giving way to God's gift of development. You get to keep Timothy and to claim that "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived; she became the transgressor." Friends, we must see such denial for what it is: sin; to refuse to receive the Spirit of God or to see by the light of God in order to preserve in shadows and sorrow and violence the orders of power and privilege that belong to animals, as if we had not been called beyond. Just that much is at stake in making the decision between development and a literal reading of the story of Adam and Eve.

Twenty-five years ago, about a hundred miles north of here, I met a curious behavior among members of the governing board of my first church. When a matter would come to the table over which there was disagreement, some of the men would get extremely angry, though no one had given offense. Some of the women would then cry, and then the men would set aside their anger to respond with manly comforts. I observed this transaction a few times. Then one night I named it. I called it a racket. "The men get their way (the public action) with power in anger, and the women get their way (that is, peace in the group) with tears." I proposed that their behavior was probably a familiar, family practice. I said it belonged to a different age of humanity than ours. And the behavior actually disappeared from our conference table with just that touch. Just a little outside light shining into the darkness helped those individuals leave behind, at least in that public situation, a vestige of ancient

animal nature, where brute strength dominates until a submissive cry is offered. The crouching tiger of God's light leapt up and they accepted my judgment. The agency of the women emerged. The image of God showed more brightly.

The contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber has written that real cause of resistance to today's feminism is "a resistance to the emergence of an entirely novel structure of consciousness, a structure that is now in the process of integrating both women and men into an utterly new world space. That is what is feared and resisted." (*Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, p. 168) That's it, though we might stand dumbstruck to see that 2,500 years ago, the author of Genesis 1 pointed with poetic perfection toward just that new "structure of consciousness . . . integrating both women and men into an utterly new world space."

Therefore, with firm conviction, let us see that many, perhaps most, of those who resist all family planning stratagems and try to refuse women the rights of decision in the integrity of their bodies are reacting against the loss of an ancient structure of power, and that their laws and strictures not only have no positive effect on reducing abortion, but positively retard human development toward justice and light, including toward more just relations between women and their partners and the life that can issue therefrom. In her masterwork on this subject, Beverly Harrison wrote:

"Far from being a matter of social indifference or a private affair, procreative choice will alter the dynamics of social power considerably. Our opponents know this, and it is the reason they fight us. Some women too find the idea of appropriating our rightful social power threatening, so conditioned have they become to social powerlessness. But with social power comes a necessary social responsibility.(p.55) . . . Only a feminist agenda for social justice for women can hold out any hope of reducing the need for abortions in this society." (*Our Right to Choose*, p. 249)

To see our sin together truly is always breath-taking. Yet God Holy Spirit is ever ready to give breath to those who are afflicted by the light in their new eye. Thus, in the gift of God we are drawn upward from our miseries into new powers of seeing. For we all begin in darkness of infant animal nature, but we are drawn into larger frames of hope and action, and yes, more capacity for compassion and for sorrows, to see how we have dimmed the light of God's image, how we have sinned. But you know how you are called into the turning—for the axle of development wheels on. No longer egocentric, no more defending just your tribe, whether of color or class or creed, no more a citizen of just your own nation, no more androcentric or even anthropocentric, you are turning toward the image of God. Male and female God created them. Amen.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*