

Marquand Chapel
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Women's Center Reflection

I Corinthians 14

26 What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. 27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, two-- or at the most three-- should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. 28 If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. 29 Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. 30 And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. 31 For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. 32 The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. 33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, **34 women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. 36 Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?** 37 If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. 38 If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. 39 Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. 40 But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Women should remain silent in the churches.

Women have no place behind the pulpit.

Women have no business leading worship.

If a woman wants to pursue a spiritual life, she should become a nun.

Women serve God by being obedient servants, like the Virgin Mary.

These statements, and others like them, are things that I have been told in the past several years while beginning preparation for a life of ministry. These comments have come from women at least as frequently as from men.

The intention is sincere. Everyone who I have met who subscribes to these beliefs truly thinks that they are the proper interpretation of God's word. Their faithful understanding is that God has given different roles to men and women, and it just so happens that the roles of worship leadership and speaking in church are assigned only to men.

The problem is that this faithful interpretation is wrong, as far as I can tell. It is oppressive and rigid, not loving and liberating as the Gospel ought to be. I have been blessed with many female role models throughout the years. My home congregation has had a woman pastor for as long as I can remember. The oppressive statements I just read did not come from my home communities. But they were memorable nonetheless, because they reflect the sincere beliefs of certain parts of the body of Christ. Paul writes in First Corinthians 12, two chapters before today's reading, that different parts of the body cannot say to the others that they do not need each other. I am pained because these sincere Christians are trying to say to me—a woman who speaks in church—that they do

not need me. I cannot respond by saying that I do not need them. I do need them. We need each other in order to be the body of Christ.

Two and a half years ago, a faithful Christian—who happened to be a Biblical literalist—asked me what I thought about the passages in the Bible that talked about women being silent in church. Isn't it clear, he asked, that God told his people through the Bible that women are not supposed to have leadership roles in church? How could I, a woman, justify seeking to be ordained?

I answered him, and I quote, "I think that anyone who believes that women are not supposed to speak in church does not really understand the Bible." It was one of those rare moments when exactly the right words came to me at the right time. Divine inspiration, perhaps?

I told this guy how Jesus' interactions with women were revolutionary for the time. In his ministry, Jesus welcomed women into the inner circle of his disciples. According to Luke's Gospel, the women were the ones financially supporting Jesus and the disciples. The first people that Jesus appeared to after the resurrection were women. The passages that we find in the epistles about women being silent are addressing particular concerns of particular assemblies. At the end of First Corinthians 14, which we heard from today, Paul writes that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way." He is concerned that the particular church in Corinth observes order. Paul is not making a universal statement about the role of women in churches. Anyone who interprets the statement in this way overlooks the biblical witness found in the Gospels and elsewhere.

From the church's very inception, it has been clear that women and men are equally welcome in the teaching and leadership of the church. One of the most liberating passages for me is from the prophet Joel, quoted in Acts 2, the story of Pentecost: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

I will pour out my Spirit on *all* people. Your sons *and* your daughters will prophesy. Even on my servants, *both* men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

Your sons and your daughters will prophesy.
Men and women will prophesy.
Your sons. And your daughters.
Women and men.
The voice of the church.