

LESSONS IN LIVING

Moving Beyond Sexism

A St. Andrews Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
February 12, 2012

Scripture Reading: James 3:1-7 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Well, it just so happens this week, that a number of people quite innocently, during the course of this last month, have come up and expressed unhappiness with the language policy. Now, no one of them was really a problem. They were all innocent, they were people just expressing a kind of longing they have for the old language. And, probably if it had just been one, or two, or three I would have gone through the week just fine. Then, it may have been Thursday night, I received an email where somebody said that they had heard a number of people in the church that were complaining about the language policy and wanted to make exceptions for certain things. The language policy, if you don't know, is that we don't use gendered language, we don't use male language for God, or female language because we know that privileges some of us over others, and it's very hard, it's very difficult; but we feel like that's a price we need to pay.

I was fine. I was good pastor and went through the week; I was fine – Buddha, and meditate, and all that stuff. I was fine, I thought. And then about 3 o'clock (I guess that's Friday morning, not Thursday night) I realized I'm not really asleep. I'm stewing over this stuff. You ever do that? You think you're asleep and all of sudden you realize, "I'm not asleep at all." And I could feel my blood pressure in my arteries of my neck. Now if I don't get up, I'm going to have a stroke. So, I went to IHOP (*much loud laughter by congregation*). If I get a stroke, I want the cause to be cholesterol, right? (*more laughter*) But, words can't really express the kind of agony I was feeling, because what I was thinking is I am 61 years old. I've been working as hard as I can for 30 years to build a community where all are truly welcome and respected. I realize that when I'm gone, whenever that is – I'm not saying, I'm hoping it's not soon, but you never know (if I stroke myself out) (*laughter*) it could happen sooner than later. But one of these, I'm pretty sure is that when I retire or drop dead – whichever comes first – (I guess if I drop dead, I'm retired) (*laughter*) whenever that is, the powers that be are going to send a minister here, (for a year you have an interim pastor) who will have the charter to bring us back in line. By "back in line" we're talking patriarchy, to get the traditional patriarchal language back intact.

Now here's what I was thinking at IHOP, if I work as hard as I can and it's still not quite happening – what happens when I'm gone, and a minister comes here that wants to undermine it? I realized that unless you take responsibility for it – right? And I'm not talking about saying "OK, yes I'll agree with it [the language policy]". Have you ever tried to carry a limp body? It gets really tiring. I'm talking about standing up for it. I'm talking about walking, I'm talking about when I make a slip and that happens a lot, obviously, in a class and I've made a handout and I miss and I'm copying from a text and I miss a sexist

phrase, I can pretty well count the people who will just say the sexist phrase. If I don't say it here on the page after all this time, it still happens.

Now the quote that came to my mind, there was a revolutionary from South America who realized it was all going to unravel very quickly and he said "My life has been written on water." It's a powerful phrase. I wasn't quite that low. But, without putting any guilt on anyone, because that's not what I want and not zeroing in on anyone – it's not about any one of us, I want to figure out how we can take ownership of this language. Before I go any further, let me say, "I understand". Not only was I a sexist for many years. I still watch the Dallas Cowboys. And that's not based on what they are anymore. It's like I haven't enjoyed a game really for 10 years. *(laughter)* It's the camaraderie that I'm remembering... my brothers, my father, sitting there watching a game. I want that back. And really, that's what's at stake with this language. We remember a special feeling and we don't want to lose that. That is absolutely understandable. But, here's the thing, there come times in history we have to realize that the things that make us comfortable are hurting someone else.

I remember when I was very young my parents trying to explain to me – I'll say my whole family, my parents tried not to be racist, but it was Dallas [Texas]. It wasn't hateful, it wasn't targeting, but it was disrespectful. And they tried to explain to me why that language doesn't matter. And so when I hear us saying that today, it goes to that same wound that never really healed. This is an issue I think that humankind will understand it someday. And I don't want our children looking back at us the way we look back at our own parents who couldn't quite do it for perfectly valid reasons at the time, but it doesn't matter anymore. It's a source of disappointment and shame. Now is the time for us to take ownership of this issue as a community, solid state.

Every day of our lives in the world, something is being born and something is dying. We live at one of those times when our ideas of the nation are dying. We understand now that it's one species. We can't really go back, but it makes us sad and so we beat the drums louder. And we understand that the sectarian religion is a thing of the past. We have to look beyond the boundaries that have been given us. But what that means is we have to make choices. We have to choose which is more important to us; to have pleasant memories of the past or to have prophetic hopes for the future. There are times when we have to make that decision. I am telling you this is one of those times.

There are ten thousand churches nearby who are not even trying to do this. You have that as an option. We are lucky to have found one another. But it is not enough to agree with this intellectually; we have to commit to one another that this will be a value that we will live out and suffer for, if necessary. Religion in our day will either be a beautiful funeral for the old or a painful birth of the new. So, I want to call you to pain today—the pain of hope.

When James was talking about the church of his time he said if you don't bridle your tongue your religion is worthless. And he wasn't talking about when you stub your toe saying a dirty word. He was saying the language we use today determines the future. Furthermore he was saying the tongue is a fire; what that means is speech doesn't stop where you do. I may say a sexist joke and I'm going to stop before I think it goes too far but language doesn't stop where you do. The fire doesn't stop when you lay down your match because there are predators looking and watching and when we do not respect a woman's boundaries or a little girl's boundaries, when we make sexist jokes, when we use sexist language we make their world more dangerous. Now I know that no one in this room wants that, but I also know we live in compartments sometimes and we don't look at the connection between what we hate about the world and what makes us comfortable. There's not a person in this room that if I took one of our sweet little girls and put her here in front of the room, would come up and slap her. If someone did [that], then we

all would leave our chairs and protect her. So why don't we do that with language? If she does not find her own power as a little girl, you may not slap her, but she may find someone who will. And if she does not know her dignity, her power as a woman, she may not hear the alarm when she needs to hear it; only if she gets respect here – and by respect, I mean not talking to her in male-centered language about the sacred. There's not a one of us that if we heard a child was lost we wouldn't go looking for them; and yet if you tell a little girl that the sacred is male, you set them on a course where they can't find their goal, because the sacredness within them – even though it's a female voice, is their guide throughout their life. If they learn here to be looking for a male face, then they won't hear the female sacred within their own hearts.

None of us would stick a thorn in that child or hesitate to remove a thorn that was hurting the child. If we stay within our comfort and do not actively remove the thorns that wound the mind – the definitions, the habits – if we do not remove those from our language, we have wounded people without even realizing it. Now what James said is: language is like the rudder. It steers the ship. So, how we speak about the world determines things about the future. How we speak today is laying a path for the future.

I want this church to be an anvil that forges a new world. I want us to base every word on our highest values. Do you want to know how you can give me high blood pressure?... This may be very helpful (*laughter*) for some of you... it is to say that the language policy is just being politically correct. I guarantee my blood pressure will go up ten points. "*Politically correct*" is a very disingenuous phrase invented by bullies. Let me prove it to you. Is there anybody here – when somebody bent over backwards to call you what you want to be called, is there anybody who has ever bent over to learn about you and to accommodate your presence in their lives, has anyone ever done that to you and you said, "you're just being politically correct"? We don't do that for ourselves, do we? We reserve that phrase for when somebody else asks the same thing of us and then we resent it. When they want the same things we have, we act like somehow that's a sacrifice for us and they're being unrealistic, unimportant. I remember that from the 1950's so well. Different topic, same hypocrisy.

Religion should lead us beyond our own passion. We shouldn't lose our own passion. We shouldn't lose our own art. But we shouldn't lose our compassion for others either. It's very understandable when people say the music and the poems, the scriptures – they're art, and we shouldn't mess with art. You wouldn't go in the Sistine Chapel and (I have heard this at least 10 thousand times) and paint the clothes on the people there. Now it should tell you something if you've heard something 10 thousand times – this isn't original thought going on here. When you find yourself parroting the phrase and sounding like some of the people that you didn't like on other subjects, it might be time for some self-reflection. The artists that we love were not considered necessarily good in their day because they saw with new eyes and so it felt awkward to people. Isn't that interesting? That's one of my favorite definitions of a conservative: someone who worships dead radicals. (*laughter*) I mean you read that, at the time, these people were seen as rebels. People were throwing away and attacking the great traditions of the time. Listen to these words by Picasso: ...*I'm going to put it in the plural because it's sexist otherwise...*

What do you think artists are? Imbeciles who have only eyes if they are painters or ears if they are musicians or have lyres in every chamber of their hearts if they are poets, or even if they are boxers, just their muscles? Far from it. At the same time the artists are political beings, constantly aware of the heartbreaking passionate or delightful things that happen in the world and shaping themselves completely in the image of that pain... making it visible – I'm adding that to his words. How could it be possible to feel no interest in other people and with the cool indifference, to detach

yourself from the very life which they bring to you so abundantly? No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war.

Now war may be too strong a word but it's a struggle. It is a struggle and it is something very wearying, but it is not going to go away. And so we owe it to one another to sing a new song. There are two stories about people who confronted the Sirens. (I think I'm remembering this correctly) Ulysses was one of the people. The Sirens lived on an island and they would call people and the people would shipwreck because the Siren's call was so beautiful that people would lose control of their lives. So, when Ulysses went through that area of the sea, he put earplugs in the sailors [ears] and tied himself to a mast so he could hear the singing. Now that is one view of the language policy. Right? Tied to the mast, don't do this, don't do that, don't say this, and don't say that. But there is a second story where they were sailing, and it may not even be the Sirens, but [it was] beautiful music and shipwreck. Same thing. And instead of tying people to masts they brought Orpheus, the sacred musician to sing music yet more beautiful [than the Siren's call]. That is what I am calling you to do. Find the artist in you. This is the time when it is not enough to worship dead artists. We need to see what they saw. We need to hear what they heard and we need to sing new music and new poetry that resonates with the best science we have and resonates with human need as it exists today.

Someone sent me an email, speaking of the language policy, awhile back. She said, "*Just speaking for myself and not for any other woman, the language we are using opens up my heart to the intimacy of the "I am" in a way that cannot happen when words like 'king' and 'lord' are used. For me our language policy is not about censoring certain words. It's much more about unshuttering our self-protective barriers to understanding intimacy and communion with the beloved and with each other.*" That doesn't sound bad to me.

I want St. Andrews to be an anvil and that's not going to happen if we wobble. We cannot wait for others to come along and pay the price tag we're not willing to pay ourselves. Usually at the end of a sermon, and I'm almost there, I ask you what are your thoughts about it and then just let you sit there. On this issue, it doesn't matter what you privately think. It just simply doesn't matter if you philosophically agree or not. My question is, *will you do something about it?* So, I want to ask (it's more of an altar call than our traditional thing – you don't have to get up) but I want to know if I have any sisters in here who are tired of sexism. (*many in congregation are raising their hands and many are applauding*) But I don't mean *tired* or you just don't like it. I mean *tired enough* to interrupt men here and make them uncomfortable to say I need more from you than that. Do I have any sisters that are that tired? (*more hands raised and more applauding*) Do I have any brothers who care enough – let's wait and see? (*some laughter from congregation*) – who care enough about the women in their lives to say this is not a *woman's issue*, this is a *human issue* and I am willing to pay whatever price it takes...so that little girls in this community can be raised knowing that there's something sacred in them and can trust the voice within them. Every day of our lives, something is being born and something is dying. And so you must choose whether your religion makes for a beautiful funeral or a painful birth. We make the world with the thoughts we have today. And so we must choose between having comfortable and pleasant memories of the past or prophetic hopes for the future. I want to close with a prayer. We haven't done that in a while. Would you join me in prayer?

Common parent of us all, break our sleeping hearts that we might feel the pain of our sisters and daughters. Bend our stubborn will so that we might cease choosing comfortable apathy over uncomfortable compassion. May this church be an anvil to forge the future. May we burn with a fire to make this world not only safer for women but also better and more beautiful because their wise voices

can be heard loud and clear. Help us to teach our daughters that their lives are an adventure no less sacred than their brothers'. Help us to learn from our

sisters to hear their contributions as equal to that of any man. Open our eyes and ears that we might rise to greater art, art that does not require us to be complicit with evil. So that every song we lose from the past we replace with a hundred new songs, more noble and more beautiful than any this world has yet heard. Amen. *(applause)*

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

Welcome to St. Andrew's Church

We are Presbyterian, yet our first allegiance is to Christ's gospel of universal love.

We are Christ centered, yet we respect and learn from all religions of love.

We affirm the ancient symbols of our faith, yet we strive to speak a new language that includes all people and affirms the scientific discoveries of our day.

We hope to teach children stories of the bible without sectarian dogma.

We strive to be a close nurturing community, yet we welcome all people into our midst.

We wish to live in inner peace, yet hear God's call to work for peace, and for universal human rights.

We take faith seriously, yet believe the journey should be fun. We celebrate life in many artistic forms.