

Driving from the Back Seat

Matthew 5: 13-16

Summer is the season for driving. Many of us have taken trips in the car, perhaps to Colorado for church camp, trips to visit family, or just short trips around this area. Welcome home if you've been away.

There is an interesting dynamic in my family -- both the family of my growing up and my family now. Each car we own, or have every owned, has only one steering wheel, one accelerator, and one brake pedal, yet usually there is more than one driver at a time. I find that whenever I'm in one of the passenger seats, away from the controls, I'm still driving! I still check over my shoulder when we are changing lanes. I still check to make sure the driver knows there is a turn coming up. I occasionally, and very subtly, still apply the secret brake located the on floor of the front seat passenger's side!

I find myself in the back seat more often as my children grow older. It is even more challenging to drive from there, but I still manage. Actually, drivers tend not to appreciate back-seat drivers. Ironically, I don't either when I'm in the driver's seat. The older I get and the more I have driven, the more I drive wherever I sit in the car. As there become more drivers in my family, I'm driving more and more from the back seat.

Driving from the back seat is an interesting image. It represents the effort to maintain control when you are not in a position of direct power. Before coming to Kansas City, to Crossroads Church, I served on the staff of a Baptist church in Virginia as an Associate Pastor. Being an associate can be a little like always being in one of the passengers' seats of a car.

During my last two years there, after our long-term senior pastor retired, the church brought in interim pastor and, a year later, brought in another interim pastor. They and a committee of church members were in charge. They were in control, in the driver's seat, but I discovered that I was the one who knew how *drive* the church and keep it on the road. I found myself more and more driving from my position in the back seat.

It's not especially pleasant or easy to do that, but I managed to keep vehicle on the road. There were no wrecks. Here at Crossroads, I share time at the wheel with the whole body, the congregation. This is a different experience, though really much less frustrating

Today's question in the ongoing summer *Ask Jack* series is, "what was the role of women in the early Christian Church?" The image of driving from the back seat seems an apt one to describe, at least in part, the role of women through much of Church history.

What was the role of women in the early church? Women played important roles in the life of Jesus, in the gospels, and in the early church as described in the New Testament. Examining those roles might well have something to teach us today.

There were many women in the life of Jesus. Some are known by name: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and John, Mary Jesus' mother, the other Mary who accompanied the women to the tomb, and Mary and Martha the sisters of Lazarus. Some Jesus some healed while others followed and watched over him.

Women received the gospel equally with men in the first-century church. There was no distinction in Christ, at least theoretically, between male and female, slave and free, and Jew and Gentile. Women suffered, as well men, and were dragged to prison (Acts 8:3, 9:2). Some women "of high standing," exerted strong influence in opposition to Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13: 50). Women served in the role of teacher. Priscilla, with her husband Aquila, taught that charismatic disciple Apollos. (Acts 18:26). Women served as deacons (deaconesses in Romans

16: 1). Finally, Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois were highly influential in that Christian leader's life.

The nature of a woman's role in the first century was accompanied by some sense of contradiction, or least ambivalence. There was equality in Christ, yet women were evidently restricted in their behavior, dress, etc. There was equality in marriage (1 Corinthians), yet a woman had duties of modesty and submission to her husband. She was not speak in church. Her subordinate place relative to men was justified by reference to the creation story when the woman was taken out of the man.

Women were expected not to usurp the man's position as a teacher. She was to be known for her faith and actions, not her words. Since the man was seen to reflect God's image, and creative speech was God's prerogative, women were to remain silent. They were to have chiefly domestic virtues. In reality women have had great influence in the church and exercised tremendous power, though often from the back seat.

Post New Testament, not a great deal is known about women's role other than what is generally know within the culture of the Roman Empire and in that period of barbarism that followed its fall. Generally, women were in subordinate roles to men. They were expected to be passive, obedient, and submissive. This was certainly not uniformly true.

In 1906, an interesting discovery was made in the grotto of St. Paul at Ephesus. Archeologists found two sixth-century images on the cave walls. One was of St. Paul and the other was of a woman, St. Thecla. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* was an apocryphal piece of sacred writing from the second century. It was apparently widely disseminated at that time.

The stories were of Thecla and Paul's *adventures*. They met when Paul traveled to Iconium proclaiming 'the word of God'. His message was about sexual abstinence in anticipation of the resurrection. Thecla was a young noble maiden who, upon hearing Paul, became devoted to him and his teaching.

Her mother warns Thecla's fiancée about this devotion and promptly has Paul dragged before the governor who imprisons the apostle. Somehow, Thecla gains entrance to the prison and her family finds her sitting at Paul's feet. The two are brought before the governor. At the mother's request, Paul is sentenced to scourging and expulsion from the city. Thecla is sentenced to be burned alive. When she is put into the fire, however, she is unharmed.

There are other similar stories about Thecla and Paul. The historian Tertullian (160-230), complains that some Christians in Alexandria were using the example of Thecla to legitimate women's roles of teaching and baptizing in the church. Some modern scholars even suggest that *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is a *proto-feminist* text. Thecla was abused by men and their world, but refuses to conform to its expectations, marriage patterns, and dress code. She boldly asserts her independence and receives support from many women.

The images of Paul and Thecla found on that cave wall at Ephesus are very interesting. Theologian John Dominic Crossan reports that both images are same height, meaning that they were of equal importance. Both have their right hands raised in the teaching gesture, meaning that both were of equal authority. The image of Paul is untouched. Thecla's image, however, has been disfigured. The eyes are scratched out and the upraised right hand has been erased. To the original creators, Thecla and Paul were equally authoritative. To those who later vandalized the images, only the male could be apostolic and authoritative. Consequently, the female image has been *blinded and silenced*.

Let's be reminded that Paul asserts that in Christ, within the Christian community, there are no distinctions between male and female, Jew and Greek, and slave and free. It is not quite

so clear what Paul's attitudes were outside that community. Contemporary scholars are still asking whether Paul was affirming women's role of leadership and authority or beginning to undermine Jesus' clearly equal treatment of women in his movement.

We are forced to wonder and speculate what happened between Jesus' time and the later New Testament? Evidently, during the first and second centuries, there was a struggle within Christianity about the role of women. Women had significant places of leadership in the early church. This understanding was later revised to conform to pressure from the culture.

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount includes images of salt and light. These images reflect the role of women in that culture "to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth." Salt preserves freshness and flavor. "If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?" This approach reflects the way of the Kingdom of God, not seeking positions of power, but rather growing where you are planted. Be faithful while transformation takes place in secret.

We need to ask ourselves how we are pressured to conform to the culture today. How do we succumb? How do we resist? One role of church in our lives is to help us resist cultural pressures to value power, wealth, prestige and honor. We need to remember the virtues of Jesus and the deep, subtle strength of the Spirit.

Fiddler on the Roof is the story of Tevye. He gets lots of attention. Tevye is the *man of the family* in a culture focused on men. That focus includes the honored rabbi, the powerful Russian constable, and the wealthy butcher. It is the women of the village, however, who preserve and flavor life: Tevye's wife Golde, Yente the town matchmaker, and the other women of the village.

Tevye's daughters in particular challenge him to reject his blind adherence to tradition and embrace possibilities. The value of these relationships enable the transformation of Tevye to *a new world – love*. In our real world, our faith tradition can teach us the value of not giving in to oppression and injustice. These are wrong and not acceptable. It also teaches us that the path to new life, to discovering God at the depth of our lives, is not in seeking power, titles, or prestige. It is not about defeating, conquering, or destroying.

Jesus calls us to persevere. Our faith tradition challenges us to be salt and light, and to know that, sometimes, the best way to move down the road is to drive from the back seat. Through such a narrow gate, along such a winding path, lies the way of joy and hope -- the way of God.