Reflections September, 2018 Vol 41 No 1

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Let us imagine a composite story of a woman that illustrates the elements of patriarchy and sexism still present in the United States today. Lydia grew up in a loving Catholic family held together by her mother, who sacrificed her own interests to devote herself totally to caring for her husband and four children. As a high school student in the 1950s, Lydia got excellent grades and made good friends but was limited to cheering for the boy’s football and basketball teams since there were no athletic teams for girls. Soon after graduating, she married her high school boyfriend. One of the readings at their wedding Mass was from Ephesians 5: 22-32 that included the admonition that wives should be submissive to their husbands – a notion that did not trouble her at that time. Soon after marriage her husband got a better job offer and they both agreed to move, even though she was not happy being further away from her family and having to find a new job herself. When their daughter was born, Lydia quit her job and became a full-time homemaker and mother, which commanded her total dedication for almost 20 years. By the time her youngest son started high school, she began to feel vaguely dissatisfied with her life and decided, with the support of her husband, to go back to school to get a degree in social work. Although she was apprehensive about keeping up with the younger students, she did remarkably well and even went on to earn a master’s degree, which brought her a great deal of personal satisfaction. The only dark spot in her collegiate career occurred when she had to drop a course she liked because the male professor continued to make suggestive comments to her. After completing her masters, Lydia got a job with a social service agency, which meant she had to balance her work and family responsibilities, a difficult task since her struggling youngest son still needed a lot of her attention. She was initially very satisfied with her job, until she accidentally found out that her male colleague was making a lot more money for doing the same work. She decided not to say anything to her boss out of fear of retribution, but she became more sensitive to subtle ways that her male colleagues did not treat her as an equal.

The wedding of Lydia’s daughter proved to be a significant event in a number of ways. The readings at Mass included the beautiful love poem from the Song of Songs that celebrates mutual love. The priest gave a homily on marriage as a partnership based on fundamental equality and shared love. He pointed out that in the Song of Songs the woman first expresses her own sexual fantasy about her lover as a young stag bounding over the hills. For Lydia, the wedding prompted on-going deep reflection, eventually leading to some important insights: an affirmation of her life of loving care for others; a greater appreciation of the sometimes subtle ways her husband returned her love; an initial sense that her Catholic faith had resources that could be liberating for women; an embarrassed recall of the now troublesome Ephesians reading at her own wedding; and a hopeful expectation that her own marriage could continue to grow.

Like most grandparents, Lydia loves her grandchildren. She really enjoys going to her granddaughter’s soccer games and is thrilled she has so many sports opportunities denied to previous generations of girls. Lydia’s life experiences make her ever mindful of the limitations women still have today, but watching her grandchildren grow up gives her hope that more progress is possible.

Lydia’s story puts a human face on the situation of women in contemporary society, who hold only a small percentage of the positions held by men in many areas: Government (about 20% of U.S. Congress, 25% State legislatures); Business Leadership (24 women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies); Educational Leadership (30% of college presidents); Hollywood (8% of film directors). Despite the 1963 Equal Pay Act, the weekly earnings of full-time women workers are less than 83% of what men make. Due to Title IX passed by Congress in 1972, more girls are playing sports, but colleges still spend less money on women’s athletics than men’s.

No doubt women have made important strides in the on-going struggle for equality. Women have surpassed men in college enrollment and in earning advanced degrees. Since the 2001 Olympics in Sydney, there are as many team sports for women as men. In the 2018 midterm elections, many more women are running for office than in the past.

The Me Too movement, which took off in October of 2017 as a response to allegations of prominent males abusing females, has encouraged more women to come forth with their stories of assault and harassment. A 2018 survey reported that 81% of adult women in the U.S. experienced some sort of harassment: verbal 77%; touching 51%; cyber 41%; assault 27%. An estimated 20% of female collegians are sexually assaulted, with only an estimated 10% being reported. About 80% of female rape victims are assaulted by someone they know. Women in our patriarchal society suffer not only from political, cultural and economic discrimination but also from various forms of abuse.

Since the Bible has been used historically to justify and promote patriarchy, it is essential to reexamine scripture to expose its bias and recover its liberating power. The Bible, which is the Word of God expressed in human words, was written by men unavoidably influenced by their patriarchal cultures. The biblical story of God’s saving action in the world is written from a male perspective that tends to neglect or marginalize the experiences of women, except for their role of producing children. Male images of God as king, lord, master and father predominate, as does the use of the pronoun “he” for God. The Second Vatican Council taught us that the Bible is inerrant in teaching truths that God intended “for the sake of our salvation.” This principle, which is commonly used to deal with scientific and historical errors in the Bible, can also be applied, as Elizabeth Johnson points out, to the sexist bias in the Scriptures. It definitely does not promote our salvation to erase women’s experience and to subordinate them to men, as many biblical stories do. Furthermore, interpretations of Scriptures that privilege male imagery of God to the neglect of feminine imagery do not serve the salvation of all. The fact that Jesus referred to God as Abba, an Aramaic word like our Daddy, denoting care and compassion, does not rule out feminine imagery nor does it justify patriarchy.

A feminist reading of the Bible tries to show that sexist texts are not normative for the life of Christians today. As Rosemary Ruether put it, if scriptural passages hurt women, then “they are not the word of God.” Feminist scholars also look for themes in the Bible that are actually favorable to women in their original context and wording; for example, the whole encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan women at the well. Furthermore, the Bible, as the inspired word of God, has a continuing life of its own, a fuller sense beyond what the original authors intended. This allows each new generation of Christians to discover saving truth in the Scriptures that was previously hidden. For example, feminist scholars use Luke’s mention that Mary of Magdala and some other women accompanied Jesus on his itinerant mission (8:1-3) to argue that Jesus included some women in his ministry and that therefore women should have a greater role in church ministry today – an interpretation beyond what Luke intended.

In an important project to pull together feminist interpretations of the Bible, Dominican scripture scholar Barbara Reid is editing a 58-volume series published by Liturgical Press, entitled *The* *Wisdom Commentary,* with contributions from Catholic, Protestant and Jewish female scholars around the world and representing various approaches to the rapidly expanding field of feminist biblical scholarship. Reid’s earlier book, *Wisdom’s Feast,* gives a helpful sampling of feminist interpretations of specific scriptural passages.

The first creation account in Genesis 1: 1-31, says, “God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Scholars have commonly used this passage to argue for the fundamental equality of both men and women made in the image and likeness of God. The second creation story in Genesis 2: 4-25 is more problematic. God creates a human being from the earth and puts him in a garden to tend it. Seeing that the man needs a “helper as his partner,” God puts the man into a deep sleep, takes one of his ribs and fashions it into a woman, prompting the man to exclaim: “This is at last the bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” This account has commonly been used to show that women are derived from men and thus subject to men. Reid suggests another interpretation that views the woman as the pinnacle of a process in which God gradually improved on his initial creation of man. Analyzing the Hebrew text, Reid argues that the woman is a “suitable partner” for the man, “equal and adequate” to him and “a help corresponding” to him. This interpretation favorable to women clearly was not the intention of the original male author, but it is one way of interpreting the fuller sense of the passage with contemporary feminist concerns in mind.

Another helpful example from Reid’s book is the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10: 38-42) where Martha complains that Mary has left her to do all the work and Jesus responds that Mary “has chosen the better part.” The standard interpretation is that Martha’s complaint is about having to do all the domestic chores and that Jesus is affirming the superiority of the contemplative life. Barbara Reid suggests that we see the passage as part of the conflict in the early church over the ministerial roles of women. In this context, Martha is upset that Mary is not sharing in church ministry, and the evangelist Luke is representing those who want to keep women silent and restrict their public role in accord with traditional patriarchal norms. Reid argues that women did play active ministerial roles in the early church as attested by the apostle Paul, who mentions the deacon Phoebe and the preeminent apostle Junia, as well as esteemed female co-workers (Romans 16). To maintain Paul’s positive evaluation of female ministry, Reid looks for ways to explain the verse in First Corinthians 14: 34-35 which has Paul saying that women should be silent in church and consult their husbands on religious matters. One possibility is that the verse was not written by Paul himself but is an addition by a scribe. Another possibility is that Paul is reporting an argument by opponents of female ministry in an effort to refute it. Still another possibility is that Paul was himself ambivalent on the question, in some situations affirming an egalitarian outlook and in others denying public roles to women, perhaps suggesting he supported the personal equality of women but did not extend this to social roles. Going back to her main point, Reid finds support for the active role of women in the first century by turning to John’s Gospel, which gives prominence to Martha without any conflict with her sister Mary, who is also active, anointing the feet of Jesus and earning his approval (11: 1-12:8). This whole discussion is important today because it highlights the contention of most feminists that women were more active in the church than commonly thought, opening up the possibility of greater roles for women today.

The multi-volume *Wisdom Commentary* should prove to be a valuable resource for the feminist project of deconstructing the biblical basis for patriarchy and for retrieving the liberating message of the scriptures.

2003 Words