

#AlternativeFaith: *Just Love*

Matthew 5:4, 27-32

I grew up in the matriarchal world of strong Norwegian women—all from my mother’s side. “Matriarchal” may seem like an odd description, I suppose, since this is the legendary land of hard-hewn Vikings; but let me assure you—Vikings, they’re all women, even the bearded ones!

Norwegian mothers are tough and they establish the upper hand right at birth. An old Scandinavian custom is that at the moment of birth, every newborn male is cast out into the frigid ice and snow so that his lifelong primal yearning is for the comfort of his mother’s womb (believe me, it’s true—just ask our spouses). Then, to show us that the world apart from our mothers is tasteless and cruel, they wrap us in reindeer hides and coddle us with lutefisk and flatbread.

Until recent times, Norwegian women were fairly religious, conventionally so, except they reinforced their matriarchal authority by teaching their children the Bible very differently than others. They explained Eve was simply being industrious by asserting her right as a woman to pursue a little knowledge, since Adam was content to lie around naked in a garden all day. They also underscore that it was Sarah, not Abraham, who demonstrated any common sense, since he wanted to start a family at ninety and then, once a father, drove one son away and tried to kill the other. And, of course, Norwegian mothers never overlook the fact that it was mother Mary, not Joseph, who was there for her boy, Jesus, all the way to the end.

When male chauvinists try to counter this by citing how the Apostle Paul didn’t allow women to have authority over men and that their heads had to be covered, Norwegian women respond, based on their experience,

what fools wouldn't want their heads covered when it's 40 below outside? Or when told that women should be silent and submissive—they simply laugh and credit God's feminine sense of humor—of course, we all let men think that! Evidently, finding a silent and submissive Norwegian woman is about as likely as discovering a pregnant Pope!

Seriously, all of this may explain why I never grew up with patriarchal bias, as I know others have. I've always assumed men and women were equal in their authority and status (so long as men, as I was told, aspired to make something of their lives). Certainly, it was never my experience or made any sense to me why a woman should be considered inferior to a man or have a submissive role or be compensated unfairly for doing the same job. Why would that be? Males and females may have different childbearing roles, to be sure, but that didn't justify the fundamental differences in power or authority, as has been so apparent throughout human history.

Unfortunately, this has been a terribly serious error down through the ages. Women have been subject to endless shame and dismissed in value repeatedly by patriarchal societies and religious traditions, even to this day. What grieves me is how much Christian tradition has played into it and sanctioned systemic inequality between the sexes, especially when it was counter to the spirit and practice of the Jesus community in its earliest years.

Throughout the Gospels and the book of Acts, it's evident how men and women were equally highlighted and how women were raised to a social prominence that contrasted the customs of ancient Judaism, as well as the social hierarchy of Roman culture. As Rita Nakeshima Brock writes,

The Gospels challenged systems of domination wherever they manifested themselves, including gender relationships. Genesis 1-2 and the Song of Songs

had established the prototype for equal relationships among women and men. Though the stories of women in the Gospels cannot be called feminist, they do present women as ordinary people exercising power and agency beyond the social structures that might have constrained them. They were a sign that Jesus's community did not follow Roman hierarchies of power and exclusion. Jesus had women friends, shared communal meals that transgressed social divisions, and refuted dogmatic applications of sacred scripture. The Gospels report that these practices threatened even the male disciples, who complained that Jesus spoke with women and was too generous to outcasts.¹

Brock then goes on to explain how in subsequent generations and centuries, patriarchy reasserted itself and changed the egalitarian culture. In fact, it's evident that early church Fathers assumed the Roman cultural norms of social and gender hierarchy over and against the ones introduced by Jesus and his early followers.

Writing about Saint Ambrose, perhaps the most significant Christian leader of 4th century, Brock makes these observations:

Ambrose reflected gender values of his time, which based hierarchies on relationships within the *pater familias*...[He] maintained women's perpetual subordination to men by reading Genesis 2-3 in reverse order, making the curse the "natural" order of Creation in paradise. He applied his view of marriage to rationalize other hierarchies as divinely created...Sexual relations between men were acceptable, as long as one was subordinated to the other by age, income, status, and/or role—so the subordinated male performed the wife's role. Only such hierarchical sex counted as real sex. The construction of male sexual behavior as dominance and control made it unremarkable for Ambrose to use a relationship between two unequal men as a parallel to a relationship between husband and wife. ²

...After Constantine decriminalized Christianity, more and more elite men joined the church. A new set of virtues to guarantee men's submission to church authority began to be added to the manly virtues. Bishops such as Ambrose offered a new masculinity to privileged Roman men. These new virtues for men had previously been the assigned roles of women, of lower-status men, and of slaves. The new virtues defined men's ideal relationship to God as brides, handmaidens, servants, and even slaves...This symbolic use of marriage as husbands dominating wives, a product of the curse and not an image of life in paradise, became the prototype both for the relationship of Jesus and his bride, the church, and for male leaders in relationship to their communities...

¹Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*, Beacon Press, 2008, pg. 45.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 188.

Among the “new males” who incorporated feminine virtues into their ideas of sanctified humanity was Augustine...Like his teacher Ambrose, Augustine retold the story of Creation at the end of the *Confessions* as a way to show that male dominance was divinely ordained. He praised his own Christian mother’s submission to his abusive father, celebrating what he said was her response to “women whose faces were disfigured by blows from their husbands...She told them that ever since they had heard the marriage deed read over to them, they ought to have regarded it as a contract which bound them to serve their husbands...and not defy their masters.”³

How this impacted the legacy of Christendom is hard to underestimate. Most of human civilization in Europe, the Americas, and around the colonized world inherited these unjust hierarchical (if not abusive) notions of “Christian love” and “servanthood” as being consistent with the will of God. Fortunately, over the past century, the feminist and human rights movement have done for the world what Christianity has not, i.e., liberate and empower women and to affirm the genders as equal.

Call it for what it is, unjust love has been a painful legacy in Christian culture throughout the centuries and the lens through which this morning’s portion of the Sermon on the Mount is most often viewed. Certainly, adultery and divorce are sources of great heartache to many, yet the biblical pronouncements in this section of Matthew’s Gospel have been put to shameful and punitive use. Adultery and divorce are morally messy and harmful to relationships, but they are not unforgiveable or unredeemable, nor are those who suffer often the ones who are most responsible for such brokenness. Yet, far too often these sayings of Jesus have been used to condemn people and thus are misrepresented for what they were and are. In this case, the context matters, as it did in Jesus’ time, when he encountered so many women who were vulnerable and culturally shamed for adultery or divorce.

³ *ibid.*, pp. 189-190, 191.

Let's be clear; adultery isn't something one falls into unawares—there are choices made and a deliberate cultivation of emotional ties and erotic desire that haven't been appropriately held in check along the way. Cultivating a relationship outside of marriage typically leads to a morally harmful and complicated situation. That said, the way these verses read, one might sense Jesus' concern for women, since he directs his comments toward males, cast as this teaching is in masculine terms. There's a very intentional reason for that, I believe.

In the inherent social hierarchy of ancient cultures (including at times, Judaism), women were often relatively powerless in terms of their legal status. Marriages were traditionally arranged by men, as the patriarchs of each household determined if their families would unite through marriage. Women, then, were given little choice and left particularly vulnerable to situations where they weren't treated well, especially since they were eligible for marriage barely into their teens; such arrangements also negated the affections two people in love might have for each other. Marriages were for the sake of the clan or community's stability and less so for a relationship of romance.

As you might imagine, adultery played havoc on everything, undermining the trust and loyalty of the familial ties. Yet, because of the marital tradition, adultery occurred with some frequency, especially between star-crossed lovers. Now, Jesus didn't challenge the virtues or merits of the tradition itself, but he clearly cautioned against cultivating the emotional ties, particularly the lust and desires, which unchecked would invariably lead to disaster. He particularly placed the responsibility on males to hold themselves accountable to do the right thing. Why? because in practice, if found out men were the only ones with legal standing, whose

witnesses could vouch for them; hence, women were often scapegoated—conveniently blamed for fostering adulterous relationships (e.g., John 8:1-11; Luke 7:36ff) when, in reality, men were usually the instigators. The patriarchal system itself was biased and patently unfair to women; hence, I believe, Jesus placed the onus on men to be the ones responsible for not cultivating adulterous relationships by checking their own initial lust and desire (the “eye” being symbolic of emotional judgment; the “hand” representing purposeful action).

The need to do this was overwhelming. Jesus was focusing on the morality, not the legality, behind these circumstances (i.e., what’s fair and just), mainly because males were more socially and religiously protected with nearly all the power and authority in the relationship. Before the days of paternity tests, men could avoid accountability any number of ways; a pregnant woman could not. In a male-dominated world, vulnerable women didn’t stand much chance. Though, Jesus didn’t eliminate accountability for adultery, he viewed the circumstances mercifully and held males mainly responsible for doing what was right and just in the relationship.

This carries over into the next section about divorce. A similar accountability is directed toward men. Why? Because women had no voice when it came to divorce. All a husband had to do to get divorced was to express dissatisfaction with his wife, write her a certificate of divorce with a couple of male witnesses, and send her out of his house (cf. Deut. 24:1-4).

Divorce was more common than we might realize in biblical times, usually leaving women economically and socially exposed and victims to abuse. The story in John 4 of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well likely wasn’t an indicator of her being promiscuous, as it is commonly portrayed. More likely, she was the victim of five men with the power to

divorce her, who had decided they didn't want her any more. Whatever the reasons were, in many cases, divorce was a legal mechanism for men to escape or dispose of their marriage without much accountability. I believe this is why Jesus came down so hard on its unjust practice.

In both of these teachings, the moral criticism isn't to shame and scorn people who have been involved in adultery or divorce per se (there was already enough shame and shunning to go around). Instead, it was directed toward the patriarchal system that allowed men to escape accountability and to exploit their power over women. Jesus' critique was akin to the same merciful bias he had for the poor, which wasn't at the exclusion of everyone else, but to address terrible injustices being committed against powerless people.

The heart of the matter is *power*—who's got it and at who's expense? Who's a victim? The imbalance of power was the underlying issue in so many situations, which allowed those of higher status to commit crimes against victims often with impunity. I have to believe he'd have the same critique of us today.

What this all comes down to is, if we are to reflect eternity and live in the righteousness (right relations) of paradise, it requires us to pursue just love—a love that is just in its view of each partner, that doesn't reflect the power centers and social hierarchies of human civilization, but the mutual empowering that God's Spirit inspires and fosters. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about embracing and cultivating love—divine love, human love—just *love*—*just* love. It is for our redemption from all the suffering humanity has brought upon itself because of domination and exploitation, because of selfishness and greed, because of sexual violence and harm.

The image of God's realm, as I see it, is not of a hierarchical social order with ascending levels of status and value, but instead a circle—a circle of mercy and love, where everyone is on the same level and beside each other. This occurs at present when men and women, males and females, heterosexual and homosexual people are equal and free to love and be loved without harming their souls or diminishing their sense of self-worth and value. The union of two is meant to protect just love, not diminish it. Apart from just love, the covenant of marriage can too easily be reduced to utilitarian use (and sometimes abuse) of another. Without just love, marriage is not a blessed sacrament or a blissful arrangement for two people.

When love is just and when it is mutually shared, it is described like this:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

Just love is the greatest of all things as a reflection of eternity and as a central feature of paradise, intended to bless and redeem us all.

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