

The church's gender minority
Matthew 14:22-33
Brentwood First Presbyterian
8/10/08
Mike Magee

Scene 1 Peter sinks

Peter is not perfect. For one thing, being a fisherman, I suspect Peter stinks. But Peter is a bold, courageous man. A risk-taking, outwardly focused man. A faithful man who calls Jesus his Lord and Savior. On the spectrum of “being” on one end, and “doing” on the other, Peter is a doer. Peter financially supports his wife and mother in law. He is an entrepreneur who owns his own fishing business and boat. But this God-worshiping-man is sinking beneath the waves. And so are the men in American culture.

Contrasted with Peter, think of the pictures of Jesus you saw as a child. Don't they suggest a tender, sweet man in a shining white dress? But as our boys grow up, whom will they choose as a role model: gentle Jesus, meek and mild, or Arnold Schwarzenegger, the action hero? The irony here is that even more so than Peter, the real Jesus is the ultimate hero, bold and courageous as any man alive. But we've turned him into a wimp. And Jesus is not a wimp.

Let's say a burly man named Jack visits a mega church. I am thinking of someone like the cowboy named Curly in the movie *City Slickers*. What's the first thing he sees? Pink carpet abutting lavender walls. Walls adorned with quilted banners. Two dozen roses on the Lord's table. Boxes of Kleenex in the pews.

Jack may be asked to hold hands with his neighbor. He may be asked to sing a love song to Jesus, such as, “Lord, You're Beautiful,” or “Jesus, I am so in love with You.” Someone may weep. Then Jack will have his 8-minute male attention span put to the test by a 30-minute sermon. When this torture test is finally over, Jack is invited to have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Let's say Jim-Bob approaches Jack and says, “Jack, would you like to have a personal relationship with me?” Yuck! Men don't talk or think like this, yet we've wrapped the gospel in this man-repelling package. No wonder Jack goes out the back!

Every Sunday, without even realizing it, we send this subtle signal to guys: “You are in feminine territory.” Consider these statistics: The typical U.S. congregation draws an adult crowd that's 61% female, and 39% male. Today 25 percent of married, churchgoing women are worshipping without

their husbands. More than 90 percent of American men believe in God, and five out of six call themselves Christians. But only two out of six attend church on a given Sunday. The average man accepts the reality of Jesus Christ, but fails to see any value in going to church.

Let's face it: men just aren't in sync with the current construct of church like women are. But it does not have to be this way. We can reconsider what God calls the church to be and do.

Scene 2 A church without men will sink

Try to imagine what this world would be like if Peter had sunk below the waves and drowned that day 2000 years ago on the Lake of Galilee. Imagine what that new branch of Judaism called Christianity would have been like without Peter. No rock upon whom Jesus could build his church. No story about Peter denying Jesus thrice, and being forgiven thrice, and Jesus telling Peter to feed his sheep. No leader for the Jerusalem house church. No foil for Apostle Paul in the book of Acts. No eventual leader for the Roman house church. I believe Jesus chose Peter to be the rock of his church not just because of who he "be," but also because of what he "do."

David Murrow, the author of *Why men hate church*, asks, "How did Christianity, founded by a man and his 12 male disciples, become the province of women?" There is a pattern of feminization in Christianity going back at least 700 years, according to Dr. Leon Podles, author of *The Church Impotent: the Feminization of Christianity*. But the ball really got rolling in the 1800s, with the dawning of the industrial revolution. Large numbers of men sought work in mines, mills and factories, far from home and church. Women stayed behind, and began remaking the church in their image. The Victorian era saw the rise of church nurseries, volunteer choirs, quilting circles, ladies' teas, and girls' societies.

No wonder men have a hard time finding their place in church. But a church without men sinks like Peter in the Lake of Galilee.

Scene 3 Jesus fishes Peter out of the lake

Scholars tell us the Greek word translated here as "battered boat," is perhaps better translated as "tortured boat." So a more correct translation is the boat the male disciples are in is tortured by the waves of the Lake of Galilee, like men are tortured by the modern day church. Peter, a weathered, audacious, risk taker, steps out of the boat onto the tortured surface of the lake, to come to Jesus. Though rugged himself, he is not an

individualist who thinks he has no need for Jesus. As he sinks beneath the waves, he calls out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately and bruskiy Jesus reaches out his muscular carpenter’s hand and fishes him out of the drink. Jesus says to Peter and to the disciples in the tortured boat, fear not!

Murrow writes that studies tell us men who are engaged with a local church are more likely to express a higher level of satisfaction with life. More so than those who say they are spiritual or religious but are not engaged with a local church.

Murrow writes men desire in Jesus a masculine audacious leader, which in fact he is. But that is not the portrayal by the church today. Our contemporary praise music invites men to express love for Jesus in romantic language most men feel awkward singing. Jesus barked, “Follow Me!” but we’ve softened it so it is now, “Have a personal relationship with Me.”

Instead of a nurturing environment where most women and a few men feel safe and secure, Murrow writes most men need adventure, challenge and risk – things discouraged in many churches. Although Jesus commissions us to go out into all the world, the actual mission of most churches today is making people feel safe and secure. Men are born risk-takers, but churchgoers are a cautious bunch. Men are all about doing, but the emphasis in today’s church is on becoming.

There is a reason a church down the road might advertise a “man camp.” Could it be they recognize a predominance of women over men within their own ranks, and want desperately to engage more men? But it is said that developing a men’s ministry and trying to glue it onto a predominantly feminine church keeps men peripheral to the life of a church. It is said another way is to invite both men’s and women’s spirituality into all activities of the church. That we could reclaim the masculine spirituality abandoned by the church, and reintegrate it with the current feminine spirituality.

Conclusion

I am not suggesting we should nurture or love less than we do. I am also not suggesting that we paint the worship center hunter green, serve beer for communion, or eliminate the sermon, as one of my friends suggested over lunch. No. I am suggesting that we could be more inclusive, and take more risks.

We realize there are risks we should not take. We are not called to do anything that endangers our relationship with God or others, or endangers our health. Still, that is not the problem for most followers of Christ. Most of us are like those other disciples in the boat with Peter at 3 o'clock in the morning - we're content to hold on to the safety of the boat.

There is a story about a pastor who loves motorcycles. He tells about being in a motorcycle shop one day, drooling over a huge Honda 750 and wishing that he could buy it. A salesman comes over and begins to talk to him. He talks about speed, acceleration, excitement, the attention-getting growl of the pipes, racing, and risk. He talks about how the good-looking girls are attracted to anyone riding such a cycle.

Then he discovers his prospective buyer is a minister. Immediately the salesman changes his language and even the tone of his voice. He speaks quietly and talks about good mileage and visibility. It is indeed a "practical" vehicle.

The pastor observes: "Lawnmower salesmen are not surprised to find clergy looking at their merchandise; but motorcycle salesmen are. Why is that? Does this tell us something about clergy and about the church? Lawnmowers are slow, safe, sane, practical, and mundane. Motorcycles are fast, dangerous, wild, and thrilling." Then the pastor asks a question: "Is being a Christian more like mowing a lawn, or like riding a motorcycle? Is the Christian life safe and sound, or dangerous and exciting?" He concludes, "The common image of the church is pure lawnmower: slow, deliberate, and plodding. Our task is to take the church out on the open road, give it the gas, and see what the old baby will do!"

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...

Jesus said come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will refresh you. If today's worship speaks to you, and you wish to become more active in this particular church, please see me or an elder after worship today.