

Silent in the Churches: A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 14:34–36

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Before we get too far into this sermon, I need to say one thing: my brother had it coming. So none of this is my fault. Well, not entirely my fault. It might be his fault. Or my parents' fault, even, for the whole thing started because they had the audacity to sell their house. The one we had was fine. I had my own space there, away from my brothers—a nice reading spot, a shelf full of books, and plenty of room for my favorite pastime: minding my own business.

Honestly, we didn't need to move anywhere. I was just fine where we were, thank you very much. But for some reason, they didn't see it that way. And before I knew it, my room was gone, for the house had sold long before our new place was move-in ready. We did the only thing we could while we waited for the builders to finish their work: we moved in with my grandparents.

Now that part is not so bad by itself. We have always enjoyed our time with Gram and Papa, so moving in with them meant more of what we loved most about going to visit: fried chicken, fewer rules, and (to be perfectly honest), more spoiling.

But those things came at a price: I had to share a room—and a bed—with my brother. Not my youngest brother, the one who looks like me. That one's harmless. This was the other brother. The middle brother. The bane of my young existence: Ryan Michael Waite.

Things are good with us now, but at the time, Ryan seemed to roll out of bed each morning with a headful of fresh ways to torture me. From hiding my things, to pinching my arms, to putting his hands just inches from my face, taunting over and over, "Not touching you. Not touching you. Not touching you."

He had made it his life goal to push me to the brink of insanity, smile as I teetered on the edge, and laugh maniacally those times I fell headlong into the abyss. And I did fall from time to time.

I could tell mom, of course—after all, she was (theoretically) on the side of the righteous, which would work in my favor—but the problem with telling on Ryan is that I would run the risk of being punished myself, for surely, Mom reasoned, I must have had some part to play in whatever madness Ryan had impressed upon me that day. He would not just torture me for no reason. I mean, what sort of person would do such a thing? What sort of person, indeed!

So, as we lay begrudgingly close in our bed one night, it was that possibility of punishment for both of us that kept me from pummeling him when he started poking me in the side, over, and over, and over—an impish little grin creeping across his face with increasing malevolence as my ribs endured thrust after thrust of his bony finger.

I want you to know, I tried to take the high road. I rebuked. I threatened. I swore to tell Mom and get us both in trouble. But he knew I wouldn't tell. I didn't have his thirst for injustice, or his *kamikaze* spirit. I tried to envision the hurt on my mom's face and to imagine what sort of punishment she would dole out. There would be no banishing me to a room by myself; that's exactly what I wanted, and she knew it. No, the only punishment that would do for a reclusive introvert and avid indoorsman like myself was

something outside. Pulling weeds, maybe. Picking up the rocks that littered the backyard of our new house. And the icing on the cake? I'd have to do it with Ryan, which would put me right back where I started.

So, for a while, I simply endured. Humble. Patient. Valiant.

Then came the jab to end all jabs, a hard thrust between the ribs that pushed a teetering older brother right over the edge. In a moment of rage, I reached down and grabbed the twenty-four-inch red Power Ranger action figure at my side and brandished it like a warrior fighting for all that's good and right in the world.

Only the plastic helmet was hard enough to be effective, so, with my hand clutched tight around its feet, I roared the guttural Braveheart war cry of the wronged, the beaten, the demoralized—and swung with all my might.

It did not end well for Ryan. The crude cudgel hit him right in the eye, and as soon as it did, he let out a banshee scream that woke the whole house. Next thing I knew, the lights flashed on, and in rushed Mom, Dad, Gram, and Papa, none of whom had seen everything that came before—the incessant pestering and jabbing. All they saw was a wailing little boy, one side of his face clutched in his hands, while his crazed, Ranger-wielding older brother stood over him, weapon in hand.

In the bright incandescence of Gram's guest bedroom, I have to admit, it did not look good. And the truth is, it was not good. I had done a horrible thing, and I deserved what I got, no doubt about it. But as even Ryan would tell you, there is more to the story than a distraught older brother and a smack in the head, for at first glance, the "scene" reveals only half the story. There is also a "backstory" as most advanced investigators realize.

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? (1 Cor 14:34–36 NIV)

In a much truer sense, something similar is happening in today's sermon text, 1 Cor 14:34–36. There are no older brothers, no Power Rangers, and no exaggerated stories of wrongful rib-jabbing.

But when we walk right in and flip on the lights, it does not look good. Why? Because Paul is telling women to stay silent in the church. They are not allowed to speak. They must be subordinate. And it does not stop there. If they desire to know anything, he writes, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

If we march right in and flip on the lights that is what we see. A mandate—universal, perhaps?—that keeps women from leading. That keeps them from speaking. That keeps them from asking. If you want to know anything, just ask your man. Let him dole out knowledge and answer your questions, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church!

It is a text that has been taken at face value many times and in many places in the long history of the church in ways that have kept women from leading in worship and preaching the gospel and serving as elders and deacons and teachers and leaders. And for a body of believers who claim that the gospel is the power of God to give us freedom and new life—who claim that, in the person of Jesus, God is doing something new, something that brings healing and wholeness to our relationships with God and one another—it is a text that does not look good at first glance.

But that is not the whole story. A reading of these verses that does not account for the larger context in which they were written does not give them a fair shake. After all, like any other passage in the Bible, these few verses must not stand on their own. They are part of a larger discussion in Corinthians about striking the balance between spontaneity and order, member and body, in the life of the church. The larger story of the church at this time is one of Spirit-filled gospel power breaking out in many and myriad ways—from speaking in tongues, to praying out loud, to prophesying for the good of everyone present.

Trouble is, sometimes that power is disruptive. People give voice to the Spirit's movements. They speak out and ask questions in ways that sideline love or overrun the meek or drown out the mumblers, and if you don't watch out, those individual expressions of the Spirit's leading can prevent the building up of the church at large.

In the middle of that discussion—that Spirit-driven, unity-aimed discussion—we find this text. A word about women and silence in the church. In a context like that, it is hard to know just what this means. Some people think Paul is addressing a specific problem in the Corinthian house churches. Maybe a group of women were talking too much, asking too many questions, or speaking in ways that focused too much on their own expressions of Spirit power and too little on building up the body of Christ. Some people think Paul did not write it at all, that it is too unlike him and must have been put here by someone else in order to voice a later opinion or address some later problem.

At the end of the day, we simply cannot know with absolute certainty who wrote these words or why they wrote them, but one thing seems certain: If they are part of a discussion about order and worship, it is hard to hear them as more than an answer to concerns about order and worship—a call for *certain women at Corinth* to remember that God is a God of order and love, and that the church is not a place where one remains an individual only. It is a place where we become something more.

The body of Christ—hands and feet, elbows and knees—each with gifts that help make the whole what it is. And if certain Christians cannot remember and honor that wholeness, it is time to be silent.

What I am saying is, this text is not a call to ban women from leadership, as it so often becomes. If it were, we would have to wonder why Paul assumes, a few pages earlier in ch. 11, that women should, and do, pray and prophesy in the church. We would have to wonder why Paul ends his letter to the Romans by greeting Phoebe the deacon and Junia the apostle among a host of others who are servants and leaders in the church at Rome. We would

have to wonder, too, about his reminder to the Galatians that in Christ Jesus, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. All of those folks have been made one (Gal 3:28). And, perhaps the most compelling point, we would have to wonder why the stories of Jesus—especially the gospel of Paul's coworker Luke—feature women with such frequency and prominence.

So when we hear this text, let us not hear a restriction on women for the church at large. Let us instead listen in harmony with the words around it, with the larger story of the gospel—a story of healing and wholeness and Spirit and power. A story of the God who comes down to raise up and calls out to send forth—a God who hears and fills and moves and heals to bring order and peace and life evermore. A story at work from the days of Abram and Sarai. A story that works with the world as it is, true enough, but calls it, too, to rise up and be more. For in this story, barriers are being broken and space is being made. Valleys are being exalted and mountains and hills are being brought low. This crooked Corinthian situation is being made straight, and everyone is starting to find themselves, at long last, on even ground.

One body. One Spirit. One church. One people. That is the whole story. And in our hearing it, may we hear, too, the story of the church at large made richer and better by a call to order and not to silence.

For by faith, Sarah bore a child who would become a whole people. Miriam watched a basket, and Rahab saved some spies. Ruth stayed out of Moab, and Tamar lived a lie. And what more should we say? For time would fail us to tell of Jael and Jephthah's daughter, Deborah and Esther, Mary and Martha, Phoebe and Junia, Mary of Egypt and Julian of Norwich, Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa, not to mention the host of women living as saints serving in the global church today, serving also in this congregation today.

Let us celebrate them and their ministry—their work to bring the order of God for the sake of the world. From the moms who send bully big brothers out to pull all the weeds to teach them a lesson about loving your neighbor, to sisters and grams and daughters and aunts who spend themselves daily for the sake of the body.

For those who once served, and those who still do, for the ones who have gone and the ones who are new, let us give thanks that in the long history of the church, from the time of Jesus and Paul all the way up to now, women have never really been silent. For the body we love would be poorer without them.

Yeah, if we walk right in, and flip on the lights, it doesn't look good. But let us take a moment to pause and give thanks. To remember good work, and gifts that were shared for the sake of the body. And when we do, let us recognize that, though it doesn't look good, it's not the whole story.

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