

## Overcoming Patriarchy

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, February 11, 2018, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Genesis 1:26-31](#) and [Galatians 3:19-29](#)

Copyright © 2018 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

We planned this sermon series because there was so much news about sexual violence. It is an issue that we simply needed to address here in the church, from the pulpit. As we planned the series, as I dug into the issue and learned more, I realized that the vast majority of sexual violence is connected to patriarchy. Yes, men are sometimes the victims of sexual violence. Yes, women are sometimes to the perpetrators of sexual violence. And the vast majority of those targeted with sexual violence are women, and the vast majority of those who perpetrate sexual violence are men. Sexual violence is, in our society at large, foremost an issue of men wielding their power in sexualized ways toward some sexual end for themselves.

Since this is the last sermon in this series, perhaps it's time I explained what I mean by 'patriarchy.'<sup>1</sup> Patriarchy is a social order that favors men (particularly cisgender, heterosexual men) at the expense of everyone else. To do this, patriarchy relies on dualistic thinking. A person is either male or female, and this is determined at birth, so there is no room for gender fluidity or transgender identity. To do this, patriarchy names certain qualities as masculine and superior, and other qualities as feminine and inferior. Power, control, rationality, and competitiveness are examples of masculine-labeled qualities and they are considered superior to feminine-labeled qualities like emotional expressiveness, compassion, and nurture. This leads to men and women having specific roles, with men leading and women supporting, and with male-labeled job getting paid more than female-labeled jobs.

Patriarchy supports (demands) male domination, and when women move into positions of power (become corporate executives, politicians, etc.), they are expected to behave "like men." The weird thing is that most men I know are not interested in dominating women. Rather, it is the system people of all genders have been born into and participate in unconsciously. So, while male-identified people reap most of the benefits of patriarchy, people of all genders support it – unless we consciously resist it.

Much of the Bible seems to support patriarchy. The formative stories of the Hebrew scriptures are steeped in patriarchy. I think this is more an example of the authors participating in patriarchy unconsciously than it is an endorsement of it. Similarly, patriarchy has (probably unconsciously) influenced the way we translate the Bible into English (and other languages). See the first sermon in this series for more on that.

Yet, despite the omnipresence of patriarchy, there are glimpses in scripture of another way. The first creation story says that people are created in the image of God, regardless of their gender. And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that in the

---

<sup>1</sup> This definition and explanation is based largely on Drew Serres, "Why Patriarchy Persists (and How We Can Change It)," *Organizing Change*, <https://organizingchange.org/patriarchy-persists-can-change/> (posted at least two years ago; accessed 29 January 2018).

community of Jesus-followers, cultural distinctions, class distinctions, and gender distinctions are unimportant, for we are all one, we are all equal in Christ. In other words, patriarchy is not part of God's desire for humanity and the beloved community Jesus is leading us to is not patriarchal.

So, how do we get to that non-patriarchal, beloved community? Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time, a person went for her daily walk along the banks of the river that ran through town. As she walked along, she heard what sounded an awful lot like a baby crying. When she looked around, she realized that the sound was coming from a basket in the middle of the river that was floating downstream with the current. Our heroine jumped into the river, swam out to the basket, and brought the baby ashore. She dropped the baby off at her parent's home and they agreed to care for the baby.

The next day, our heroine went for her daily walk along the river and, sure enough, another basket was floating along. Worrying that it, too, might hold a baby, our heroine jumped into the river and rescued the baby. She took this baby to her neighbor's home to be cared for.

You can probably tell where this story is going. The third day, our heroine had an appointment and couldn't go for her daily walk along the river, so she had another friend take the walk for her. Sure enough, the friend went into the river to pull out another baby.

It wasn't long before our heroine organized a river patrol. And then some friends built an orphanage, and before you knew it, the whole town was organized to take care of the babies that kept getting pulled out of the river.

Then one day, at one of the organizing meetings, somebody made a bold suggestion. "I was thinking," this person said, "maybe some of us might go upstream to find out why these babies keep getting loaded into baskets and plopped into the river. Maybe there's something we can do to stop it."

We can look at the work of the church, particularly the mission work, as having two components: downstream mission work and upstream mission work. Both are vital. The downstream mission work looks at the needs that are right before us and addresses them. It pulls the babies out of the water and cares for them. Upstream mission work looks at the needs that are right before us and asks why they're happening. It goes upstream and asks, "Why?" and "How do we change it?"

There are people who don't have enough money each month to keep a roof over their head and to buy groceries, and they have transportation limitations. So we are helping our local food bank bring the food to them with the mobile food van project. This is virally important downstream work and makes a huge difference in the lives of the people served. There is also an upstream aspect to this need. Why are people so poor that they can't afford both rent and food? This is a question about the system.

It is my hope that the #MeToo movement will lead our society to holding perpetrators of sexual violence accountable. This is a type of downstream work. It is a vital type of downstream work. Holding an individual perpetrator of sexual violence accountable will make an important difference, especially for the target of that violence.

I mentioned some other downstream work in my sermon last week. I mentioned how important it is to believe the stories we hear from people (especially from women) who have experienced sexual violence. And it's important that we tell them that we believe them. Maybe something we (as a church) could do is to create a space where people can tell their stories – and be believed. And when those stories are about experience of sexual harassment and abuse that took place in the church (for this can happen in the church just as easily as it takes place anywhere else in society), we could figure out what act of repentance by the church is needed.

I also suggested last week that one of the things we can do when we witness some form of harassment or abuse taking place is to interrupt it. Have you heard about the New York superhero known as Snackman? He defused a fight on the subway by standing between the combatants while eating potato chips. You can see the film of what happened [here](#).

We don't have to use potato chips to interrupt. We can get the target out of the situation or we can distract the assailant. All it took was a woman walking by and slowing down to create the moment for me to escape from a sexual assault when I was a teen.

There are ways to confront a harasser (I wouldn't do this with an assaulter). Later, "when the harasser is less likely to escalate the situation, [we can ask] questions like: 'Were you aware of how you came off in that conversation?' Researchers also suggest talking openly about inappropriate behavior, like asking colleagues: 'Did you notice that? Am I the only one who sees it this way?' It might seem obvious, but researchers say it's crucial to check in with a victim and offer to help."<sup>2</sup> In the work setting, that help might take the form of offering to go with them to Human Resources, if they want. At church, it might take the form of offering to go with them to talk to a pastor.

Sharyn Potter, a sociologist at the University of New Hampshire who runs a research group for sexual violence prevention, says, "A bystander saying 'This isn't your fault, you didn't do anything wrong,' is really, really important."<sup>3</sup>

These are just a few examples of downstream work that we can do. Upstream work is always harder than the downstream work because it's the work that changes whole systems.<sup>4</sup> Yet, because so much about sexual violence is powered by patriarchy, only by overcoming patriarchy will we be able to curtail the sexual violence.

You've probably heard about girls being sent home from school because their outfits were deemed to be "distracting." But think about the message that sends. When we interrupt a girl's school day to force her to change her clothes, or when we send her home because her shorts are too short or her bra strap is visible, we are telling her that making sure boys have a distraction-free learning environment is more important than her own

---

<sup>2</sup> Claire Cain Miller, "The #MeToo Moment: How to Be a (Good) Bystander," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/us/the-metoo-moment-how-to-be-a-good-bystander.html> (posted 12 December 2017; accessed 29 January 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Many of the following ideas come from Drew Serres, *op cit*.

education. Instead of shaming girls for their bodies, maybe we could teach boys that girls are not sexual objects. But that would take a systemic change.

Patriarchy effects all of us and we all participate in it, but because men benefit from it, men bear the primary responsibility for disestablishing it. As Lindy West pointed out, “Only 2.6 percent of construction workers are female. We didn’t install this glass ceiling, and it is not our responsibility to demolish it.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense, overcoming patriarchy is more a men’s issue than a women’s issue.

One of the ways we could address a part of patriarchy is for us to stop teaching sex education in our public school and start teaching sexuality education. The difference between sex education and sexuality education is that the former focuses on plumbing and mechanics and the latter focuses on the whole human being. Imagine if we taught that we need to listen to each other in our intimate relationships, that sexual expression should happen in the context of an affirmative ‘yes,’ rather than teaching merely that ‘no means no.’

And if our schools won’t do it, maybe our churches (at least progressive churches like ours) should offer holistic sexuality education to the general public.

We’re also going to have to hold media accountable. Whether this is for male-dominated journalism, for the glass ceilings and unequal pay that persist in Hollywood, or for the victim-blaming that gets echoed in media, they all need to be held accountable.

And we need to address legislation. When bills are introduced that take away a woman’s agency and when bills are introduced that support male domination, we must condemn them and fight against them.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to change how we raise our children, especially how we raise our sons. There is a lot I could say about this, but for now I’ll limit myself to just a couple ideas. First, I want to say that changing the way we raise our sons is difficult. It means going against all the messages they will receive from our patriarchal society. All the more reason to be intentional about it. There was a great article in *The New York Times* back in June about [raising feminist sons](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/upshot/how-to-raise-a-feminist-son.html).<sup>6</sup> It offers a dozen specific attitudes and actions for parents to adopt in how they raise their children, especially their sons. It covers things like helping our sons increase their emotional intelligence, and providing them with positive role models, and considering how work is divided up in the home, and the importance of our sons having different kinds of friendships. I think these suggests apply to teachers and grandparents and church friends, too. I encourage you to read it.

We need to teach our sons – and all men, really – that power and position are not an end in themselves. Nor are they a license to prey upon those who are less strong or in subordinate positions. Rather, when men have them, for whatever reason, they allow a

---

<sup>5</sup> Lindy West, “Why Is Fixing Sexism Women’s Work?” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/03/opinion/why-is-fixing-sexism-womens-work.html> (posted 3 January 2018; accessed 29 January 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Agnes Lee, “How to Raise a Feminist Son,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/upshot/how-to-raise-a-feminist-son.html> (posted 2 June 2017; accessed 29 January 2018).

man more ways to be of service to those around him. That's what Jesus taught. By itself it means little that you are bigger or stronger or more exalted. The measure of a man – the measure of a person – is found in what you do with those things.<sup>7</sup>

Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> Based on Leonard Pitts, Jr., "What does it really mean to be a man?" *The Bellingham Herald*, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/ODN/BellinghamHerald/shared/ShowArticle.aspx> (posted 25 November 2017; accessed 29 January 2018).