



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Dismantling Patriarchy

Clay Nelson © 14 October 2018

A friend asked what I was preaching on this week. I told him “Dismantling Patriarchy.” He gave me an empathetic chuckle, “Well, good luck with that.”

I’m not sure what he meant by that. Easy peasy. It has only been around for the last 11,700 years of the earth’s history. Lots has changed since it took hold during the Neolithic age, sometimes called the new stone age. The Bronze age had not even happened yet. What had happened is that the previous nomadic hunting/gathering age where men and women worked together as a unit for the family’s and tribe’s survival had been replaced by growing crops and raising livestock which meant living in villages. It raised the issue of ownership for the first time. Who owned the land the crops grew on? Who owned the goats and cattle that grazed on it? That led to further questions. Men became aware that they had some mysterious role in the conception of a child. But having failed their intro to biology class, they assumed that their semen was like a seed planted in empty soil. Like the barley, wheat and goats the child was theirs. Like the soil, a woman’s only value was in being fertile. And like the fields, the man owned the woman. And as we all know, ownership gives power. While our understanding of the birds and bees is now more informed about the mutuality of conception, we still refer to a woman as being fertile. Each time we do we reinforce new stone age thinking and the flowering of patriarchy.

Patriarchy was furthered at the end of the Neolithic Era when women began to be traded as commodities. This was seen in arranged marriages between families or villages, women being used to have sex with visitors as a deed of hospitality by tribal chiefs, and the ritual rapes during festivals to ensure prosperity. Women were treated as commodities, and from a young age became accustomed to this identification. Women’s value lay in their reproduction, especially in farming villages. In these villages, more people were needed to work the land and sustain the population, so women were expected to produce a large amount of offspring. Children became an economic asset, and if women were unable to produce them, they were seen as all but worthless. The idea of women being good only for their wombs has progressed even into today’s society.

All the major religions would cement this Neolithic understanding of the relationship between men and women into their cultures. The story of Adam and Eve is as good an example as any. The story portrays a woman as not worthy of full maleness. Only man is in the image of God. Eve is only a dangerous helpmate. Dangerous because she tempts man to fall from that image.

By the time the Ephesians read Paul’s letter to them admonishing women to be subject in everything to their husbands as the head of the household it was old news. To them this was the natural order. It had always been thus. No one could remember back 9000 years to the Pleistocene age when things had been different. The only thing new in Paul’s letter was that it had been ordained by God. Even their pagan Greek neighbours had understood this for at least three hundred years. Aristotle, tutor to Alexander the Greek, had portrayed women as

morally, intellectually, and physically inferior to men; saw women as the property of men; claimed that women's role in society was to reproduce and to serve men in the household; and saw male domination of women as natural and virtuous. Not having the benefit of our knowledge of human biology, Aristotle believed that women had colder blood than men, which prevented women from evolving into men, the sex that Aristotle believed to be perfect and superior. He believed that any imperfection that is caused in the world must be caused by a woman because one cannot acquire an imperfection from perfection (which he perceived as male). Aristotle had a hierarchical ruling structure in his theories. Through this patriarchal belief system, passed down generation to generation, people have been conditioned to believe that men are superior to women. These symbols are benchmarks which children learn about when they grow up, and the cycle of patriarchy continues to the present day.

When Thomas Aquinas introduced Aristotelian thought into the theology of the Catholic Church misogyny became an acceptable part of patriarchy. You can't have imperfect beings in positions of power in a holy institution. Protestantism did not challenge this view, and if anything, reinforced it with the primacy it gave to the bible as the word of God, holding up the many passages that supported patriarchal beliefs.

I'm beginning to understand my friend's chuckle about dismantling patriarchy. Such an undertaking is akin to tilting at windmills. I'm beginning to think dismantling patriarchy in one sermon is perhaps overreaching. Patriarchy is so entrenched in our culture it is part of the landscape. So much so, many don't even know the word. Yet, it has been challenged for generations and many Unitarian Universalists have been among those who have taken up their lance to tilt against it. I merely wish to continue that resistance, for it will take many more generations and sermons to create the cultural shift necessary to discount it as the natural order and acknowledge its destructive effects.

One of the difficulties is there are multiple understandings of patriarchy offered. The one I prefer is by bell hooks, an African-American feminist theologian: "Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence." By this definition patriarchy not only oppresses women, but people of colour, those who are queer, and the poor.

Her approach appeals to me because she is not anti-men but anti-patriarchy. She asserts that patriarchy has no gender. In her paper "Understanding Patriarchy" she observes: "Patriarchy is the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body. Yet most men never think about patriarchy—what it means, how it is created and sustained. The word 'patriarchy' just is not a part of their normal everyday thought or speech. Men who have heard and know the word usually associate it with women's liberation, with feminism, and therefore dismiss it as irrelevant to their own experiences."

Perhaps the first step to dismantling patriarchy is for men to become aware of the social-political structures that shape and inform male identity and sense of self from birth to death.

bell tells of growing up in a working-class home where both her parents embraced their church's teachings about patriarchy. Those teachings were reinforced by every institution they encountered, schools, clubs, courthouses, sport arenas, the media, TV and movies. They naturally taught her brother and her how to fit in to this "natural" order. She writes, "As their

daughter I was taught that it was my role to serve, to be weak, to be free from the burden of thinking, to caretake and nurture others. My brother was taught that it was his role to be served; to provide; to be strong; to think, strategize, and plan; and to refuse to caretake or nurture others. I was taught that it was not proper for a female to be violent, that it was 'unnatural.' My brother was taught that his value would be determined by his will to do violence (albeit in appropriate settings). He was taught that for a boy, enjoying violence was a good thing (albeit in appropriate settings). He was taught that a boy should not express feelings. I was taught that girls could and should express feelings, or at least some of them. When I responded with rage at being denied a toy, I was taught as a girl in a patriarchal household that rage was not an appropriate feminine feeling, that it should not only not be expressed but be eradicated. When my brother responded with rage at being denied a toy, he was taught as a boy in a patriarchal household that his ability to express rage was good but that he had to learn the best setting to unleash his hostility. It was not good for him to use his rage to oppose the wishes of his parents, but later, when he grew up, he was taught that rage was permitted and that allowing rage to provoke him to violence would help him protect home and nation."

While this was what they were taught by their parent's actions, bell and her brother suffered some confusion about gender. In reality bell was stronger and more violent than her brother, which they learned quickly was bad. And he was a gentle, peaceful boy, which they learned was really bad. Although they were often confused, they knew one fact for certain: they could not be and act the way they wanted to, doing what they felt like. It was clear to them that their behaviour had to follow a predetermined, gendered script. She tells a disturbing story of what happened when that script was not followed. As a little girl she liked to play marbles with her brother. When her father was at work, her mother had no problem with them playing marbles together. "Yet Dad, looking at our play from a patriarchal perspective, was disturbed by what he saw. His daughter, aggressive and competitive, was a better player than his son. His son was passive; the boy did not really seem to care who won and was willing to give over marbles on demand. Dad decided that this play had to end, that both my brother and I needed to learn a lesson about appropriate gender roles.

"One evening my brother was given permission by Dad to bring out the tin of marbles. I announced my desire to play and was told by my brother that 'girls did not play with marbles,' that it was a boy's game. This made no sense to my four- or five-year-old mind, and I insisted on my right to play by picking up marbles and shooting them. Dad intervened to tell me to stop. I did not listen. His voice grew louder and louder. Then suddenly he snatched me up, broke a board from our screen door, and began to beat me with it, telling me, 'You're just a little girl. When I tell you to do something, I mean for you to do it.' He beat me and he beat me, wanting me to acknowledge that I understood what I had done. His rage, his violence captured everyone's attention. Our family sat spellbound, rapt before the pornography of patriarchal violence. After this beating I was banished—forced to stay alone in the dark. Mama came into the bedroom to soothe the pain, telling me in her soft southern voice, 'I tried to warn you. You need to accept that you are just a little girl and girls can't do what boys do.' In service to patriarchy her task was to reinforce that Dad had done the right thing by, putting me in my place, by restoring the natural social order."

I found this story helpful in understanding some of the dynamics of the recent Kavanaugh hearings. Clearly everyone played according to their gendered scripts. Dr Ford testified in the quiet, polite and respectful manner proscribed for women. The old white male Republican senators felt no shame in ignoring the validity of her claims, which was their

right, being the superior beings. Judge Kavanaugh exhibited self-righteous rage at even being accused and possibly denied that which was his privileged due by a daughter of Eve. Patriarchy was under attack and had to be beaten back forcefully. He was heroically defending the natural order. The women who protested his nomination were described as a vicious mob out to destroy his life.

All this I understood, but what flummoxed me was the significant number of women who reviled Dr Ford and defended Judge Kavanaugh, at least until I read bell's story. She is right, patriarchy has no gender. It is a social-political system that oppresses both men and women. Dismantling it will liberate both genders, but not until both men and women recognise it is not the natural order but a human creation. That begins with becoming aware of how it controls our beliefs, thoughts, actions and choices. If we can at least do that, maybe our great-great-great-great grandchildren will leave the new stone age behind for a better place.

But don't despair. Yes, the cultural shift we seek will take a long time to achieve, but we can take heart that our forebears have successfully countered some of the fruits of patriarchy. Many women have now achieved suffrage, the right to own property, to serve as elected leaders, the right to divorce, the normalising of inclusive language, and parental leave. There are fewer child marriages, lower numbers of teen pregnancies in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, and many more girls have access to education, for example. They inspire us to reduce epidemic levels of violence against women and children, increase the number of women in political office and the upper echelons of business, alter the justice system's poor treatment of women who suffer sexual assault and harassment, and to bring an end to gender pay inequality to name but a few. They are windmills we can defeat now, women and men together.