

Liberating Experiences: Or, the Day They Threw Me Out of My Own Church and Other Parables

By the Rev. Robert L. Hill – (originally preached from this pulpit nearly 50 years ago)

I have had some surprises in my life, but I guess I've never been much more surprised than I was the day the Woman's Liberation Movement threw me out of my own church.

It wasn't just an ordinary day. It was a day in the middle of my vacation, one of the few days during my vacation when I came out of my retreat and actively worked at being a minister, instead of just thinking about it, which is one of the things I did for most of my vacation.

On this particular day, however – Women's Liberation Day – I decided that the Women's Lib meeting in our Parish Hall was so important that it should have the benefit of my presence. That, I suppose, was my first mistake.

I should have spent the day doing something socially useful – like reading old Superman comic books, or trying to invent an ice cube that won't melt in vinegar. There were any number of things I could have done.

Instead, I came down to our church, bright and early, to see that everything was in readiness for the meeting of the Northshore Women's Liberation, scheduled for the afternoon and evening. Also, being basically vain, I wanted to prepare a

bulletin board to tell the Women's Lib people about all the good things our church had been doing, lately, for their cause.

While doing that, I fell into conversation with some people who happen to be in the church that morning for another meeting.

My second mistake of the day was in being an obvious proponent of Women's Liberation. In not more than five minutes the three people I was talking with – two men and one woman – trotted out for my perusal virtually every cliché about women and the movement of which I'm aware.

For example; Women can get ahead. I know one who has.

And then: Besides, women are just not suited for a lot of jobs that men are suited for, so they shouldn't expect equal treatment.

Not only that, but: Women are not really interested in getting out and into the world. They like being housewives and taking care of kids. They don't have the same competitive drive men have.

There were more arguments, in addition, all of them of equally high quality and philosophical precision. But the two that really got me were these:

First, from the woman in the discussion: "I like being a woman. I wouldn't be a man for anything."

And the second, from one of the men: "Any woman who has to join an organization to get her rights has something wrong with her, anyway."

I've come to believe that there are three kinds of arguments in the world. There's the kind of argument that is demonstrably false. To that kind of argument, you can reply. Second, there's the kind of argument that is so conclusive that one must simply yield in the face of it. No reply is appropriate. But the worst kind of all is the argument that is so inconceivably inconclusive, so false and so outrageous that – once again – no reply is appropriate.

By the time I'd got my mind unboggled, the discussion was over and my philosophical antagonists had gone off in a blaze of victorious irrelevance. I think in that moment I must have had a taste of what any woman who understands the basic motivation of the liberation movement must feel when she sees an Aunt Tom on TV.

An Aunt Tom is, most often, a famous woman of one kind or another appearing on a talk show. Because she's a sex symbol, or an ambassador's wife, or the mother of three children or something, she's asked to say what she thinks about the women's liberation movement. "I'm so glad you asked that," she begins From that point on, you can predict what she's going to say. She's not going to argue with the basic premise of the movement. She's not going to say she thinks women should be paid less than men for any of the same jobs. She's not going to say she thinks women should not have a full range of free choices on their life-directly decisions, as men do. She's not going to say anything analytical about the question. She's going

to say: “I’m so happy to be a woman that I can’t imagine what they’re raising all the fuss about...” Then the talk master beams at her, says “Viva la difference,” and the audience applauds.

The implication being, of course, that the women’s liberation movement is urging women to spurn sexuality, and become men, which is absurd.

Well, anyway, if I’d had any sense, I’d have called it a day right there. But instead, I took my outrage into my office, shut the door, and wrote a column for the local paper drawing out the parallel in the women’s lib movement of today and the civil rights movement of a few years ago.

And in that piece of deathless prose, one finds these ringing words: “Women are right to organize and work for their rights. They are not equal citizens in any respects, and it matters little that many of their chains are luxurious.

“The battle is for free choice, for the right to be what one wants to be to the limits of ability, regardless of whether one is male or female.”

So, you see, when I approached our Parish Hall in the early evening of the same day, it was not just Bob Hill going up to the door. It was Bob Hill, champion of the oppressed, fighter for freedom, friend of liberation.

Not only that, but I approached the evening’s activities in my own church accompanied by the first woman president in our church’s 254-year history.

And not only that, I approached that liberation meeting with the awareness that my own wife, with my **full** approval and assistance, was at that moment enjoying the liberation of a writer's conference in the wilds of Vermont.

Talk about a friend of justice ... I half expected trumpets to blow when I entered the door. I was Ghandi leading the salt marsh. I was Theodore Parker helping slaves to freedom.

And, then, quite suddenly, I was Napoleon at Waterloo. For out of the haze of glory came a pleasantly feminine voice saying "I'm sorry, sir, but you'll have to leave. Tonight's meeting is just for women."

Pride goeth before a put down.

For some reason, a larger than normal amount of blood made its way to my head, and my mouth opened without my telling it to. Fortunately my presence of mind stood me in good stead and I was able to make a dignified and appropriate reply. As I recall, I said "Oh, really?"

I left. I went home, bandaged my pride with pages out of a book by Margaret Mead, and calmed down. That's the story of the day they threw me out of my own church.

Actually they didn't throw me out. They just asked me to leave, along with a newspaper editor and a photographer, and a husband or two. They reasoned that the presence of men might make some of the women nervous about speaking up. During the daytime sessions, they said, some women **had** expressed

feelings of inhibition about saying what they really thought with men in the room.

I can understand that, and I think you can too, if you've been to a cocktail party recently. It doesn't always happen, but all too often, conversations at parties tend to become segregated, with the men talking about Vietnam, the Middle East, and other problems in the world, while the women talk of nurseries, food prices and fashions. Even when the two sexes are not physically separated, one can note a difference in the way people respond to a comment made by a man, or by an equally articulate woman. It takes a bold and determined woman to hold her own in most serious, mixed conversations, even when she's superlatively qualified to talk on the subject at hand.

And where women's liberation is concerned forget it! In most circumstances, I think it would take a Joan of Arc to speak favorably of Bread and Roses at a suburban cocktail party. I am sure there are many, many women who hesitate to express their real feelings about women's liberation in front of their husbands, or even in front of their women friends.

Why is this so? A big part of the answer has to do with the image of what "a woman" is. A mental health study done recently at Worcester State Hospital used a sex-role questionnaire containing over one hundred items. Some of the items described characteristics appropriate to John Wayne masculinity. Others went to the opposite extreme of the

femininity stereotype. Others ranged in between these two extremes.

The people conducting the study gave the list of 100 characteristics to three groups of people, all of whom were professionally trained clinical psychologists. One group was asked to check those characteristics which properly describe a **mentally healthy adult**. Another group was asked to check those characteristics which properly describe a mentally healthy **male**. And the third group was asked to check those characteristics which describe a mentally healthy **female**.

The results were, to my way of thinking, very depressing. These people, professionally trained to try to help others resolve identity crises, build proper self-images and so on ... these mental health therapists reinforced the society's standard sexual stereotypes.

They assigned the same characteristics to a mentally healthy adult male as to a mentally healthy adult.

But, they described a mentally healthy female as being passive, emotional, dependent, less competitive, nonobjective, submissive and more easily influenced. As the person who conducted the tests remarked, characteristics chosen to describe the mentally healthy female seemed "a most unusual way of describing any mature, healthy individual."

The therapists who participated in this, incidentally, were not all male. When society is successful in telling a child to expect

to be passive, emotional, dependent, less competitive, nonobjective, submissive and so on ... and says it long enough and loud enough ... she's likely to grow up to be that, and to feel guilty when she doesn't feel like being that way. "Sugar and spice and everything non-threatening" **that** is what little girls are supposed to be made of.

Here is how Margaret Mead describes the situation which – in my opinion - gives rise to the need for women's liberation groups: "In our society, a women's interest in any kind of work which might take precedence over the desire to have a family is discouraged; girls are admonished to study typing rather than mathematics, and if, after the children are grown, women look for greater meaning in life, their eyes are turned towards a hobby, self-fulfillment, seldom toward activities on behalf of the larger community."

Well, I'm going to assume that most of us know that women are second class citizens in our society. We know religions, practically all religions, have considered them inferior to men, a necessary evil at best. We know the statistics about unequal pay. We sense the frustration and depression of suburban women who happen to be ill-suited to live out the stereotypical roles of womankind, but are living them out anyway.

I trust that we all realize the essential core of women's liberation, as a movement, is not an attempt to bring about _____, but instead to bring about equal opportunity.

They're not saying that no woman should be housewives and mothers. They're not saying that masculinity and femininity should cease to be. They're just saying everybody should be given equal choice, equal encouragement, equal rewards without regard to sex, regardless of what direction they choose to go in life. To get this, Margaret Mead says "...it will be necessary to make some very basic changes in the present attitudes of both men and women..."

I believe that is true, and I believe that we all owe it to ourselves to try to speed those changes in attitudes. If some of the women's liberation people go to excesses in their fight to change society's attitudes, I think we should be able to understand why.

But what I want to say, to myself and to the rest of the men here, is that we've got to free our women. We've got to help our wives, daughters and friends get free of the stereotypes of womanhood that they keep getting pushed and led into.

It may be the most rank chauvinism there is, but I'm going to say it anyway: We've got to help them be free.

It's a tough job because we've got to free ourselves of the same stereotypes which bind them, even as we untie them. We've got to tell ourselves and our daughters that they can become chemists or doctors or astronauts if that's what they're best suited to be.

We've got to tell ourselves and our wives that their own personality, development and growth is just as important as ours, or as that of their children.

We've got to tell ourselves and them that – just as we sometimes need to go away for business or professional conferences or training sessions – they too must pursue their interests and talents to their fullest, even if it means going back to school, taking a trip alone, finding a job, or some other inconvenient things.

We've got to tell our wives and daughters and friends to be themselves. We've got to say: Forget what you "ought to be;" become what you can be. And if they don't know what they can be, tell them: Get busy finding out. Take some risks. Don't worry about seeming pushy or undignified or unladylike. Don't be afraid.

Maybe that last part is the most important of all. Don't be afraid. There's something universal: there's no basic difference in the sexes when it comes to being afraid. We're all afraid to take risks, to change. We all love security and comfort too much.

But when risk-taking stops, growth stops. And when growth stops, we become dead, whether we're male or female, whether we're young or old.

So I say to you men, and to myself, free your women.

Don't ask them if they want to be freed. Just free them in whatever ways you can. And then be prepared to help out with the reconstruction era.

If you succeed, you may find your relationships with them becoming more intense than they have been in a long time.

So, free your women. If you think you can stand the excitement.