

Two things can be true at the same time: 1) There are ideological, political, social, and theological expressions and movements that are wholly incongruent, incompatible, and irrelevant to our own expressions and understandings of God, both as the individuals that comprise this community of faith, and as a corporate body. 2) Our distance and dismissal of these competing strands does not eliminate the damage, uncertainty, and chaos wrought by such strands, especially to our most marginalized and vulnerable neighbors.

Therefore, we live with great tension. We, as a free-thinking and open community, choose to emphasize the God WHO IS rather than the God WHO IS NOT. But we live in a world where an open, loving, creative, inclusive, transcendent God (this God is an utter reality by the way!) no longer possesses the newsworthiness to generate clicks, eyeballs, and shares. Unfortunately, salaciousness, in the form of exclusion and meanness is a story that sells in 2023.

Such is the context of our week. If you follow the news, it's been hard to miss that this month, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to remove from its fellowship those churches who choose to "affirm, appoint, or employ a woman as a pastor of any kind."

I read this line to you, as a pastor who serves alongside three women who are ministers (and extraordinary and extraordinarily pastoral ones at that!), in a congregation with another half-dozen extraordinary, ordained women who have served as ministers, pastors, chaplains, missionaries, and proclaimers in various capacities in various Baptist churches. And this to say nothing of all the women in this place who have served as deacons, community leaders, and vibrant voices in our congregation. I read this to you as the leader of a congregation whose entire existence and whose entire welfare is wholly contingent upon the

vibrancy, spiritual gifts, and prophetic witness of the women among us. And I read this to you on Father's Day as the daddy of three little girls who I know for certain God will ordain whatever and whomever it is they are eventually called to do and be.

The statement of the SBC is not our statement, and it does not have a direct impact on anything that we will do in the future. But its lack of direct impact on this congregation is not without difficulty and trauma.

Our congregation has no formal affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention. But we do have a long and complicated history. This is the very body that has fundamentally shaped and articulated core Baptist principles in North America for more than two centuries. Chief among them are the four fragile freedoms: *Soul freedom*, the autonomy of every individual to be directed and moved by their own consciousness and inner Spirit; *Believer's freedom*, the autonomy of every congregant to have both voice and vote, to be leaders in congregational work; *Church freedom*, or grassroots autonomy, the ability of every congregation to express how it is led by the Holy Spirit; and *Religious freedom*, the separation of church and state. These freedoms remain vital to who we are.

But the SBC has also been, and too often, on the wrong side of history. Its leaders offered a surgical defense of slavery in the nineteenth century that expanded its horrors for two more generations. And over the last five decades, its leaders have surgically and systematically attacked the four freedoms, creating an orthodoxy centered in biblical inerrancy, complementarianism, country over God, and top-down control. Many churches and church leaders saw the writing on the wall in the late 1970s and 1980s, and eventually worked to form new expressions of Baptist community, including the Cooperative Baptist

Fellowship, the Alliance of Baptists, and the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, all of whom our congregation is connected to.

This break was traumatic. It was a loss of identity and institutions. It was a move from concentric circles to disconnected circles. And even, four decades into this process, as we continue to work to carve out safe spaces and vocal platforms for people of all expressions; as we work to support and affirm the callings of all those whom God equips in any way, shape, or form; as we work to tell the story of the God WHO IS; we must do so in the shadow of an organization who chooses to do something else; we must have tedious and exhausting conversations about what kind of Baptists we are, even when the same standard is not applied to other mainline denominations whose creativity, openness, and flexibility will never approach that of ours.

The public rebuke and discrediting of the calling of women by any group hurts. One exclusion dulls the joy of a hundred inclusions; one criticism often speaks louder than a hundred affirmations. And so we grieve with any person, who due to this decision, faces a loss of home, a loss of confidence, a loss of connection. We grieve that any power or principality might be audacious enough to declare its reach and credentialing above and beyond that of our Creator. And we pray that every person who is experiencing a call to vocational ministry, but especially those whose identities do not check traditional boxes, will find communities that offer assurances, affirmations, and support of their authentic callings. We pray, also, that we as a congregation would be more attentive and intentional in both identifying and meeting the needs of those persons called to do this important work.

Therefore, Psalm 100 is a timely text for us today. I believe a sense of gratitude for God's rootedness in each and every one of us is vital for

our well-being. The password is “thank you.” Make yourself at home. God’s goodness is authentic. God’s goodness, God’s umph, God’s gifts injected in every human being, and indeed in all creation, are real. God is God. And we are God’s people. No statement, no meanness, no article, no movement, no force of nature can ever change that. God loves each one of us. God calls and credentials each one of us. God delights in each one of us, and especially when we choose to be just as God has created us to be: ourselves!!!

It's a morning of thanksgiving. Here's what I'm thankful for.

On Wednesday, in New Orleans, while an entire denomination was considering how to exclude the leadership of 51% of its participants, here in Charlotte, Sardis congregants were exploring a text from *Genesis*, seeking to glean wisdom from the silenced and hidden voices in the text, women like Sarah and Hagar.

In the month of June, we celebrate the staff anniversaries of three women, Tillie, Kathryn, and Hilary – they have occupied titles like pastor, minister, director, leader, super-heroine; apparently those titles are provocative in some circles!!! Collectively, they’ve offered nearly 40 years of service, leadership, inspiration, and care to our congregation. We as a community, are immeasurably better because of the calling God has placed on their lives, and their response to God’s calling.

Over the years, we have ordained lay leaders and ministers; we have dedicated and baptized children; we’ve acknowledged life events like graduations, marriages, and retirements; we’ve held funerals; we’ve read the names of our saints. I’d wager that we’ve offered more than 100 formal blessings in the last decade for any number of reasons. Do you know one of the commonalities? These blessings have all been

corporate. They have been stamped with the words, hugs, signatures, voices, and actions of our entire church body. They have been an embodiment of the four fragile freedoms.

I'm thankful for God's presence in this place made known in the called, credentialed, and faithful people that fill it.

Sardis Baptist Church, I'm not sure that we will ever have enough reach to rewrite the unpleasant headlines of our time – there are always other powers at work. They were certainly at work in Jesus' day. But we do have the power to use our gratitude, and our gifts, and our encouragement to affect our own spheres.

We can recognize, encourage, and affirm the callings of the people around us. We can invite others into that recognition, and we can hold the hands of those who in the pursuit of calling, grieve the loss of the communities that have dismissed them, or can no longer formally encourage and support them. We can echo God's everlasting yea when too many others insist on Caesar's nay. And we can be open to the transcendent power of God in our lives. The powers and structures that confine us did not develop overnight, but rather over time, one act of apathy at a time. We must faith that our acts of kindness are working to reveal God's kin-dom.

Thanks be to God for the women who have been called and will continue to be called to lead us to such a reality.

Amen.