

Last winter I talked about how people have been gathering on this corner to go to church for almost 300 years. The first meetinghouse was built in the early 1700s, long before there was even a United States.

The first church here had box pews. A pew is a church bench with A box pew low walls around it, sometimes with a little door. It can hold four or five people. Back then, and for a long time to come, the church got the money it needed by selling those box pews.

When a family bought a pew, it was theirs, and nobody else could sit in it, even if they were not in church that Sunday. Families who had the most money, and were the most important people in town, owned the boxes closest to the front, where the minister spoke. People with less money sat in the middle, and people with just a little money owned boxes in the back.

People who did not own boxes still came to church. Servants and apprentices, people who didn't own their own farm or shop and worked for others ~ they sat on benches in the back. Some of the people owned slaves, and the slaves either stood through the service or sat under the stairs.

This doesn't sound like our church today, does it? We don't arrange ourselves by how much money we have or what kind of house we live in, and certainly not by whether we are a servant or a slave. But this was the way it was back then, hundreds of years ago. Most people didn't question slavery; it's just a fact of life in the Bible. Many people believed that God meant for some to be masters and some to be slaves, and everybody back then was supposed to know their place.

All through the many years our church has been here, people have been trying hard to move beyond their place, and others have been trying just as hard to hold them back

Children were certainly supposed to know their place. Have you heard the old saying, "Children should be seen, and not heard"? Kids were supposed to be quiet around adults, to obey their parents, and all adults, at all times, and never talk back. If they did, parents or teachers were supposed to punish them, maybe by sending them to bed without any supper.

Another thing people used to say was, "Spare the rod, spoil the child." A rod is a stick, and sparing it meant not using it. This saying warns parents that if you don't hit your children, they will wind up spoiled rotten, and not become good grown-ups.

Back then most people believed that everyone was born bad, and had to have their spirits broken before they could become good.

Husbands often hit their wives, because women were considered to be like children, needing to be controlled and protected. Women were constantly told to stay in their place ~ at home, taking care of their families. Only a few girls went to school, where they learned to sew and maybe read enough to embroider their names on things. Most people thought that sending a woman to school was a waste of time and would just make her unhappy staying in her proper place.

This was called patriarchy. The word “patriarch” comes from the Bible, and means father. The father of a family was like God on earth. He had all the power and had to be obeyed, or else.

Later in the service I’m going to talk about how people without power tried for a long time to gain control over their own lives. It’s a big story, and a very important one. People from our church helped break the power of the patriarchy, and struggled to make the world a place where everyone has freedom and respect.

That struggle is not over. There are lots of people who still don’t have freedom and respect, who are being told to stay in their place, to not raise their voices, to sit down and shut up so those who have power can enjoy their lives in peace.

One of my favorite sayings is that we should “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” This means we should help people who are hurting, especially if that hurt is caused by the way the world is set up, and we should bother the people who have set up the world so they can have more power than everybody else.

It’s about fairness, and if there’s anything our church is about, it’s being fair. So off you go to your classes, where I hope everything is fair and you treat each other, and your teachers, with respect. We will be sparing the rod, but we do not believe that we will spoil you with too much love. That is just impossible!