

Proper 18 - St. David's
9/6/09

For any of you who suffer from insomnia, I hold in my hand something much more powerful than Ambien or Lunesta. They are referred to as scholarly journals, the most boring genre of literature that has ever existed. The ones here happen to be journals covering the field of theology. But there are high brow journals in almost every discipline. Highly academic papers are most often so narrowly focused on a subset of a subset of a subset of learning in a specific field of study, that even people who are immersed in it often fall asleep reading them. Listen to these stimulating, real life titles randomly taken from recent publications. *"A Brief Epistemology of Seriality.* I can't even figure out what that means. Here is an engrossing one from a doctoral student in history. *"Holding the Center: The Geographics of Consolidation and the Emergence of Post-Colonial Dublin."* How about an engrossing title from medicine; *"Ethics and Policy Issues in the Dissemination and Marketing of CT Screening Parts: A Survey of Radiologist's Practices, Attitudes and Beliefs."* Wow.

That was the type of paper one Laurel Thatcher Ulrich published in 1976 at the beginning of her career as an American historian. Has anyone ever heard of her? I didn't think so. The article was called, "Virtuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735." Now if that does not sound mesmerizing enough, guess what it is that she used as the source for this scholarly study? Puritan funeral sermons. Yes, that is what I said. Papers like these obviously disappear into academic nothingness in no time at all. But, listen to the opening paragraph of Ulrich's article, as she describes these Puritan women.

“Cotton Mather called them ‘the hidden gems.’ They never preached or sat in a deacon’s bench. Nor did they vote or attend Harvard. Neither, because they were virtuous women, did they question God or the magistrates. They prayed secretly, read the Bible through at least once a year, and went to hear the minister preach even when it snowed. Hoping for an eternal crown, they never asked to be remembered on earth. And...they haven’t been. Well-behaved women seldom make history.”

Anyone ever heard that last sentence before? Somehow it escaped from the ghost town of scholarly academia into mainstream popularity. It is on t-shirts, like this one I got for Jean at Harborplace in Baltimore, to bumper stickers, like the one on our previous deacon, Claudia Heath’s car, to mugs and buttons and everything else. It has become one of the most celebrated sayings in feminism. It is so popular that Ms. Ulrich released a book in 2007 with the same title.

Ms. Ulrich’s statement rings true not just in Puritan America of course, but across history. Women who have stayed in their cultural place, so to speak, have tended to totally disappear. If they ever appeared again, it was only in the corners of dusty scholarly journals, when someone, like Ulrich, spent years attempting to dig them up. If Ulrich’s famous aphorism is accurate across history, it is doubly so when it comes to the Bible. More than any time since, women in both the eras of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian testament were supposed to be as close to invisible as possible. The reason there are so few women in the Bible is not because men played a more important role in

forming Judaism and Christianity, but because women were compelled by culture and religious tradition to not be noticed. The reason the twelve apostles are all male is not because women were not there, but because, as Ulrich discovered, women were taught that it was their duty to disappear. If they did not disappear on their own, male writers were only too happy to preserve their womenhood and bury them so deep in the text, that not even an archaeologist could find them. The only way we really ever get to hear about women in our sacred text is when one of them disregards their religious upbringing and they misbehave badly, while at the same time the male recording the story cannot figure out anyway to leave the female out and still make the point. So what women do we get to remember in the Hebrew Bible? Eve, of course, who we blame for humanity's first sin and the plight of humans to this day. The woman made me do it! We believe the oldest passage in the Bible is The Song of Deborah in the book of Judges. Why is Deborah commemorated? Because she is singing about another woman, Jael, who is remembered in history because she drove a tent peg through a guy's head.

In the Christian Scriptures, we have Mary, of course, who certainly is famous, but only as Jesus's mother. We know virtually nothing else about her, except that she was an unwed teenage mother. The most important woman in the Gospel of John does not even have a name. We know her only as the Samaritan women at the well... and as the one who messed around with every guy in her town. The only exception to the well behaved women rule is Mary Magdalene, who is so important to Christ that he appears to her before any of the male disciples. She is so important to the story, she could not

be left out. So what did the later church do? They turn her into a prostitute, substituting the story of the woman who pours oil over Jesus and suggesting that this was Mary Magdalene. So even if you are well behaved and you do make history, later generations of males turn you into a misbehaving woman anyway.

Today though, we have the piece d' resistance. In my mind, The Syro-Phoenician woman is as important as any character in the entire Christian testament, with the exception of Jesus himself. And once again, we don't even know her name. Thank heavens that she misbehaved badly. If she had not, we in all likelihood, would have never heard of her or knew this fantastic story.

How does she misbehave? In just about every way culturally imaginable. First of all, women do not approach men in first century Mediterranean culture, no way, no how. Second, this is a Jewish man and a Gentile woman. Gentiles do not approach Jews. Next, in addition to interrupting him and the other males, she actually starts talking to him, just like she was some sort of equal. But she doesn't stop there. On top of all that, she *touches* him. So here we go again, a Jewish male touched by an "unclean" Gentile woman. Last week, Jesus rejected the purity code as it pertained to food. Now, the same code appears, as it pertains to people. So as today's Gospel begins, all of us who were here last week are very positive about how Jesus will respond to this foreigner. He's going to tell her that people are not unclean, just because they are not Jewish, right? Wrong. Jesus proceeds to shock us to the core. Rather than affirming her, he rebuffs this mother for asking for help for her poor child. "Let the children be fed first," he says, "for it's not fair to take the children's food and

throw it to the dogs.” What did he say? Who are the children to which Jesus is referring? The Jews, the forgotten people. They need to eat first according to Jesus. And who is Jesus calling a dog? This Hellenized woman, who is Gentile by race and Greek by culture. Now if all that is not startling enough, the actual Greek word used here is feminine, and we all know what a female dog is in English.

For many, this is the most uncomfortable story in the Bible. What do we do with a Jesus who responds to this woman in what we could only term today, a racist, chauvinistic, mean spirited way? Yes, his response is normal for the culture. After all, the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon are described by the Jewish historian Josephus as “notoriously our bitterest enemies.” But we expect Jesus to be beyond all that. Instead, he responds in the same disparaging fashion that any Jew would in a similar situation.

As uncomfortable as it may be for us to see Jesus in this unflattering light, I ask you to sit with that for a moment and return to our misbehaving female. Because after Jesus calls her the “b” word, she continues misbehaving, this time in an even more blatant fashion. She responds to Jesus, just as a male would, in the standard debating style we often see played out by Jesus and the Pharisees. Not only does she misbehave for a woman in that time and place, but her retort is sharp and biting and deliciously well done. “Sir, even the dogs under the table get the children’s crumbs.” In other words, even me, a lowly despised Gentile Greek pagan woman, as well as my sick child, deserve something. Jesus had attempted to turn this woman away with a racist slur. But the misbehaving woman, with her eloquent response, causes Jesus to see the error of his ways, and he...changes his mind. Well behaved women seldom make

history. They also seldom change history. The Syro-Phoenician woman does both and I would suggest this morning that this makes her a model for all of us.

Yes, I believe that Jesus screwed up today. He treated this woman poorly, just as he was taught to do by his culture. This may offend our sensibilities, but we need to consider the offensiveness of our belief system. If we were Muslim, the idea that God could make a mistake would be the highest form of blasphemy. But as Christians, that is not how we understand divinity. We do believe in a God that most other religions find offensive, a God that came to earth and became flesh. And if we truly believe this, then we need to accept that Jesus had all the foibles and the issues and the problems that we do. It is, in fact, that understanding of Jesus that warms me when I make bonehead mistakes. Instead of lessening my faith, it has brought me to a much deeper, more evolved one. A perfect Jesus offers little hope to us that we can ever change. But a Jesus who has to grow and learn like us, can teach us the most valuable lessons imaginable. The Jesus of today suggests that there is hope for us. Read in that context, today's Gospel is suddenly filled with models for our own life.

First of all, we realize and can accept that the hero in today's tale is not Jesus, but instead a heroine. The Syro-Phoenician woman teaches us about stepping out of our assigned cultural role, and misbehaving when that is what is necessary to care for those in need. She teaches us about the value of tenaciousness and persistence and never giving up. She teaches us that yes, sometimes, even as little human beings, we can change God's mind. That, in fact, is what intercessory prayer is all about.

But beyond the value of following the Syro-Phoenician woman's lead, seeing

Jesus as imperfect allows us to also learn from him today. What does Jesus do with this brash, misbehaving woman who has no right responding to him in such a flippant way? He listens to her. He does not stand there and plan his next attack so that he can put this brazen woman in her place. He doesn't think, "What could this pagan woman possibly say that could have any influence on me?" He doesn't think, what could this Republican, this Catholic, this Muslim, say to me that could possibly have any effect on what I already know is true? Instead, he listens and actually hears what she says. Her words help him realize that the way he treated her was in direct opposition to what he just told the Pharisees last week. Her words help him to make the connection between him saying last week all foods are clean and realizing in this moment that the same thing applies to humans.

The lesson does not stop there. Before this encounter with the misbehaving woman, Jesus is described in both the Gospel of Mark and Matthew as seeing his call to the people of Israel only. Yes, last week he does preach a lesson of inclusion, but that lesson is to the Pharisees regarding their fellow Jews. I believe it is in this moment, when Jesus was willing to listen to a despised female foreigner, that his ministry took a drastic turn. The Syro-Phoenician woman has just stretched what Jesus said about inclusion last week to go beyond his own religion. She suggests to Jesus that his message of inclusion is so true, but that his vision is not wide enough.

From this moment on, Jesus's mission changes. Rather than seeing his message for just his people, he now directs it to all the world. At this moment, moved by the words of a misbehaving wisdom woman, Jesus's message grows from particular to

universal.

He listens and then he immediately responds with action. He heals the Syro-Phoenician's daughter at that moment. He never again in the Gospel of Mark withholds healing of anyone, regardless of their culture or religion. Today we hear him move on to the *Gentile* region of Decapolis, where he heals a Gentile man who is deaf, utilizing a new technique. He uses touching and spitting. That would of course, be anathema to Jews because fluids that come out of a body render someone unclean for a time. But within Gentile circles, this would be an accepted practice. Because Jesus was willing to listen to a Syro-Phoenician misbehaving woman, he now sees his call to all of the world.

Finally, what we learn from Jesus today in his moment of imperfection is that often wisdom and faith come from a place we least expect. There is no more unlikely source for learning in Jesus's culture than a Gentile, much less a woman Gentile, much less a misbehaving woman Gentile who has an impure child possessed by an evil spirit.

May all of us be moved to boldly misbehave, to be persistent and tenacious in our quest to bring healing to others. Let us remember that even Jesus was changed by staying in relationship not just within his own circle, but beyond. Let us never be so sure that we are right that we do not listen to the voices of those with whom we have always disagreed. Finally, let us turn that change into action, living into the universal message of inclusion that Jesus adopts today and we heard and saw in today's Epistle of James, where we are instructed to not make distinctions among ourselves, where we are called to accept everyone as they are, where they are. Not only will we make history by doing so, but we will also create the reign of God in our midst. Amen.