



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 1

Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

The Woman Who Lost Everything

Introduction to the Study

Throughout his life and ministry, raised and living in a culture where women were largely viewed as unimportant and unnoticeable, Jesus surprised—and often offended—in his interactions with women. He talked to, befriended, ate and celebrated with, and healed women. Jesus was essentially and revolutionarily *different* than others in his society in the way he saw women. Understanding this is essential to understanding the good news.

His approach with women raised suspicions, disgusted and offended, and put him and his followers at risk. And women, living in and oppressed by patriarchal systems from Jesus' time to today, continue to be drawn to the startling and life-giving good news of Jesus and the movement that emerged from his life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

Many Gospel stories about women and Jesus' encounters with them resemble life for marginalized women in parts of Africa and other places in the world today. Our experiences with some of these women while we have been teaching and serving in the African countries of Tanzania and Madagascar have changed

how we see women, their lives, and the impacts society lays on them. Our understanding of Jesus' relationship to women has changed. Throughout this study, you will find comments on the ways the Gospel stories relate to and resonate with the lives of women who continue to find Jesus' good news attractive and life giving.

In her essay "Upstream," American poet Mary Oliver wrote: "Attention is the beginning of devotion." In this study, we will pay close attention to six Gospel stories in which Jesus paid attention to and saw women. The Gospel writers chose not to include the names of these women, if they even knew them. Although the women are nameless in the text, the attention Jesus paid to them, his compassion for them, and his recognition of their inherent value is instructive to us as disciples. By studying how Jesus saw these women, we can pay better attention to both women and Jesus. Attention is a form of devotion, especially in this holy season.

The Woman Who Lost Everything (Luke 7:11–17)

We begin our Lenten journey traveling through Galilee with Jesus when he had a seemingly chance encounter with a woman engulfed with grief and loss and facing

a very perilous future. Because Jesus saw her and had compassion for her, her life was transformed.

His approach with women raised suspicions, disgusted and offended, and put him and his followers at risk.

Jesus and his disciples came to the small town of Nain, and they were traveling with a large crowd. While the group was still outside the town, they met another large group taking part in a funeral procession. A dead man prepared for burial was being carried out of the town gate on a bier. The man's mother followed with a crowd of mourners. Luke notes that the dead man was his mother's only son and that she was a widow.

Women of any era would be consumed with grief, having lost both husband and son. If we knew a woman who had suffered such great loss in our time, we might develop a calendar with meal deliveries scheduled and noted times when members and pastors could visit. We might add the grieving widow and mother to the congregation's prayer list. We would look for opportunities to include her in community activities, to check in by phone, and to make sure she knew that the congregation was standing with her in this very difficult time.

But the woman of Nain was in a more serious situation than a grieving wife and mother might be today, as hard as it is to go on after overwhelming loss. As she walked with the crowd to bury her son, having already buried her husband, this widow was facing a very uncertain future.

Women in the Israel of Jesus' time did not own property nor have the right to inherit. The widow of Nain did not have a home to return to after the funeral. In fact, she had never had a home. Rather, she was granted the opportunity to live in the home her husband owned. When he died, their son, whom Luke tells us was the only son of the family, would have inherited the home. We can presume that the son granted his mother a place to live in the house he owned. After both men died, the home in which she had lived would go to those who had the right of inheritance.

The widow of Nain, walking with the crowd to bury her son, had nowhere to go after the services were

completed. She had been rendered homeless by the deaths of her husband and then of her son. Without a male relative to offer her housing, she no longer had a home. Women in this situation had limited options. Widows without a son, or whose sons had died, struggled for ways to survive. If they lacked a marketable skill, they could resort to begging, or they could become prostitutes. Many such women became ill from the strain of poverty and homelessness, and many died soon after the last male relative was buried.

So as she walked to the cemetery with the crowd to bury her son, the widow of Nain knew that her future was bleak. Everyone walking with her knew it too. Then Jesus saw her.

Luke 7:13 tells us, "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her." Telling her not to weep, Jesus touched the bier, and the pallbearers stopped. "And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother."

There are four stories of individual dead persons coming back to life in the Gospels: this story, the raising of Jairus's daughter, the raising of Lazarus, and the resurrection of Jesus. Each story is unique, and for those that appear in more than one Gospel, each Gospel writer tells the story differently.

This resurrection is different from the others, as this is the only resurrection that happens because of the life, and sure and certain impending death, of another person. Jesus had compassion on the widow of Nain, and when he raised her son to life, Jesus gave him to his mother. Jesus performed this miracle because of the compassion he had for the man's mother. She needed her son in order to go on living—without his life, her life would be over. Jesus saw this, and so he returned her son to life so that she could also live on. Jesus restored her life.

It is not that Jesus gave her son *back* to her or *returned* her son to her. The man, her son, was never hers. In Jesus' time, a woman's children were not her own. The children of a couple, like all property, belonged to the father. This is what made divorce so ruinous to women. Divorce, almost always initiated by men, resulted in devastating levels of loss for a woman. A divorced

woman lost a place to live, and if her father was not willing to take her back, she became homeless. On top of this, divorced mothers lost their children as well.

So in saying “Jesus gave him to his mother,” Luke stated something new. In this text, Jesus challenged and reversed, morally at least, the patriarchal system of laws regarding women and their children. From this point forward, the man, the son of the woman, who was not hers but her husband’s—that son was now her son, according to Jesus. Her relationship with her son would be transformed from a very limited bond to one that was life giving. Through this newly defined relationship, the son still belonged to his mother.

Finally, it is important to note the reaction of those who saw what had taken place. Witnesses are those who see and who give testimony of what they have seen. Luke shares that their first reaction to the miracle of resurrection was fear, great fear, which seized them (v. 16). Their second reaction was to glorify God and to testify to what they had seen throughout Judea and in all its neighboring regions. To see, for the witnesses, was both to become very afraid and to tell others. Jesus saw the woman and the situation that imperiled her. His actions led to others seeing her and sharing the good news about Jesus.

The Community Learns and Changes When Jesus Sees

What happened when Jesus saw someone? One clear response is that disciples in the community of faith started to see as Jesus saw. The New Testament retains evidence that the way the community treated widows changed because of what Jesus saw and did.

In Acts 6, there is a story of widows receiving food from the community. This was not part of religious practice before this new movement, which would come to be called the church, emerged. We remember this story primarily because it includes the first mention of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. From this story describing the earliest days of the church, we learn about how widows were seen within this new movement.

As it happens with some other stories in Scripture, we seem to be entering the narrative midstream—there is

much that has happened that has been left out, things the author might assume that we know. From what remains, we can draw some conclusions.

- A daily distribution of food, supported through the common sharing of possessions (Acts 4:32–37), began very early in the movement’s life—before this story happened. This was one strategy through which the early Christian community in Jerusalem ensured that there were no needy people in the community (Acts 4:34).
- Widows were among those who were cared for by the community through daily distribution of food. The community of Jesus’ disciples realized from its inception that widows were oppressed and poor. Caring for them had become a significant part of the work of the movement, important enough that it was included in Luke’s account of the life and ministry of the early church.
- The number of widows, both Hellenists (Greek-speaking) and Hebrews, was substantial. Seven men are chosen to serve them. The group of widows would not fit around one or two tables—they were many, and it would take a number of people to organize the work needed to serve them. We can say, then, that widows were attracted to this new movement in large numbers.

A clear and direct line can be drawn between the story in Luke 7 of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain and the story in Acts 6 of decision-making processes about how to deal with and resolve conflicts about food distribution for widows. When Jesus saw the grieving and homeless widow of Nain, a widowed woman had very little support from society. This shifted signifi-

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cantly, and widows received a lot of support from the early Christian community, in which feeding widows

was a daily part of the work of the church. When Jesus saw someone, the community of his followers learned to see them as well. They came to see people who were previously invisible and to act with compassion for those whom they saw.

Life for Widows in Tanzania

The story of the widow of Nain sounds familiar notes here in Tanzania. Widows are among the most oppressed and at-risk people in Tanzanian society. Tanzanian state law gives women the right to inherit from their husbands upon their deaths. However, this law is not often enforced, particularly in the rural areas that make up the majority of the nation's land.

Where the law might impede taking land from a widow, oppressive cultural understandings of women can be brought to bear. One of these is to find a way to ensure that the community sees a widow as bad or dishonorable. Widows in Tanzania are regularly accused of responsibility in their husbands' deaths. Sometimes this is coupled with the charge that the widow is a witch who cursed her husband. In other cases, the widow of a man who died from AIDS is whispered to be the one who gave him the fatal disease. In all these situations, widows are in mortal peril, as people in the community may seek to take what they see as justice into their own hands.

Additionally, widows in Tanzania often face the risk of violence from their dead husband's family. Widows who seek to retain use of the family home are regularly physically abused and run off by the in-laws. Sometimes the children are also taken, particularly by families with means. In other cases, the widow is left to take care of the children while losing access to her home and land.

For women in Tanzania and the host of countries where inheritance law is unjust or is not enforced, the story of Jesus seeing and paying attention to a widow in her plight is heard with awe at the power of God to give

life. This story of Jesus' resurrection power gives hope today to widows around the world.

Who Would Jesus See Today? Who Do We See?

Even if we could go back in time to look deeply into the town of Nain, we might not see anything worth noticing, nor anything that would draw us to pay attention. When Jesus visited, Nain was a very small town, with little to recommend it. Modern-day Nain, the place scholars and archaeologists understand to be the present iteration of the ancient town where a woman who lost both her husband and her son once lived, is a small town still. It does not attract many visitors or tourists, and it is not listed on anyone's top ten lists of things to see.

The widow of Nain might not have been noticed by most people either. We might be made sad, or feel pity in a vague way, when viewing the funeral procession of someone we do not know. Or we might be annoyed, anxious, or even angry that those taking part in the procession are slowing down traffic and blocking the road. And depending on what else might be going on for us at that moment, we might not have seen the procession and the widow, nor paid attention, at all.

For one widow, Jesus' simple act of seeing her clearly and responding with assistance—this made all the difference. Reflecting on this story can move us to ask: Who is Jesus calling us to see today? Where are we being asked to pay attention? Who needs the gift of our seeing them, and how can our seeing give the gift of life?

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 2

Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

The Woman Who Stole Her Healing

Introduction

There are two Gospels that include the story of a woman who touched Jesus and was healed. In Mark's version of this story, the incident happens inside another story: the raising of a twelve-year-old girl.

By this point in Mark, Jesus had performed many deeds of power. The people in the Gospel and later readers understand that Jesus was a very great healer/exorcist and that he employed his divine power across all kinds of social barriers, particularly across the powerful ethnic and religious barrier dividing Jews from non-Jews, or Gentiles. By the time Jesus and his disciples got to this point in the Gospel, they had just come back from a mind-bending trip across the Sea of Galilee to non-Jewish territory. There Jesus cast out a powerful demon with the politically charged name of Legion—the same name as the Roman armies (5:1–20)!

Jesus had also performed mass healings, first in Capernaum, of everyone in the city (1:32–34). Then in chapter 3, he performed another mass healing, this time with people present from all over the region, without distinction as to ethnic or religious identity (vv. 7–12).

There the unclean spirits proclaimed and worshiped him, saying “you are the Son of God,” which was an imperial title.

Another key feature of Jesus' healings/exorcisms is that he did them entirely free of charge, a fact that was just as remarkable two thousand years ago as it is today. Jesus was certainly not the only healer or exorcist of the time, although the scale of his deeds clearly surpassed those of any others. But the other healers made sure to charge plenty of money (just as they do now)—so much so that they even brought some people to financial ruin (just as they do now).

Jesus' disciples were quite aware of the enormous financial, social, and political potential their master had, and they were always on the lookout for ways to enhance his and their standing in this regard. In chapter 1, after the amazing success of the mass healing of Capernaum, Jesus went out early in the morning to pray alone at a local holy place. Mark tells us that his disciples “hunted” for him (1:36). His disciples fully intended to keep Jesus in Capernaum, likely in Peter's house. Even if their master wouldn't charge money for his healing work, the people who would surely be

coming to Capernaum to visit this great healer would need lodging and food, wouldn't they? Jesus dashed their hopes of setting up "the Great Healer of Capernaum" by telling them that they had to go to the other towns of Galilee for preaching (1:38).

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By the time Jesus and his whole group of disciples got back to Galilee in chapter 5, he had done many more healings and exorcisms in many more places, including a major one in Gentile territory. His disciples followed along patiently, seeing and hearing evermore amazing events and claims about Jesus. Then, in a stroke of great blessing, they were all met by a Jewish VIP, one of the leaders of the synagogue (5:22). Synagogue leaders were much more important persons than present-day religious leaders, who for the most part become important persons only on the one day of worship. At that time, they were both religious and civic leaders—the city council as well as the board of the synagogue.

Some grumbling and criticism had already begun to be made of Jesus and his followers from both Jerusalem and Galilean leaders. These criticisms were serious, as they carried a threat of violence with them. At Mark 3:6, there was already a conspiracy afoot by the powerful Pharisees and Herodians to destroy Jesus. So it was very good news, at least to Jesus' disciples, that this Jairus now sought out Jesus and begged for his help. The man's appeal was earnest and strenuous, and he begged repeatedly on his knees before Jesus. And there was also hope in that the girl was still alive. Surely Jesus could save her! The whole town went along with Jesus to Jairus's house as the problems of this important man became everyone's problems. Patriarchal culture says that everyone must take care of important, honorable men. From the point of view of Jesus' disciples, things were going very, very well.

The Unseen Woman Who Interrupts Progress

Then something strange happened. The least important person in the town, someone shameful—a non-person whom no one even sees—got in the way.

In a patriarchal society, this woman was useless and apparently cursed by God. As with all women at the time, her utility and importance to the town lay mainly in her ability to bear children. She had had money (apparently inherited), but she couldn't become a wife because of her defective or diseased uterus. Not only was she considered shameful because of her inability to have children, but she had now lost all her money, wasting it on doctors.

So the one point of honor she had, money, was now gone. Even the very fact that she had once had money meant that she had no male relatives, for if she had had them, they would have inherited that money instead of her. She was triply shamed, without family, without the ability to bear children, and without money. She was desperate, alone, and shamed.

About Shame and Honor

Before we continue with the story, we need to reflect on shame and honor. Cultural anthropologists talk about honor/shame cultures. Honor and shame are the internal ways that patriarchal societies reinforce behavior and social control. Violence is often not necessary in such societies (although it does most definitely play an important role), because the society's members police themselves, their own behavior, and their social relations, in order to avoid shame and to gain honor. In this way, people mostly carry out their own oppression, such that the elites do not have to violently enforce the society's oppressive structure. Most of the oppressive social control in patriarchal societies is carried out by the members of the society on themselves and one another through their internal sense of honor and shame. This is how patriarchal societies cause individuals to act against their own best interests, in favor of the powerful.

There is a kind of market in honor, as it can be won, lost, or traded because the honor/shame cultural system is a *closed system*. There is only a fixed amount of

honor, and not everyone can have it. Honor can be gained through money, birth to an honorable family, marriage to an honorable family, and giving birth to boys. Losing or never having any of these means losing honor and gaining shame. There is an infinite gradation of honor and shame, and members of these societies are constantly evaluating everyone in terms of how much honor or shame a person has. Money, family, fertility, and gender are key to having, gaining, and maintaining honor and avoiding shame. In this context, even the relationship to God is part of the closed honor and shame system. Being an important religious figure also conveys honor. God is the source of both fertility and wealth (see Deut. 27 and 28) and so becomes a key source of honor. Another part of the honor and shame dynamic is that honorable men will receive gifts just because they are honorable men (as in the case of this synagogue leader), while shameful people will have things taken away from them just because they are shameful persons (like this woman).

The big question in this story is why the woman didn't simply ask Jesus for healing. He would surely have agreed. He had healed much harder cases than hers, had never refused anyone, and didn't charge money—she could simply have asked. But her shameful position within the town prevented this. To ask would be to make herself, and therefore her triple shame, public—which was something she was bound not to do. There is a significant possibility that had she tried, she would have been laughed out of Jesus' presence by all the townspeople. According to the honor and shame system, she didn't deserve to ask. And after all, Mr. Important Honorable Synagogue Leader had begged Jesus for help, and Jesus and everyone else were on a mission to deliver just that. His little girl was at the point of death; Jesus had to come immediately.

So the shamed woman made a momentous decision: she would steal her healing. That is, she would steal from God. Jesus' healing power was from God, so when she took it without asking, she was stealing from God.

In her own way, though, this woman also showed exactly the kind of faith that Jesus was always looking for—a kind of daring,

reckless, risky gamble that ignores and even upsets social, political, and religious proprieties, all honor and shame—so long as it aimed for good rather than evil. She completely defied the honor and shame system while appearing to keep it. She was admirable in her daring and recklessness; this is why the evangelist Mark tells us about her. She was the heroine of this story, the model of faith that Mark wanted us to know, remember, and honor.

And her gamble paid off. She touched Jesus' cloak, and just as she guessed would happen, she was fully healed. But she didn't think about the full consequences of her gamble.

Jesus felt the power leave him, and he then did exactly what his disciples didn't want. He stopped the parade toward the important man's house and started asking, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:30). His disciples' irritation was obvious in their testy response: "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" (v. 31). Their master was not doing the right thing, and he was wasting precious time by asking a stupid question.

And then it got worse. Jesus started going through the crowd looking for someone whose face he hadn't seen before, forgetting about the synagogue leader's daughter. Mark makes it clear that Jesus' searching took quite some time: "He looked all around to see who had done it." The woman, now terrified, came forward trembling to confess what she had done.

Why Search for Her?

This leads us to the second big question of the story. Why was Jesus so determined to find this person? Why wasn't he satisfied with his disciples' reasonable observation?

Let's think of what might have happened had Jesus not looked for this woman. Let's say she stole her healing and just got away with it. What would have happened?

So the shamed woman made a momentous decision: she would steal her healing.

In a small town like this, everyone knew everyone else, and all their relations, and all their stories too. Not

only was it a small town, but the honor and shame culture required constant monitoring and evaluation of everyone's relative status, even those who were at the utterly shameful bottom of the society. Eventually people would realize that this most shameful woman was no longer sick. She was well, and they would know that Jesus, the great healer, had just come through town. If *no one* saw or heard her ask to be healed, the questions would then come thick and fast: How did you get healed (you shameful person who deserves nothing)? When did this happen? Who did this to you? We know you didn't ask for it from Jesus! Has a demon done this to you to trick us? And perhaps the most outlandish question of all would occur to someone: Did you *steal* your healing from Jesus?

The scandal would be enormous, and her life could soon be at great risk. There's no rule at all about what the punishment is for stealing from God. Who could even imagine such a thing? But that wouldn't stop people from imagining that the punishment must be dire indeed.

This reckless woman saved herself physically, but in doing it this way, she also doomed herself socially. Jesus knew he had healed someone physically, now he also had to save this person socially, that she might be made fully whole.

Jesus Sees Her and Changes Her Story

She came forward trembling and confessed "the whole truth" (v. 33). It was just as damning as anyone might have suspected. The surprising and important thing for us to see is that Jesus immediately began to change her story. We might piously assume that Jesus was always piously good, never telling anything less than the truth and always obeying all the rules. But that is not the case. He was not big into obeying all the rules; indeed, he broke several of them. And he could change someone's true story when necessary for that person's salvation. He did so for the woman who came into the Pharisee's house in Luke 7:36–50, and he did it again here for this woman. He gave her another way to see herself, and in so doing, he also gave us another way of seeing her, each other, and ourselves.

"Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (v. 34). We know

that that is not the same as what actually happened. We know that God's power passed through Jesus to heal her. We know that she was already freed from her suffering. But Jesus' story is better in a number of ways.

First, Jesus changed her status on the local honor and shame scale, from "that shameful woman" to "daughter," from a woman whose very existence was unclean to a fully honorable member of society. She was not a thief; she was a healed daughter! She could get married now that fertility and honor were restored to her. *Second*, Jesus even removed himself and God's power from the story. It was *her faith*, as reckless and dangerous as it was, that healed her. She was both healed and honorable. Jesus healed both her physical illness and her social sickness. *Third*, he remade her recklessness into faith.

However, not all was made well. Her recklessness had actually ended the life of the synagogue leader's daughter. This reckless woman became a daughter, but the synagogue leader lost his. The time Jesus spent (wasted, if we were to ask his disciples) with this poor, shameful woman resulted in the death of a young girl.

Jesus and Death

Jesus is very different from other people regarding death. While a terrible storm was beginning to sink his boat on the lake (4:35–41), he stayed asleep on a cushion in the stern and then acted without fear when the screaming of his disciples woke him. In this story he treated death like sleep, something to be woken up from. When it came to his own death, he faced it courageously and with control while everyone around him was losing their minds (ch. 15).

We live our lives in fear. We believe in death, and we accept fear as natural and necessary. But Jesus knows better, and he alone shows us the way out of both fear and death. He knows that death is finally unnecessary and that the day is surely coming when God will end it. He knows that the real opposite of faith is not unbelief, but fear. He never tells us to fear, and he often exhorts us to believe, as he said to the girl's father "Do not fear, only believe" (5:36). That is how free people live, and as the apostle Paul said, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). Jesus' saying "Do not fear,

only believe” gives us the words that help us become free from our overlords who tyrannize us through our fear of death.

Jesus went on to raise a girl from death, making it very private, so that he wouldn’t be honored because of it. He approached death like we might approach sleep. Jesus saw a woman, even when she was hiding in shame and fear; he saw the power of God over death, even when those present could not see it. In healing a dishonorable woman and raising a girl to life, Jesus

taught people, then and now, how to look and how to see.

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The Woman Who Claimed Her Place

Introduction

In this study, we have been exploring moments when Jesus saw women—moments when those women were invisible to others or perhaps could not even see themselves. *This is a different story.* In this story, Jesus comes to new sight through the instruction of a woman. Through Jesus' willingness to accept and adopt a woman's vision, we learn much about who Jesus was and is and how women were seen and received in Jesus' realm.

Jesus was on the road, having spent some time in Galilee with his disciples. While there, he was visited by Pharisees concerned about defilement—which is defined as the act of “debasement, degrading, or spoiling.” Specifically, the Pharisees expressed concern about Jesus' disciples eating with defiled hands. They were coming to the table without washing. In this story, the Pharisees are tattletales, coming to Jesus to tell on the disciples. Not washing your hands before eating was a violation of tradition, specifically “the tradition of the elders,” although it was not a violation of Scripture.

Jesus had no time for this. He met their concern with a condemnatory word from a time of great unfaithfulness for ancient Israel, when the Assyrians were besieging Jerusalem (Isa. 29:13–14). Isaiah decried those who honored God with their words while turning away in their actions. Isaiah described God's particular, pointed disgust with tyrants, scoffers, and those who caused injustice to flourish (vv. 20–21). Mark relates that Jesus went on to teach that defilement comes from *inside* a person, not from *outside*. That is, as much as the Pharisees saw and named the disciples' acts with the elevated term *defilement*, not washing your hands would not defile a person. Jesus redefined sin, seeing it in much more serious, deadly actions. He named the evils that come from the human heart as sin (Mark 7:17–23). Jesus reframed sin for his disciples, who had once again failed to understand. He placed offenses against others—violence, lying, theft, being unfaithful to one's

Mark relates that Jesus went on to teach that defilement comes from *inside* a person, not from *outside*.

partner—front and center as sin. These are the sins that result in defilement.

Getting Away to Tyre

After having a heavy conversation about purity, battling (again) with the Pharisees, and having to explain (again) to his disciples, Mark tells us that Jesus set out and went to the region of Tyre. That is a journey of at least thirty miles, and Jesus was traveling on foot. He was intent on getting away—far away. Jesus was looking for some down time apart from the sniping of religious leaders and the failure to comprehend exhibited by his followers. In traveling to a Gentile area, Jesus was, in mind and body, stretching toward a long-needed break in a place where no one would approach him for help, healing, or instruction.

“He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there” (7:24). Jesus was not looking for opportunities to proclaim the good news, heal, or do miracles. He was seeking rest. But his search for respite was foiled by a woman—a Gentile woman—who needed his help. Mark relates that Jesus, who “could not escape notice,” was heard about “immediately” by a Gentile woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit (vv. 24–25). It’s a fair assumption that, for Jesus, her arrival was not a welcome sight.

Nevertheless, there she was, appearing immediately upon hearing about his visit, bowing down at his feet, and begging him to cast out the demon from her little daughter. Note her manner of approach. She didn’t knock timidly nor wait to be invited in. Instead, she came straight to him and bowed down at his feet. This manner of approach can annoy but cannot be ignored.

Jesus’ response to her pleading has made preachers, teachers, and disciples squirm for centuries. Jesus said, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v. 27).

For those who love to sing “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear,” Jesus’ response sounds not only unfriendly but also downright unkind. It doesn’t *sound* like Jesus. What is going on here?

Jesus was tired. Yet, on other occasions when he was tired, Jesus had compassion for those in need (see 6:31–34). Jesus might be saying that Gentiles, like dogs, are unclean. But saying this immediately after lecturing

both Pharisees and his disciples about an inappropriate focus on purity seems incongruent. Perhaps he was testing the woman—but if so, this would be a singular event in the Gospels. No one else who asked Jesus for healing was tested. And if this was a test, it was quite a nasty and insulting examination. Something else was happening in this story that requires some pulling apart.

Jesus said, “Let the children be fed first.” The children in question are the children of Israel, the Jews—the chosen people of the covenant with God. Jesus first noted the time. He seems to say that he could respond, maybe, sometime later. But first he must attend to something—someone—else who, by virtue of relationship, was more important and deserving. It was commonly understood that the Messiah, God’s Anointed One, would be sent to save the Jews—and only the Jews. The Twelve, Jesus’ own disciples, believed this, as did many of the earliest leaders of the church. The Messiah would be sent for a limited mission, one that included the Jews and excluded others. The idea of Gentile inclusion in God’s salvation project would have been surprising. For many Jews, suggesting this would have been a shocking offense—one which they would have mightily resisted.

In this story, Jesus suggested that salvation might be offered to the Gentiles at some later time. That time was not now, but at some future moment after the Jewish children had all been fed. Jesus got pointed in his response. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” He equated being a Gentile with being a dog and indicated that salvation through healing was first owed to the Jews.

The Syrophenician woman was called a dog, which was an unclean animal. Dogs run in packs, scavenge for their food, and attack when hunting or threatened. Dogs were not understood or treated as pets during biblical times. They were not allowed inside homes. While some families had guard or herding dogs, they were certainly not understood as belonging to the family. In both the Old and New Testaments, when people are referred to as dogs, it is deeply rude and denigrating. The goal of such a statement is to ensure that the person addressed knows their place—that of an animal, not a person—a station from which they cannot rise.

A Mother on a Mission

But the Syrophenician woman was not finished. As a mother on a mission with a child in danger, receiving a vile insult was not going to stop her. She answered Jesus, saying, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28).

There are a few things about her response that call for exploration.

1. *This Syrophenician was a strong woman.* A lesser person—particularly one whose gender, race, and religion served to exclude them—would have heard the insult and decided that they had lost.
2. *She accepted being seen as a dog, and she responded that dogs have rights.* As scavengers, dogs are happy to be around when children eat, as food will often fall to the floor. The dogs accept the food that falls.
3. *She understood Jesus’ power and authority in ways that perhaps he did not.* She did not ask for a place at the table. She didn’t request to be viewed as one of the “children.” She didn’t ask for more than the crumbs. She did not resist the moniker of “dog” Jesus put on her, her family, and her community, and she did not argue against being given access only to the crumbs. In fact, she fought for the crumbs—for *the crumbs were enough*. Truly, *there are no crumbs*; for in Jesus, crumbs are whole, sustaining, healing loaves. Crumbs of the salvation that Jesus came to bring would heal her child.
4. *Her understanding of Jesus’ mission was broad.* The Syrophenician woman saw herself and her family as part of that mission. Even when Jesus told her she was not part of those to whom he had come—at least not among those who had primacy of place in his vocation—she saw herself as part of a more inclusive mission to which Jesus was called.
5. *She saw God offering salvation and life in abundance through Jesus.* Jesus argued from a standpoint of scarcity. There was not going to be enough healing, life, nor salvation to go around—so the children must be fed first. The food of salvation belonged to the children. If there was something left over—or when it became clear that the children were full—perhaps then the dogs would be fed.

The Syrophenician woman saw God, and herself, differently. That is, the *theology* she shared

in this healing story was different from the one Jesus shared. Her dog-talk was actually God-talk. Her sense of God, God’s power, God’s love and compassion was expansive, lavish, abundant. Although we cannot peek behind the curtain to see what in her backstory brought her to this understanding, we do see that her beliefs were sufficiently strong that she was willing to challenge Jesus.

6. *She was used to, and ready for, mansplaining.* She approached Jesus respectfully, bowed at his feet, told her story, and asked for help. Jesus did not just tell her no. He shared why he refused her request and threw in a deep, profound insult for free. His response certainly wasn’t what she hoped to hear, but it was not unexpected.

The Syrophenician woman would have been accustomed to people regularly refusing her requests for help. Her gender, her race, and her religion—any of these—would have moved many Jews to avoid contact, and openly assisting her was out of the question for those who avoided defilement. Any person in her position would know that there was a good chance that Jesus would refuse to help.

His mansplaining attitude surely came as no surprise. Even the insult was probably something she had heard before. The surprise was that she was prepared to respond.

One final surprise in this story occurred in Jesus’ reaction to her rejoinder. No less tired, no less desirous of time away, no less ready for a serious break, and having refused and insulted this woman—Jesus turned. Jesus changed his mind. Jesus said, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter” (v. 29). Jesus accepted her argument, her logic—her theologic. It made sense when considering what he knew about God. He responded not with anger but with the saving grace of healing she and her family needed. In the end, *Jesus saw her*. It was the appropriate response to her faith in Jesus’ power and God’s compassion.

The evangelist Mark gives to the Syrophenician woman—and not Jesus!—the right to claim her own place inside the household of God’s salvation. She belongs there, and she gets to claim her place in it. No one from Israel, not even Jesus, gets to “allow” her in—she, a pagan woman, gets to claim it for herself. She belongs.

What Does This Mean for Us Today?

The struggle in this passage occurs and ends in so few words that we must pay close attention, lest we fail to see what is at stake.

The message of finding the appropriate time and the warning to stop pushing—these are well known to the oppressed. The sense that other issues, other more deserving persons, must be attended first is commonly heard during social struggles. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote about this in his small and memorable volume *Why We Can't Wait*. The book followed the publication of a famous letter Dr. King wrote in response to white male religious leaders who urged patience in the struggle for racial justice. King spoke of the unlikelihood of privileged people voluntarily giving up their privileges; of the tension that is created not by those who protest and resist oppression but by the oppression itself; and of what happens when people endure years of being seen, and eventually seeing themselves, through a “degenerating sense of nobodiness.” King argued that this made waiting not only impossible but also unfaithful. The approach, manner, and speech of the Syrophoenician woman sound similar notes of resisting one’s given place and seeing oneself not as a nobody but as a person of importance. She lays claim to a vision of self that is different than those in power have of her.

This story offers hope to those who feel compelled to argue with God about what would be righteous. This healing story, like a few other texts (Gen. 18:16–32, Exod. 32:9–14, 2 Kings 20:1–11), demonstrate that talking back to God and asking the Almighty for help when the divine will suggests a different way can result in liberating, life-giving change.

Further, this story helps us reflect on the spirit world. The woman’s daughter had “an unclean spirit.” Although Jesus sought to escape notice, the Syrophoenician woman found him and came immediately. Could it be that the Holy Spirit found, spoke to, and moved the woman to come to Jesus? The Holy Spirit is always aware of the work, power, and activity of unclean spirits. In this story, one of the members of the Trinity, the Divine Community, helped another to come to see and understand the mission of God in more fulsome ways.

The issue of self-knowledge is important here. How we see ourselves impacts how we are seen. In Tanzania and around the world, women and girls are encouraged

to submit and to accept societal controls on their bodies, sexual decision-making, and reproductive capacities. They are taught to do as they are told. Our women students endure the daily burden of working and living with some who believe they should not be offered ordination nor even the right to study theology. They continue only through the power of God’s grace, which allows them to see themselves differently than many around them see and to understand God differently as a result.

The Syrophoenician woman saw herself as worthy of salvation and healing. We can assume that she taught her daughter, healed by Jesus, to see herself in this way too. She could be called an “arrogant woman,” a type that has been criticized throughout human history. Women are often socialized to see themselves as lesser or subordinate and called to go along with the choices of men in their families, communities, and nations. The church has often encouraged women to submit to men. At times, this has tragically led to great trauma and mortal injury. Stories of this continuing reality shame the church and fail to proclaim the good news of liberation in Jesus. The existence in the Gospels of the story of an arrogant Syrophoenician woman, one who taught her daughter to be arrogant as well, calls us to reflect on what it means to be faithful women and men and to relate in faithful ways.

Through their encounter and interchange, Jesus came to see the Syrophoenician woman differently. Jesus, on a day of deep physical, spiritual, and mental fatigue, opened himself to learning to see. His teacher surprised him. Her gender, race, religion, and problem initially excluded her from Jesus’ vision. When he did see her clearly, this created a new perspective on Christ’s very body. Her coming to Jesus and asking him for help is remembered because she counted herself among those Jesus was sent to redeem. Her seeing made Jesus see. We are called to look around today, to see who might be in Christ’s body whom we have failed to see.

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ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 4

Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

The Woman Who Had Five Husbands

Introduction

This long story from John's Gospel is complex, as are so many of John's stories. The ancients could handle reading slowly and deeply, and that's how we must approach this text.

The story begins with conflict between John the Baptist and Jesus, for both are baptizing in Judea. The Judeans openly compared the two, to the favor of Jesus and the disfavor of John. John is very keen to avoid and openly deny any such rivalry. He has the baptizer witness over and against any such possibility of rivalry for a theological and spiritual reason: Jesus did not traffic in rivalry, envy, jealousy—all of which lead to violence—because he came to do away with all these things. Jesus' reign and ministry, which are directly from God, marked the definitive end of violence and everything that leads to violence.

In our story, Jesus' arrival at this particular well is framed as a coincidence. Jesus, John says, was tired and thirsty. This is unusual for John's Gospel—it is a rare moment of human realism. In John's Gospel, Jesus usually acted and spoke in an otherworldly way. The unnamed woman also came to the well at an odd time

of day: noon. Jesus asked her for a drink—an appropriate gesture. He is not from there, and it is not his well, so it would be stealing if he just took some water for himself.

The woman immediately questions his request, and that brings us to another point of even bigger conflict than the one in Judea with John the Baptizer. The woman was surprised by Jesus' request because, as she says, "Judeans do not share things in common with Samaritans" (v. 9). This refusal to share vessels is a very small sign of a much, much bigger conflict. To understand it, we have to go into some history.

A History of Hate and Conflict

For four centuries before Jesus, there were separate worshiping communities in Judea and Samaria—a separation that continues to this day. The Samaritans consider themselves to be descendants of the patriarch Joseph, the one who had the many-colored coat and the dreams in Egypt. The Samaritans had their own version of the Jewish law, the Torah, written in their own language and alphabet, and they did not accept any Scriptures other than the Hebrew Scriptures, although they had other holy writings. They worshiped God and

carried out their own sacrifices in their temple on Mount Gerizim in Samaria. They believed, and still believe, that the Judean temple in Jerusalem was formed by a breakaway priest from the original temple in Samaria.

In Jesus' time, many Judeans considered the Samaritans to be not foreigners but something worse—fake Israelites. The Judeans believed that the Samaritans were ethnically mixed between Israelites and foreign settlers brought to the area by the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BCE. The Judeans also believed that their temple in Jerusalem and their Hebrew version of the Torah were the original ones and viewed the Samaritan versions as fake copies.

Those mutual accusations of fakeness being thrown about by both sides were very serious. They prepared the way for violence, and that is exactly what happened in 113 BCE under the Judean ruler John Hyrcanus. He led an army to destroy the Samaritan temple and to devastate the surrounding lands.

So when the Samaritan woman says to Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (v. 9), she is questioning much more than just the sharing of dishes. Jews and Samaritans do not share Scriptures, worship places, ethnic origins, languages, and even God. The only thing shared between them was a history of suffering and bloodshed.

The Gift of Living Water

Jesus responded, as he so often did in John's Gospel, by taking the discussion to a new level. He told her about a different kind of water that he could give her—living water. She didn't fully understand, for two reasons. First, the term *living water* normally refers to any kind of running water, as opposed to the still water of ponds, lakes, or wells. There are no streams in that area, which is why the people there needed the well. So her question about where to get living water was an honest one. Second, and more importantly, she didn't hear Jesus insist on the words *gift*, *give*, and *given*, so she responded thoughtlessly with the verb *get*.

Let's think about the word *give*. It's a very powerful word in the Bible. Whenever it shows up, we should notice it. In this story, the evangelist makes sure to use it three times in the same sentence.

There are three moral economies in the world: divine, human, and demonic. The human economy is

the one we are most familiar with, and it is based on getting things through buying and selling. The woman at the well responded to Jesus' first statement with the question, “Where do you *get* that living water?” (v. 11, emphasis added). Similarly, before Jesus fed the five thousand, his disciples told him to dismiss the crowd so that they could go to the nearby villages to *get* something to eat, and he responded by telling them to *give* the crowd something to eat (Mark 6:30–44).

The divine economy is based on giving and forgiving or releasing. Here are three quick examples: 1) In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus moved his disciples and the crowd together from the human economy of getting to the divine economy of giving. 2) Jesus' parable about the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16 did the same thing. 3) The two verbs *give* and *forgive* are at the center of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). That means that the prayer grounds us, Jesus' followers, in the divine economy of giving and forgiving rather than the human one of trading and getting.

Obviously, then, the demonic economy is based on taking and destroying. This is what all empires do, in all of human history, as they expand their possessions. This is what we humans are doing to the earth as we destroy it and witness the ravages of climate change.

In John 4, Jesus was talking about way more than water, although water is still part of the conversation. He was talking about the gift of God, which includes all of life and all of eternal life as well. Everything that we humans have, do, and are, and will have, will do, and will be, is based on God's free gift. This way of looking at God and at life is entirely spiritual.

In the story, this giving talk kept going, again three more times. Jesus said, “those who drink of the water that I will *give* them will never be thirsty. The water that I will *give* will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14, emphasis added). The woman replied by changing her verbs and asking Jesus to give her this living water. The water Jesus offers is the spirit of God, not literal water. Jesus was directly offering her the grace of God. The woman didn't quite get that, because she thought that what Jesus offered could replace the well water she kept having to draw.

The Spirit of God

Now here's an interesting point about the Spirit of God. It is sometimes associated with water in the Bible, even as something that we drink. Through the prophet Joel, repeated in the Pentecost story in Acts 2, God promises "I will *pour out* my spirit upon all flesh" (v. 17, emphasis added). In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks at great length about the spiritual nature of the church, which binds all together into one body—even with all their ethnic, social, and economic differences and their different roles within the church. Paul says, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made *to drink* of one Spirit" (v. 13, emphasis added). Here in John 4, the Spirit is living water that is not a passive well that we always have to work to draw from. Instead the Spirit is an active spring bubbling up within us, freely giving us life everlasting and so fulfilling our thirst for the real life that is given by God, the spiritual life more important than the physical one that struggles to meet basic needs.

In the next part of the story, Jesus brought up another matter: the woman's many husbands. This is strange in a couple of ways. First, wasn't Jesus being kind of pushy? Is that really his business? Second, in a patriarchal society, women don't have husbands, but rather men have wives. It is the men who have the women and not the other way around.

The water Jesus offers is the spirit of God, not literal water. Jesus was directly offering her the grace of God.

At the time of Jesus, the Samaritans were identified by Judeans with the Cuthians, a non-Jewish tribe from the east that the Assyrian Empire established (2 Kings 17) back in the eighth century BCE. They were one of five such idolatrous peoples. As Gerard Sloyan observes, "If the woman's five husbands were these peoples, the present liaison of the Samaritans . . . on Gerizim would be the sixth [man]: an idolatrous cult in Jewish eyes." The five husbands and one man Jesus referred to symbolize the Samaritans' pagan past.

Jesus himself brought up this connection, making this woman stand in as the representative of all the Samaritan people and all their history. She immediately saw that to which he was referring, and she answered him by first honoring Jesus as a prophet (i.e., a truth-teller sent by God) and then by defending her people from the slander of paganism. "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20).

Jesus' answer was stunning, not only in the context of the religion of ancient Samaritans and Judeans, but when considered in the context of almost all ancient religions. Jesus tells her that the place of worship doesn't matter, for "the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (vv. 23–24).

Of Mountains and Murder

This needs some unpacking. Jesus sees a combination of things that go past most modern people: mountains, sacrifice, violence, and lying. In John, the two times that Jesus goes to a mountain are when he goes to Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, first to stop the sacrifices in the temple (2:13–22), and then later to be crucified. Mountains are the places of sacrifice, and Jesus stops sacrifices with his sacrifice. The animal sacrificial systems (of the Judeans, the Samaritans, and all the pagan religions) mirror, support, and encourage the human sacrificial systems of war, empires, oppression, and poverty. Jesus knew that all of that evil and suffering is covered over with lies. The main lie is that God wanted and commanded all

this killing and oppression. So when Jesus talked about worshiping God in both spirit and truth, he meant without bloody sacrifice (whether animal or human) and without the lie that God wants this killing.

One way to put Jesus' gospel on a bumper sticker would be: "No more victims/Victims no more." We followers of Jesus are called to refuse to make victims, and I pray that all Christians would learn to follow Jesus in this way. Moreover, when others try to make victims of us, we are called to refuse to accept that role and to refuse to react with the anger and violence that

the whole victim-making process expects. With Jesus leading the way, we are victims no more in a world full of cultures that make victims. This is even—or especially—true when some of those victimizers call themselves Christian.

The Samaritan woman then hazarded a guess about Jesus, moving her assessment of him from prophet to messiah. Jesus affirmed her profession of his messianic identity—something that he doesn't do with anyone else in the Gospel! That changed her into a disciple and evangelist, and she immediately set out to tell her own people about this extraordinary visitor. Because of her faithful witness, the people of the city invited Jesus to stay with them, which he did for two more days. After hearing him for themselves, they then awarded Jesus another title: "Savior of the world."

This title is clearly important in John's Gospel, but we modern folk need some help understanding it, even if it sounds familiar to us. This title was not first applied to Jesus. Julius Caesar was the first Roman general to be titled savior of Rome. Later, his adopted son Caesar Augustus was the first emperor to carry the title savior of the world. Archaeologists found this on a stone inscription from 9 BCE in Asia Minor. This same inscription also declares that Augustus came to end war and that his coming was good news—gospel—for the whole world. So this title was applied to Jesus *after* it was first applied to Caesar.

With that fascinating piece of historical information, we can easily see what the Samaritans were saying—that Jesus is the true savior who truly ends war. This means that the emperor in Rome *is not* the true savior and *does not* truly end war. This is all the more true given that John's Gospel, like the other three Gospels, was written after the Romans had utterly devastated Jerusalem and destroyed the temple there—irrefutable proof that the Roman emperors did not end wars but made them and fostered them. The Romans had their own sacrificial temples on their own mountains in Rome, and they exported their killing, destruction, and oppression around the world, especially within Galilee and Judea.

One way to put Jesus' gospel on a bumper sticker would be: "No more victims/Victims no more."

This title, applied by the Samaritans to Jesus, meant that they were not only accepting him as their savior but also definitively turning away from the Romans. Their acceptance of Jesus had a real cost to it, and they knew it. They didn't imagine that they could love Jesus and serve Caesar at the same time. They knew that in believing in and confessing Jesus as the Savior of the world, they no longer believed in Caesar and his empire. They would no longer fall for Caesar's lies, nor would they support his killing system.

Jesus takes the Samaritan woman at the well on an extraordinary journey, and it is to her great credit that she was ready to follow him on that journey. We, too, are called to this path. Jesus' gift of the spirit and the truth leads us not only to the true worship of God but also away from the false worship of this world's idols of fear, greed, and hate. In this way, the Samaritan woman is a good model for not only her fellow Samaritans but also for modern Christians two millennia later.

Jesus also saw this woman become an evangelist and the apostle to the Samaritans. Her witness allowed her whole community to see the new reign of God that Jesus brought, a reign that is not defined or limited by ethnic group, by political empire, or by history—and certainly not by the systems of sacrifice, debt, and death that we humans have constructed in place of God. By talking with a woman, Jesus showed how the new reign of God is created entirely from the spirit and truth.

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ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 5

Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

The Woman Who Saw and Anointed Jesus

Introduction

This story is the only one in this study that is contained in all four Gospels. It must have been very important for all early Christian communities. We are reading it only from Mark's Gospel at 14:3–9, but it also shows up in Matthew 26:6–13, Luke 7:36–50 (in a very different form), and John 12:1–8. In many ways, this story shows the most clearly, of all our stories, why women were and are so important to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to his movement, the church. Jesus himself knew this is important, because he said, at the close of the story in Mark, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (v. 9). Jesus saw women, and wise women returned the favor. And in this story, this female prophet saw him first.

As feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out, it is a clear witness to the male-centered tradition of the church that in the church's active memory, the Last Supper and the men present at it are well remembered, but this woman is not well remembered, in spite of Jesus' prophecy concerning her. As we will see, she is the model of both discipleship

and prophethood while the men are failing at that task. Not only did Jesus see and understand her, but she first saw and understood him.

The Context in Mark

Let us set the stage for her story. One of the unique features of Mark's Gospel is something scholars call the messianic secret. This means that no human knew Jesus' true identity for half of the Gospel—not John the Baptist, not Jesus' family, not even his disciples. God knew it, of course, and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism as the voice of God proclaimed, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). That sounds pretty clear, but we have to note that no human heard those words, saw the heavens torn open, or witnessed the Holy Spirit come down except Jesus. As the story continued, various demons blurted out Jesus' divine identity, but he quickly silenced them before casting them out. We readers are in on the secret, but all the characters in the story are kept out of it, including Jesus' own disciples.

This dynamic dramatically changes starting at 8:27, in the middle of the Gospel. Jesus asked his disciples the key question: "Who do people say that I am?" They

responded, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets” (v. 28). Then Jesus’ questioning got more pointed: “‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And [Jesus] sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him” (vv. 29–30).

She is the model of both discipleship and prophethood while the men are failing at that task.

You might expect things to go smoothly for the rest of the story. Jesus and his disciples could now, together, organize themselves and the many people they had encountered into a popular movement against the Romans, who were the political, economic, and spiritual power behind the widespread oppression of the common people of Israel and its neighbors. However, Jesus sought more than mere victory over the Romans. He pursued victory over all violence, oppression, and death, and that required a very different strategy. The men who were his disciples didn’t see and understand it until after his death and resurrection, but the female disciple in this story saw it and understood it before then.

Heading toward Crucifixion

Just after Peter guessed Jesus’ true identity in chapter 8, Jesus told all the disciples what he must therefore do: go through “great suffering,” rejection, and execution, after which he would rise again (v. 31). This drew a swift negative reaction from Peter, who had just confessed Jesus as Messiah. Shockingly, Peter scolded Jesus. Then Jesus scolded Peter in turn, saying, “Get behind me, Satan!” (v. 33). Clearly, the Jesus movement was not coming together in one revolutionary purpose! Jesus went on to warn that following him meant embracing crucifixion. That requires some unpacking.

When Jesus was a boy, around ten years old, there was a major rebellion in Galilee against the Romans. The Romans responded as usual, with overwhelming and brutal force. They sent down a legion from Damascus and destroyed the rebels. They made a deliberate point of crucifying thousands of the rebels. The boy

Jesus undoubtedly saw all this and probably knew many men who had been crucified. He knew firsthand that crucifixion meant not merely a slow and painful death but also legal extinction of the crucified person’s personhood. That meant that person no longer owned anything because he no longer existed as a person. All

his property, including his children, were now abandoned property, to be seized by anyone who had the power to take it—and that would especially include tax collectors.

So when Jesus insisted that anyone who followed him must “take up their cross and follow me” (v. 34), he was instantly going the opposite direction from his disciples. They were determined to kill Romans just as much as the Romans would be determined to kill them once they knew about them. They had no intention of accepting their own violent death at the hands of the Romans. They wanted to force death on their enemies instead. They were a lot like us. They did not see that Jesus’ goal was not the defeat of their enemies but the defeat of death itself, and the defeat of all enmity.

His Disciples Resist

Things did not actually get better between Jesus and his male followers after that. At 9:31, Jesus again told them that in Jerusalem he would be killed and be raised after three days. His disciples responded by arguing among themselves about who was the greatest—in other words, about who would be the next Jesus. They heard him say that he would be killed, and they took that into account with surprising aplomb. What they didn’t hear was him saying that he would be raised. Jesus’ own death began to make sense to them, but his resurrection from the dead made no sense at all. They could not see Jesus as a crucified messiah; they refused to do so.

A similar clash happened at 10:33–45. Again, Jesus made it very clear what would happen to him in Jerusalem, more explicitly than he had before. James and John then asked Jesus to set them on his right and left—that is, to make them his lieutenants when they got to Jerusalem and Jesus entered into his “glory.” Jesus then explained something that is a huge consequence of his coming crucifixion/resurrection, and indeed of his

whole ministry. His type of leadership was the opposite of that of the world's leaders. Rather than serving himself, he served others *without* serving himself. Furthermore, his leadership is the sole model of leadership for his followers, both then and now. That is how he calls us to serve.

It is because Jesus said this that there is anything like equality and democracy in the world now. The rule of democracy is supposed to be that those who govern do so on behalf of the governed and *not* in order to serve themselves. We owe that momentous change to Jesus.

In chapter 10, Jesus also made two huge and momentous social and economic changes. He first changed marriage from patriarchal marriage, which is a contract between the husband and the wife's father, into a covenant between a man and a woman. Women gained the right to jointly own the property of their husbands and have the right of inheritance. Then, after demonstrating the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of wealth with the rich young man, Jesus abolished patriarchy altogether in favor of communal possession and use of all property among believers.

The Female Prophet unlike Any Other

This struggle between Jesus and his male disciples, and the changes Jesus enacted, is the context for his anointing in chapter 14. This woman came into a house that was not her own and anointed Jesus on his head. The story doesn't tell us a lot about her socially—not even her name—but it does tell us a few things.

First, the house belonged to an outcast, Simon the leper. He was therefore not friends with the priests, scribes, and Pharisees. He was not on their mailing lists. The fact that he's named likely indicates that he was a known follower of Jesus, sort of like Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross. They were in Bethany, so within relatively easy walking distance of Jerusalem, but also not under the noses and eyes of the authorities.

This unnamed woman saw Jesus first. She knew him and understood him before he knew and understood her. She came in during dinner with a very expensive jar of ointment and anointed Jesus' head. This tells us first that she had money of her own and had decided, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna from Luke 8, that she would support Jesus. We don't know how

she came by this money, whether by her own work or through inheritance.

We know that she was a prophet unlike any other. Not just anyone in the Bible could anoint someone on their head, which is to make that person a king, a priest, or a prophet. Only someone who was already anointed could do so. Plus, there is not a single instance in the Hebrew or Greek Jewish Scriptures in which a woman either anointed someone else to be a leader in Israel or was herself anointed for that purpose. Women anointed their faces or bodies to make themselves attractive to a man. But no one anointed them on the head to be prophets, and no woman gave that anointing to another person. This does not mean that she could not be a prophet, but rather that this prophetic role could have come to her only directly from God.

In addition, we know that she saw, appreciated, and supported Jesus of Nazareth in the way he was and with the mission he had, rather than in the way the men wanted him to be, to serve their agendas for power and wealth. She saw him, understood him, and accepted him for who he was, what he was doing, and the way he was doing it. Jesus, in turn, accepted her; he correctly saw her act as a good service and a kindness, knowing very well both that no man was going to anoint him into their preconceived ideas and roles of king and that he was carrying out God's mission.

Jesus saw something that wise women have always seen: that what is good and right and true is rarely accepted and understood by those in power, and that the divine transformation into that good, right, and true future cannot be easily planned or foreseen. The cause of righteousness can and will suffer many defeats and will be made to look foolish and wrong many times. Jesus knew it would require a terrible price from him, and he knew that this unforeseen, unprecedented, and unnamed woman prophet valued, supported, and empowered him in that price and that cause.

The reaction of the men present is predictably disappointing. Not only had they been opposing Jesus in his specific way of being Messiah, they had also tried to prevent others who did understand this merciful Jesus from getting access to him, including the Syrophenician woman in chapter 7 and the people bringing little children to him in chapter 10. In this story, they resisted again. They griped and made a phony criticism, that

this was a waste of money and it should have been

They didn't want to see a woman anoint Jesus.

given to the poor. It's quite true that the gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed good news for the poor. Kindness should be done consistently for the poor. Jesus always did so. But this wasn't their real concern. They didn't want to see a woman anoint Jesus, despite the fact that Jesus had already lifted up women, ending patriarchy and transforming women into coequal property possessors with their husbands. And they certainly didn't want Jesus to talk about his own burial. They wanted the burials of Romans and collaborators, not of Jesus, and they wanted Jesus to lead them into that killing.

The terrible and painful irony of their supposed concern for the poor (and lack of concern for Jesus' death) is that they were displaying this fake concern while Jesus' death was being actively engineered. This story in chapter 14 is immediately preceded by the decision by the Jerusalem leaders to kill Jesus, and the story is immediately followed by Judas going to those same leaders to begin the process of that event. From this point on in the Gospel, Jesus' disciples increasingly turned away from him, finally abandoning him at his arrest. And it was only the women who remained faithful. In Mark's Gospel, they were the only ones present at Jesus' crucifixion (15:40–41). They were also the only ones to show up to his tomb to perform the last rites that they couldn't do earlier.

The Two Kinds of Stories

We mentioned earlier in this chapter Schüssler Fiorenza's observation of the lack of attention paid by the male-dominated church to this story of the female prophet. We need to expand on that. There are two ways of observing what happens in the last three chapters of Mark, and there are two competing kinds of stories.

One is male-centered and violent. It begins with the plot to kill Jesus by the male leaders in Jerusalem, joined by Judas Iscariot. While the other disciples were generally opposed to these leaders, they nonetheless agreed with them (and were secretly complicit with them) that killing must happen. This first story ended with Jesus' abandonment, crucifixion, and burial, all done by men. The center of this story was the shocking, horrifying crucifixion of Jesus, shown to us in gruesome detail.

The other way to see these events is female-centered and nonviolent. It began with the anointing of Jesus by a female prophet, continued with the faithful presence of women at his crucifixion, and ended with the witness to Jesus' resurrection by the female disciples, who remained present with him. The center of this story, however, is a mystifying event that we don't see happen at all—his shocking and incredible resurrection.

These two stories leave us readers with a choice. Which path will we take? Which way will we see things? Will we see Jesus, as the women do, as the divine messenger of a whole new way of life, who defeats not just worldly powers who use death but also death itself through his submission to his own death and resurrection? Will we see in him the beginning of a new creation based on faith, hope, and love rather than the old creation based on fear, greed, and hate? Or will we continue to serve the world's empires with their old idols of wealth, death, and lies? Will we trust that what God has done in and through Jesus is the whole truth of a new way of living, so true and so good that it is worth risking turning away from the supposed securities of the world's empires and turning toward God's reign of life?

Jesus takes the risk of trusting us to see and value this revolution of faith, hope, and love, and to give ourselves to it just as he has done. Our ways of giving ourselves are not the same as his, but like these women, we have him as our model and example, our pledge of hope, our guarantee of faith, our living presence of love. The women at the end of Mark's Gospel invite us into that same hope, faith, and love by seeing Jesus and taking the risk to respond to him. Their stories help us to also become seeing and active participants in God's reign through Jesus of Nazareth.

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ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 6

Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

The Woman Who Was Set Free on the Sabbath

Introduction

What we see depends on how we look at it. This is called perspective. Jesus brings a perspective in this story that transforms life and health. In so doing, minds, hearts, and viewpoints are also changed.

To understand, we need to back up a bit. Luke 13 begins with people talking to Jesus, curious about why some people had been imprisoned and executed and why others had been killed when a tower fell on them. Were these horrific deaths a sign of God's disfavor? This was a commonly held perspective in Jesus' time. Jesus' response was clear: *No*, if someone dies a horrible death it is not proof of God's anger. Human suffering is not caused by God.

A parable follows: A man who owns fig trees was frustrated with one that failed to produce fruit. He ordered the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener suggested patience, offering special care and mercy to see if the tree might produce fruit the next year. The gardener's perspective of care, mercy, and patience won the day.

Then Jesus appeared, teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath day. This is not uncommon—already in

Luke's Gospel, this is the fifth instance of Jesus teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. A woman came into the synagogue, bent over and not able to stand up straight. The text tells us that she had been this way, completely bent over, for eighteen years: not able to stand up. A person's perspective on life and the world depends on what they can see and how they are seen. The woman was bound by her bodily disfunction to look in only one direction. She had learned to walk and talk bent over. She cooked and ate bent over. She lived her life bent over. On this day, she appeared at the synagogue. Her limited perspective bound her movement, and she had to pay as much attention as she could to prevent herself from falling. Her presence and appearance were uninteresting because, after eighteen years, people were used to seeing her slowly coming, moving while bent over, and being careful not to walk into anyone or anything.

This woman was clearly gifted with persistence and strength. A weaker person would have stopped leaving the house, and her choice to keep going, engaging with community, had probably extended her life. She was always bent over, which was oppressive; nevertheless, she persisted.

Jesus saw her and called her over. She came slowly. Some miracle stories include a lot of background and description; this one is different. Jesus said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment” (v. 12). He laid hands on her, and immediately she was able to stand up straight, and she began praising God.

Although the story does not stop, we need to pause for a moment and think about what just happened. After eighteen years of being bent from the waist for every activity of life, this woman was freed to stand up straight. The freedom Jesus gave was not only immediate but total—all at once she stood straight up and began praising God.

Then the story veers, taking a new perspective. The synagogue leader, speaking not to Jesus or to the previously bent-over woman, started instructing everyone else to not come to the synagogue for healing on the Sabbath. Healing, from his perspective, was work. Work was to be done in six days, not on the Sabbath. So, the leader said, if you want to be healed, come some other day.

Jesus’ response was swift and sharp. In the same way that animals are untied—unloosed—and led to get water on the Sabbath, this woman deserved to be set free from the bodily bondage she had suffered for eighteen years. Those who opposed Jesus were put to shame, and the crowds there in the synagogue rejoiced “at all the wonderful things that he was doing” (v. 17). This story explores issues of bondage and freedom, healing and Sabbath, and the nature of our worship of God.

From Jesus’ perspective, the sabbath was the perfect day to free someone who had been bound for so long.

Bondage and Freedom

In this story, Jesus had his mind stayed on freedom. In many Gospel healing stories, Jesus uses words commonly translated “to heal.” In this story, Jesus used forms of two related verbs, *apoluo* and *luo*: “to set free, to untie, to loose, or to release.” Jesus set the woman free and continued to focus on bondage and freedom in his exchange with the synagogue leader. The leader thought that the Sabbath was not for healing, so he discouraged people from asking for healing on that day. We can infer that he thought the woman, bent over for

eighteen years, should have returned another day. This is something that poor people and sick people trying to navigate systems that offer services often hear: “You have come on the wrong day. Come another day.” The oppression and lack of freedom this fosters for those who are bound is not considered in these arguments—only following the rules.

Jesus saw differently. Animals are untied from the place where they are bound so that they can get water on the Sabbath, Jesus said. This is both merciful and sustains life. In the same way, Jesus noted, this woman, bound for eighteen years, should be set free from her bondage on the Sabbath. In fact, from Jesus’ perspective, the Sabbath was the perfect day to free someone who had been bound for so long.

The Meaning of Eighteen

The stories we find in our English Bible versions of the Gospels have been carefully curated. Along with the ongoing task of translation, biblical scholars use the term *redaction* for the long process of editing the texts to arrive in the form we now have. The first hearers and readers of our Gospel texts had different perspectives than we do. They heard these stories differently, seeing symbols and references we often miss. One of these arises in the number of years that the woman was bound.

Eighteen is a complex number in Scripture, denoting both oppression and life. In Israel’s history, eighteen years recalled times of oppression. Judges 3:12–14 recounts the time when the Israelites did “what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (v. 12). This resulted in the Lord strengthening King Eglon of Moab, who went to war with Israel and defeated them, and the Israelites served him for eighteen years. In Judges 10, a story is shared where Israel again did evil in the Lord’s sight, so the Lord “sold them” (v. 7)—as one does with slaves—to the Philistines and the Ammonites. The text says they oppressed the Israelites for eighteen years. These stories would have been remembered by many present that Sabbath day, as Jesus spoke of the eighteen people who died when a tower fell on them (Luke 13:4), and freed a woman who had been in bondage for eighteen years. The number eighteen would have brought memories of bondage and oppression for many.

Conversely, eighteen is also a word that can mean freedom and life. In Hebrew, the word *chai* is translated “life.” Many musical theater fans may remember the use of a form of this word—*L’Chaim*—as the title of a big celebratory number in *Fiddler on the Roof*. *Chai* is spelled in Hebrew with two letters: chet (ח) and yod (י). Each letter in Hebrew is given a numerical value. Chet has the value eight, and yod is ten—totaling eighteen. So the number eighteen, for Jews, is related to and refers to life. This has led to a tradition followed by many of giving gifts at celebrations in multiples of eighteen. The number eighteen used in Scripture is complex, and its use in this story is not accidental.

Remember the Sabbath Day: Which Way?

There is discussion in the story of how to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. The synagogue leader first mentioned Sabbath indignantly, Luke tells us, as Jesus had cured on the Sabbath. From the leader’s perspective, what had happened was work. Jesus had worked on the Sabbath. This violated the fourth commandment. The leader referred to the commandments found in Exodus 20:2–17, where the Sabbath day’s holiness is said to be related to the order of creation: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it” (v. 11).

Jesus remembered a different version of the commandments, relating the Sabbath day to freedom. The version informing Jesus’ perspective appears in chapter 5 of Deuteronomy. There we find a longer fourth commandment. Where the version in Exodus mentions livestock, Deuteronomy mentions “your ox or your donkey” (Deut. 5:14)—the same animals Jesus mentioned in his rebuke to the synagogue leader. Then Deuteronomy shares a very different rationale for the commandment. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (v. 15). The Deuteronomist recalls the holiness of the Sabbath day related to God’s work to free the Israelites. According to Deuteronomy, the Sabbath is holy because of freedom.

In responding to the synagogue leader, Jesus refused the perspective the leader brought of healing as work. Jesus shared a very different perspective, one of the Sabbath as a day set aside and made holy because of God’s work for and will toward freedom for the children of God. Therefore, the Sabbath day is a good day to free someone. In fact, it is the best day for someone to be freed. It is a day that is all about freedom from bondage, about loosing or untying someone—animal or human—from oppression.

We should consider, then, how our understanding of Sabbath might change if we adopted Jesus’ perspective. What might we see as its goal? What if taking Sabbath and sabbatical leaves rested on the idea of freedom from bondage, of setting someone free to praise God more fully? Who do we know that is oppressed or in bondage, or whom could we set free as a Sabbath discipline? Changing our perspective on Sabbath could inform the way we live lives of freedom and offer freedom to others.

Changing our perspective on Sabbath could inform the way we live lives of freedom and offer freedom to others.

A Name for the Nameless

The name of the bent-over woman has been lost to history—if the Gospel writer ever knew it. Unlike the other women in this study, Jesus gave the bent-over woman a wonderfully powerful name: “daughter of Abraham” (Luke 13:16). She is a community member, one of the chosen people, someone deserving of honor. In giving her this name, Jesus claimed relationship with her as a fellow descendant of the patriarch.

We should also note that Abraham didn’t have daughters—he had only sons. In Abraham’s family line, Scripture often lists him with his son and his grandson: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The three are often referred to as the patriarchs, and there are many reasons, both good and less so, for the title. In this story, Jesus gave Abraham a daughter, and in so doing, Jesus gave this daughter of Abraham the full rights and privileges of an heir, deserving of the freedom God granted to all. Jesus compared the woman he had set free to the animals whom any observant Jew would have untied to

let them drink water, even on the Sabbath day. In calling her a daughter of Abraham, Jesus made the comparison pointed. She was not just “not an animal”—she was important. She was deserving. She was an honored person from a holy and revered family whose bondage should not have been allowed to last even one more day.

Jesus’ Perspective on Women and Freedom

This story has a lot to teach us about Jesus. From his perspective, women are worthy of notice. Women who have problems are worthy of conversation, human touch, and action. From Jesus’ point of view, *women deserve freedom*.

In our time, oppression marks life for many women and girls around the world. Women and girls live at daily risk of gender-based violence. Girls in many countries, including Tanzania, are less likely to stay in school till the age of eighteen, an important marker for human and community development, than their brothers. Women are more likely, all over the world, to live in poverty. Female heads of households are more likely to parent families that live in poverty. Women are more at risk of HIV than men. Women are paid less than men for doing the same work. Women who attain their educational goals are less likely than men with the same education—and some with less—to be considered for positions matching their credentials. Women are subject to sexual harassment and assault on the job, on the street, and in the home. For many women in our world today, freedom is out of reach.

Jesus saw women in ways that the people around him did not. Jesus saw women in ways that most women in his time did not see themselves. Jesus saw women as deserving of mercy. He saw them as children of God. Today, the church must strive to let Jesus’ perspective on women inform our own. Most churches do not ordain women for religious leadership. For those that do, it is still newsworthy when women attain high office or are called to lead large congregations. Often women are not offered freedom to answer Christ’s call.

The church as the body of Christ needs to discern how ready we are to follow Jesus and be informed by his perspective. Jesus saw women, called women, healed women, befriended women, and set women

free. Disciples of Jesus today could well take up following him in this as a meaningful Sabbath discipline.

Conclusion

When people saw what Jesus had done, they often felt both great fear and an urgent need to tell others what they had seen. Memories of his work lasted with those who saw what happened. In the earliest days of the church, remembering Jesus’ perspective empowered ministries. Leaders developed strategies that committed to Jesus’ vision. How does the memory of Jesus’ vision, the way that Jesus saw and what he did in response, move us today? What will we do because we remember and see?

To answer these questions, we must *remember Jesus*, honing our memory of who Jesus was, how he saw, and what he did. Part of this mental exercise is to recall how Jesus saw women and acted with and for them in countercultural, transformative, and life-giving ways.

We then must find ways to *adopt Jesus’ vision*. We must learn to see as Jesus saw, asking: Who is invisible in our community? Who is living through an unseen crisis? What problems are actively stealing life from people, families, and communities while no one notices? Where are hidden forces creating hidden catastrophes for people? And what are the imperceptible problems and crises faced by women?

Finally, we must *discern how to act*. We are called as disciples to act with compassion on what we see. You may have heard the phrase, “I can’t unsee this,” referencing something awful in terms of fashion, art, or human foolishness. As Jesus’ disciples, we are called to sharpen our vision *to see* oppressed women and *to not unsee*: to focus our eyes on that which needs to be seen and then to act. May God bless us as we seek to see as Jesus saw and to act following his example.

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