

Jesus, Friend of... Women
Luke 8:40-56
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We continue our Lenten sermon series today, in which we're looking at some of the groups of people with whom Jesus was friendly during his earthly ministry. We're acknowledging right up front that, if Jesus were to come today, he probably wouldn't hang out with us, but would be with people who live on the margins of society. In his time, that included the poor, the mentally ill, foreigners, the sick, children, and today's group, women.

This isn't incredibly shocking to us. What's the big deal about Jesus being friends with women? You probably know that the culture in which Jesus lived and moved was patriarchal, favoring the power and privilege of men over women. Women were definitely considered lower-class citizens compared to their male counterparts. But that doesn't mean Jesus couldn't be friends with people of the opposite sex, right?

Wrong. If he was truly following the societal customs of his day, then Jesus actually couldn't be friends with women. Or hang around with them. Or talk to them. The culture was not only patriarchal toward women, it was oppressive, and there were strict guidelines that dictated how men and women interacted. You know those unwritten taboos of society? Things like talking loudly on your cellphone in the doctor's waiting room or taking 20 items into the "15-items-or-less" line at the grocery. You can do them, but there's a social consequence for it. The same thing was true back then for men who associated with women in public. You just didn't do those things.

The reasons behind these rules are biblical, which is sad, one of many examples of how the Bible has been co-opted and misused to support someone's agenda. It goes all the way back to the creation story in Genesis 2, when God gives Adam and Eve the whole Garden of Eden but tells them not to eat from that one tree. The snake tempts Eve, who takes a bite of the fruit, thus sealing her fate as the perpetrator of humankind's downfall. What we conveniently forget is that, after she takes a bite, she hands the fruit to Adam and he eats it, too. That means he was standing there the whole time and didn't say a word. I think the serpent came to Eve instead of Adam because he knew who wore the fig leaf in that family.

Blaming Eve for disobeying God neglects the fact that, earlier in the story, Eve was created from Adam's rib. As Matthew Henry wrote in his commentary, "The woman was not made out of the man's head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal to him and near his heart to be beloved." I also think she was created and given the name "woman" because God realized men were going to need someone to say, "Whoa, man!" Some things never change.

The demonizing of Eve set the tone for women's roles in much of scripture and society. By the time you get to Jesus, women have been relegated to the roles of child-bearing and housekeeping, with hardly any presence in the wider culture. They were always supposed to be under the protection and authority of a man, either their fathers, husbands, or a male relative. Women had little access to property or inheritance, were only allowed in the outer courts of the temple, and were not allowed to divorce their husbands, although husbands could divorce their wives. One Jewish rabbinic law held that the testimony of 100 women was not equal to that of one man.

Thankfully, a lot has changed since those times and women overall hold a much higher place in society, but we have work to do. Women are still paid a fraction of their male counterparts in many industries. While more women have moved into executive leadership roles, the glass ceiling is still very much intact in a lot of places. And I can tell you plenty of stories about my female clergy colleagues who have received looks of shock and disgust when someone asked for the pastor and they responded, “That’s me.”

When we were pregnant with our first child, I really wanted a boy. Then we had our daughter Sydney and my heart grew 10 times its size. When we were pregnant with our second child, we lived across the street from a family that had two little boys. Let me correct that. They had two demons disguised as little boys. The more I was around them, the more I really wanted another daughter! And God blessed us with Molly.

As the father of two strong-willed, intelligent, independent daughters – they take after their mother – I see first-hand the gifts and graces women have to offer this world. I’m glad we’ve moved past the patriarchy of Jesus’ time. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t a problem, because not all women are valued equally. The more vulnerable they are, the less presence they have in our society that values progress and productivity. I thank God for ministries like Step by Step that works hard to keep women on the margins from becoming invisible.

I was in a seminar last year in which the presenter was talking about different personality types. For each personality type he offered a famous example. On his last one, he said, “I realized a few weeks ago that all of my examples are men. I should change that.” And my friend Tawanda, an African-American woman who is the executive director of the local Red Cross, said, “So, why don’t you?” If it was possible for this white guy’s face to get any whiter, it did. I admire Tawanda for her holy audacity, but it shouldn’t just be up to her to speak up when women are not fully represented. Jesus would have spoken up, but I didn’t.

That’s the same kind of audacity we see in our story today with the woman who touches Jesus’ garment in hopes of healing. Jesus’s power is pick-pocketed, and when he calls out the perpetrator, the woman falls down before him and proclaims to everyone there why she did it. Does Jesus get angry? He should, according to society. This woman, unclean because of her bleeding, not only touches him, but then speaks directly to him in public. Instead of being indignant, he calls her “daughter” and says, “Your faith has made you well. Go in peace.”

This is one of many examples of the respect and dignity with which Jesus treats women. He talks with them, like the foreign woman at the well. He heals them, like Jairus’ daughter. He receives their blessing, like the woman who anoints his feet. He even teaches them, a serious social taboo, like when Mary sits at his feet while Martha works. Jesus not only said, “Many who are first shall be last, and many who are last shall be first,” he lived it by putting first the very people that society had put last.

Jesus had good reason to do this, because women were the lifeblood of Jesus’ ministry. The women are the ones who must understand Jesus while the male DUH-ciples are fighting over who gets to sit next to him in Heaven. In John’s gospel, it’s Mary who says, “Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” The women are the ones who stick with Jesus. When Jesus is crucified and his disciples are fleeing to save their own skin, it’s the women who are at the cross with him. And it’s the women who receive the greatest news ever. Remember what I said about the worth of a woman’s testimony? In all four gospels, the first people to find out that Jesus has been resurrected are women. Even the disciples in Luke don’t believe the women about the empty tomb, claiming it was an “idle tale.” Regardless, it is women who become the first bearers of the good news.

One particular story highlights the esteem with which Jesus held women. While he's eating at the home of a Pharisee, a woman from the street comes in and anoints Jesus' feet with oil. The Pharisee criticizes Jesus for associating with such a "sinner," but Jesus counters by admonishing the Pharisee for not offering him hospitality, and then honors the woman who did so. Drawing the Pharisee's attention to the person who has extended him true hospitality, he says, "Do you see this woman?"

Do you see this woman? Most of us in this room have the privilege of being seen, and I hope we don't take that for granted. But there are other women around us who don't enjoy the same privileges, rights, and accesses that we do. Do we see them? The woman who is working two jobs to help pay bills while her husband is out of work. Do you see this woman? The single mother who's been abandoned by her support system and is trying not to give in to the pressures of life. Do you see this woman? The teenager ostracized from her family because of her sexual orientation. Do you see this woman? The widow who doesn't come to church much anymore because it's too painful, and when she does, she sits alone. Do you see this woman? The lady in the traditional Muslim headdress who gets stares and jeers as she walks in the store. Do you see this woman? The woman of color who can't stay silent at society's injustices but can't speak up for fear of being labeled a trouble maker. Do you see this woman? They are our sisters, just as much as the women sitting with us today.

I'm thankful to serve in a denomination that values the role and gifts of women. I'm honored to stand next to Rev. Trish Standifur as we lead worship each Sunday. I'm thrilled my daughters have gotten to see strong women serving as deacons standing at the table, as elders lifting up the bread and the cup, as ministers proclaiming a bold word from God. But it's not only our daughters who need to see that. It's our sons, too. They need to see women, not through the eyes of society, which glorifies certain types of women while demonizing others, but through the eyes of Jesus, who saw all women the same as men – created in the image of God, sinners worthy of God's grace.

In our scripture today, when Jesus calls out the woman who touched his garment, she falls at his feet and proclaims to the crowd why she touched him. Through Jesus' healing power, she finds her voice. If we are to be followers of Jesus, living as he showed us how to live, then we must also help women find their voice in this world that seeks to drown them out. Rather than accusing them of telling "idle tales," we all would benefit from hearing them, listening to their stories, learning from their struggles, being inspired by their perseverance. As women continue to take on more leadership in our political system, both local and national, as women become bolder in standing up to sexual assault and male chauvinism, as women continue to claim their place alongside men as equals created in the image of God, may we follow Jesus' lead, not standing behind them, not standing in front of them, not standing over them, but standing beside them, equal co-laborers in the kingdom of God.