

## March 18, 2018: Gifts of Women's Sunday

TEXT: [Matthew 15:21–28](#)

TITLE: **Pathway to Peace: Refusing to be Silenced**

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

British Artistic Director and founder of WOW—Women of the World conference—Jude Kelly tells the story of taking her young children to see the 1982 blockbuster movie, *E.T.* She describes the climactic scene toward the end of the movie where the children are trying to save *E.T.* from the hands of the scientists who want to do experiments on the sweet alien, even though it is killing him. As the kids pedal their bikes into the woods to get *E.T.* back to where his space ship left him, they start to fly. She recounts her kids' reactions.

*“Robby is enraptured, he’s there with them, he’s saving E.T., he’s a happy boy. And I turn to Caroline and she’s crying her eyes out. And I said, “What’s the matter? “And she said, “Why can’t I save E.T.? Why can’t I come?” And then all of a sudden I realized: they weren’t children; they were boys—all boys. And Caroline who had invested so much in E.T., well, she wasn’t invited to save him, and she felt humiliated and spurned.”<sup>1</sup>*

Kelly sites examples from 11,000 year old cave paintings to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*—works of art depicting life through the perspective and labor of men. She points out for us what has become a universal truth that is so accepted that it is often ignored: the stories of human experience have largely been told by men. The texts written by men are cannon. And the stories that have been told by women are often seen as only relevant to women—an alternative narrative but not universal truth.

When putting together the bulletin for today’s service, I pulled out the resources that we customarily use to come up with the “On this day in history” sidebars. I had hoped to find even 2-4 anecdotes that featured the noteworthy moments of our story focused on women. The *Christian Almanac*—the one most frequently used—had no examples of women shaping history. So I turned to the great guru of the internet, and the only items I could find were that Buckingham Palace announced the engagement of Sarah Ferguson to Prince Andrew (1986) and Zsa Zsa Gabor filed for bankruptcy (1994).

Where are women’s stories?

This dynamic of which Kelly speaks is not relegated to our day and age. It even shows up in our Biblical story for today.

We read a familiar text of Jesus and his disciples traveling through the countryside—this time, journeying to the border of Tyre and Sidon. Of course, the only disciples named in the text are men, and although we assume that as the crowd of Jesus’ followers grew women followed along, most of us picture what we were taught in Sunday School:

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Jesus' closest confidants and faithful servants were men—those twelve disciples gathered and sent in his name.

A woman approaches Jesus and the disciples as they travel into her hometown. She cries out to Jesus, calling him Lord, Son of David, although she is, according to Matthew a Canaanite—a religious enemy, an unbeliever. She cries out on behalf of her daughter who is terribly afflicted by a demon and is suffering, with a faith in Jesus barely expressed with such certainty. Her cries are ignored—even by Jesus.

And so she calls out again, refusing to give up. At this point, the disciples try to silence her. “Send her away,” they demand. “Her voice is loud, petulant. She’s making us uncomfortable.” And Jesus tries to send her away, making excuses about how she is simply not one of the people he was sent to save.

She cries out again, kneeling before him, pleading for his help. And Jesus’ reply is dismissive at best and racist at worst. He calls the woman and her child dogs.

But the unnamed woman refuses to give up. She teaches the teacher and says, “Even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” And her daughter is healed without Jesus even having to move a muscle.

In some ways this story raises more questions than answers. Why doesn’t Jesus just help? It is clear that he spends more time making excuses and avoiding this loud-mouthed woman than it would have taken him to heal her daughter in the first place. Why did he ignore her? Why did he try to send her away? Why did he insult her? This isn’t the Jesus we know or worship!

Some people go to pains to soften Jesus’ words. Some try to suggest that Jesus is really using the Hebrew for “puppy” referring to the woman by a pet name of sorts. Others suggest that Jesus is acting a part in order to call out the sinful mentality of the culture in which he lives—that he doesn’t *mean* what he is saying, but that he is using the rhetoric of the culture in order to call out the sin of the culture. Others suggest that the woman teaches the teacher—a Jesus who is just as human as he is divine, and who is having, perhaps a bad day.

When we look at this story from the perspective of the male voices we see: the sexism, racism and xenophobia of the day. We see the exhaustion of those trying to do God’s work and their collective attitude that there are limits God’s power: God’s care, in their view, is for *some* and not for all. We see disciples trying to serve as bouncers—gatekeepers who get to decide who is worthy of an audience with the Living God.

Frankly, all of these attitudes are present in the church today. They are frequently cited reasons why some dub themselves “spiritual but not religious.” The presence of “isms” that exclude, of theology that claims that God favors some over others, and practices that deem some unworthy of an audience with God are sins of the modern church, as they were 2000 years ago.

But what happens when we focus on the woman's telling of the story? When we hear this text through the woman's eyes, we see a different picture of the world and of God. The woman tells a story of a girl who matters. She lets us know that someone seen insignificant in the eyes of the culture and community has worth and value and deserves to be made whole. She tells us the story of a woman whose voice speaks truth to power and deserves to be heard. She tells the story of a God who can heal—of a God with enough to offer those left out and overlooked. From this woman's perspective God can bring transformation in surprising ways, even when the collective wisdom is that someone falls outside of God's grasp.

Through the woman's eyes, we see a version of God in which we can place hope. We see a God worthy of praise. The woman challenges the narrative that limits her access to God or her daughter's ability to be made whole. The woman cries out against the walls that are erected to keep her out, and by her persistence breaks through the barricades, kneeling before Jesus. See, this woman believes that God has enough grace, enough power, enough of an ability to heal that even the *leftovers* God offers are enough to transform the lives of all of God's people.

When we look at this story through the woman's eyes we see a God of abundance—with enough to offer that all may know the healing power of God. When we look at this story through the woman's eyes, dividing lines dissolve. When we look at this story through the woman's eyes, a marginalized voice is powerful enough to advocate, to communicate, and to educate even the Savior of the World.

Women's voices matter. They have power. They call out injustice. They facilitate healing. They initiate transformation. They give voice to a perspective that is often unheard and undervalued. They challenge the status quo.

Malala's young voice spoke unflinchingly against the power systems of the day that tried to relegate her and her female peers to a subordinate role in society by denying them an education. But Malala used her voice to speak up: to demand an education for herself and for every girl, and to work for peace. When women's voices unite together, injustices like sexual harassment and assault are named for what they are, and systems that have perpetuated abuse are dismantled one perpetrator at a time. When women speak up—young or old—we hear the prophetic refrains of our day that call us to justice: #blacklivesmatter; #metoo; #enoughisenough.

So listen up, that *herstory* might be told alongside history and a more complete narrative might articulate human experience. Listen up, because in spite of significant gains, women are still being cut out of conversations and even paid for their silence.

Listen up, because when a woman speaks, you might just learn something. Jesus did. And it made all the difference.

Amen.