

What's That to do with me?

In Lawrence Massachusetts, at the height of the gilded age, textile factory workers, almost all first or maybe second generation immigrants, largely women and children, worked in deplorable conditions. Over half were young women between the ages of 14 and 18. And, as automation grew, wages and necessary skill fell, the dangers rose, and people found themselves working 60 hours a week for a mere \$9 a week. The dietary staples of these people, living many families to a single room, was bread, beans and molasses. Over half of children died by age 6. More skilled workers were almost exclusively English speakers and at least 2nd generation Americans. They were also, theoretically union members, though few paid dues, and they were resentful of the migrants taking the lesser jobs left over as automation made theirs largely obsolete.

These situations always come to a boiling point. In 1912, after seeking international union help and not receiving it, the women of Lawrence could take no more. As they walked out, the larger unions began to take notice, and offered support. The government response? To call out local militia, who beat the women, even as they were seeking to get their children out of the town which had become so violent. Rather than let the children leave, the police imprisoned women and children. There were miscarriages, deaths. The whole thing was captured by national media. The protesting women sang their call for bread (sustenance) and roses, too: a bit of life's beauty. Eventually the mill owners relented – some and the strike ended with children especially and workers in general, safer and a bit better paid than before.

Their actions proved that women and immigrants, could, would, and should stand up for their rights in the face of an oppressive system. There is nothing quite like the collective power of women pushed too far.

What has that to do with me???

I love today's passages of good women challenging the men in their lives in ways that transform the world around them, and maybe around us. The Syrophenician woman is a special heroine. Jesus, our Jesus, calls her a dog. Dismisses her, degrades and overlooks her. And with grace and dignity, by challenging him, this brave mother teaches Jesus a truth he was trying hard to overlook. One has to wonder, after reading the story of the wedding at Cana, how long Jesus would have waited to begin his ministry if he had not been pushed by his mother. She literally shoves him into the center, leaving him no place to go except forward into his destiny. Moms are like that.

But he is still reluctant, isn't he? "Woman, what concern is that to you and me?" he asks. Being challenged, Mary becomes not mother, but 'woman.' Generic, flat, stripped of authority. God picked well in her, though. She was not so easy to dismiss. Neither are we.

Sometimes, we ask the question 'what has that to do with me?' And others we are called to provide the answer. The great thing is, when you ask it, you get an answer, equipping you for the next day.

What do these stories have to do with us? Everything.

We cringe at historical treatment of women and children. We cringe at the news now, but we do not own it. What concern is it to us if the distant land of Alabama charges pregnant women with murder for getting into an argument while pregnant? What concern to us if the neighboring land of New Jersey has

judges that advocate for rapists being set free because of their good families? And let's not even talk about those wealthy men and their underage sex rings. The girls weren't from here...were they? None of us, that I know of, are in a position to consider an abortion, so what is it to us that doctors forfeit federal funding if they provide medically appropriate options to their patients? What can we do, personally, about the way children are being treated at the border? They are not us, not here...yet. Must a woman or girl here, among us be targeted by ICE? It may already be too late, then. Must one of us, personally, need medical care we cannot get because we are less threatening barefoot, pregnant, under educated and underpaid? I pray that we may learn from Jesus, learn to learn from what has already happened, as he did when confronted with the Syrophonician woman. There is no time better than now to do our Christian duty. Tomorrow may, indeed, be too late. This is what it has to do with us.

Just last week I had a white man look me in the eye and say "that Meghan Rapinoe, that bitch should be dead. I wish those 'blanks' had lost and she get get the f out of America if she doesn't like it." Last week. To me. This is what it has to do with us.

I am told a lot that I "don't look like a pastor." When pressed, what that seems to mean is that I am not a man, mostly. But if I am to be a woman pastor, I should be dressed in loose fitting, shapeless clothes, wear 'sensible' shoes, stud earrings, and no lipstick or nail polish more remarkable than mauve. I do the opposite, and I do it *on purpose*. Jesus called me exactly as I am. He called me in and through my femininity, not in spite of it. Jesus is not shaming me – he learned that lesson from our friend the Syrophoenician woman. Jesus isn't telling me to be less of a woman to be more of a pastor. Some folks do, but not Jesus. Jesus is

asking me to be all of who I am, for him, everywhere I go – especially now. This is what it has to do with us.

Ladies? Women and girls all over this country associate the name of Christ with their silencing, subjugation, and justification for denying them healthcare, encouraging them to ‘forgive’ their assailants, without asking their assailants to take responsibility for their actions. Do we believe this is the Jesus we love and the Christ we serve? _____

If we do not, who are we waiting for to talk about the Jesus we DO love, and the Christ we DO serve???. The women of Lawrence waited for someone else, too. And by the time help came, conditions were so bad that the lives of their children were in grave danger, and some were lost. That is the cost of waiting to share the good news of liberation. Is it a cost we are willing to pay? _____

What is the good news here?

If even Jesus is human enough to try to get out of growth by shrinking the voice of the messenger, we too must be forgiven for the impulse. On the other hand, if we are to be like Jesus, we must also seek to overcome the impulse, as he does in both of these stories. First, though, we must name when we have the impulse, and when it is used against us. Naming the problem and stating a Jesus-tested and approved response is good news.

I want to add one more passage to our thoughts before we begin: this from the Gospel of Mary, one of the texts that was excluded from the official canon of the Bible. It seemed important to include a woman’s voice as we talk about what is the role of Christian women in our current moment and what is the good news that we, in particular, have to share in these bad times.

Reading from Mary...

Women are now and have always been the first bearers of Christian liberation. And we have always faced push back. And we cannot, must not, be the first generation who says, 'oh, okay, we will sit back down and work on our needlepoint, thanks.' This is what it has to do with us.

Here's the good news: we here at New Paltz UMC believe in a Christ who liberates all. A Christ who requires just for – and of – all. We worship a God who loves women, sanctifies and glorifies women as made fully and unconditionally in the image of God. We do not take this for granted. We do what we are doing here now: we question, we explore, we challenge. We ponder together what that means and how we will share it. People are being silenced by law, by coercion, by fear. We are the light in the darkness, ladies. This is what it has to do with us.

So, what can you do to spread the good news of Christ in these bad times for women?

You can tell your children – girls and boys – stories of remarkable women who followed Jesus bravely. Tell them the story of how Meghan Rapinoe knelt on principle to support her fellow citizens who live under a second class status. Tell them of the strikers of Lawrence Mass., of Ida B. Wells who challenged issues of race and gender, advocating that Black women defend themselves not rely on anyone else to do so. Tell of Sojourner, and Harriet, the Notorious RBG. When you see a girl being man-splained, shut it down for her, better, with her. When terrible news stories come up at work, you can say 'here's what Jesus did in similar circumstances...I'm looking for ways to follow that example.' Or 'that's not how I read Jesus.'

Just being yourself, unabashedly female and Jesus centered, is an act of sharing the Good News that Christ is not looking for handmaids (yes, I did that on

purpose). He is looking for sisters. And we, in all of our variety, are offering ourselves to walk beside him.

If we each do enough of these small gestures, there will be fewer opportunities to reach a Lawrence Mass disaster point. We don't all have to strike...though we'd get farther faster if we did...but these stories are pushing people away from Christ and each other, and so far, the response of most Christians is to say 'church is not political,' even as Jesus is being used to subjugate us using legislative means.

This week it was announced that child labor laws are likely to be rolled back, allowing teens to work significantly longer hours and do more dangerous work. The justification? "launch more family-sustaining careers by removing current regulatory restrictions." It's our children, now. Of course, it's always been our children. Our daughters, and our sons.

Someone you will encounter this week needs to know the good news that Jesus shares with and through women. Will you be silent? This, beloved, is what it has to do with us.

Amen.