

“Hidden Figures: Unnamed Women in the Bible”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 20, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Exodus 2: 1-10; Luke 7: 11-17; 1 Corinthians 14: 26-37

Exodus 2:1-10

Now a man from the house of Levi went and took to wife a daughter of Levi. ² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. ³ And when she could hide him no longer she took for him a basket made of bulrushes, and daubed it with bitumen and pitch; and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river's brink. ⁴ And his sister stood at a distance, to know what would be done to him.

⁵ Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, and her maidens walked beside the river; she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to fetch it. ⁶ When she opened it she saw the child; and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸ And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So, the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away, and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him.

¹⁰ And the child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son; and she named him Moses, for she said, "Because I drew him out of the water."

Luke 7:11-19

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹² As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus delivered him to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷ This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

1 Corinthians 14:26-37

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one

interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰ If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. ³² And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, ³³ for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

(As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. ³⁵ If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. ³⁶ Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?)

³⁷ Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.

Sermon

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.^[1]

Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name,

And they're always glad you came.

You wanna be where you can see,

Our troubles are all the same

You wanna be where everybody knows

Your name.

You wanna go where people know,

People are all the same,

You wanna go where everybody knows

Your name.

That, my young friends, is the theme song from Cheers,
a sit-com in the ancient history of television from 1982-1993,
when there were three big networks,
MTV was strictly commercial-free music videos,
and folks crossed the room to change a channel.
That song, my good friends, speaks to who and whose we are.

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name,

And they're always glad you came.

Names matter.

Relationships matter.

Our names matter.

Everybody has one. At least one. Some have only one.

Cher. Madonna. Rhiana. Pele. Neymar.

The two sounds we like the most are someone saying our name and the words Pay Day.

True story.

The three places you enjoy the most – here you fill in the top three of your choosing –
are most likely where folks know you and call your name out loud.

Names matter.

Relationships matter.

So it is with great curiosity

that we approach today's subject matter: Unnamed Women in the Bible.

The sermon subject was suggested by a church member here.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

One small, vital detail clarification: Everyone in the Bible has a name.

Do we really believe their mamas let them out the house without one?!

Good Lord, whenever I was in trouble my mama yelled my full name,

sometimes starting with my oldest brother's name

and then working her way down the list of names until she got to mine.

Every mama's child had and has a name.

Isaiah (43:1) said that God said, *"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;*

I have called you by name, you are mine."

Everyone in the Good Book had a name; she may not have been identified;

she may have had her name forgotten over the years;

she may have had her name dropped due to careless reporting;

she may have had her story overlooked or denied by his-story.

Yet what these women did or said or witnessed is included in the Scriptures.

They have a love, a legacy, a voice, an impact, influence, a place at the Table.

The unnamed women in Holy Scriptures nonetheless had a name.

We may not know it today; plain as day it had life and breath.

Someone who loved them knew it, said it, cooed it.

The One Who Created and Creates knew their name, their story, dreams, souls.

Names matter to God because people matter, because relationships matter.

A careful study of the Hebrew and New Testaments,

from Genesis to Malachi, from Matthew to Revelation,

will turn up countless unidentified women.

Mothers

Daughters

Crowds

Multitudes

Women in Parables, in Proverbs, in Churches

Honorable and Devout Women

Grandmothers

Wives

Sisters

Widows

One day, Jesus found himself encountering a widow

whose name we do not know but you know that He did.

Jesus knew her name and her story,

for he had compassion on her.

Listen once more to the Word:

¹² As [Jesus] approached the gate of the town [of Nain],
a man who had died was being carried out.

He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow;
and with her was a large crowd from the town.

¹³ When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her
and said to her, "Do not weep."

We pause here to point out that these words, "Do not weep,"
are neither idle chit chat nor a feeble effort at consolation.

They have deeper meaning,
a meaning which Jesus' actions will soon reveal and she will soon learn.

¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the bier,
and the bearers stood still.

And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!"

¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak,
and Jesus delivered him to his mother.

Think about that imagery, that experience of grace, of new life.
"...Jesus delivered him to his mother..."

When a mother gives birth, when she brings forth new life,
the midwife hands to her the child she delivered, to hold, to nurse, to cherish.

Here in the town of Nain, at the city gate,
a widow whose only son had died too soon
was the first soul that Jesus raised from the dead to new life.

His next act of grace was, like a heavenly midwife,
to deliver the resurrected son to an amazed mother.

We may not know her name but we love her story; ergo, we love her.

We witness Jesus' compassion for her fragmented life.

We were with her in her grief and despair and loss.

Suddenly Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!"

Like her heart, our hearts skip a beat.

Like the bewildered crowd that looked on in amazement, we resonate with her joy.

Names matter.

Relationships matter.

After Jesus of Nazareth,
the greatest leader in our shared faith narrative is Moses.

The Bible in Exodus states: "*She named him Mosheh*
"because," she said, "I [mashah], I drew him out of the water."[2]

She named him Mosheh, which became transliterated Moses.

Who is she?

She is Pharaoh's daughter, an Egyptian, who has compassion on a Hebrew boy.

The Egyptian gives the Hebrew child a Hebrew name.

What was her name?

We know Moses' name.

We know the midwives' names, Shiprah and Puah.

Lost to the wind are the identities of Moses' mother, his sister,
his savior Pharaoh's daughter and her maids.

Pharaoh's daughter had much to do with shaping Israel's future
– our own salvation from slavery and oppression –
because she had compassion on the baby Moses.

You know the backstory.

In Exodus, our liberator Moses would not have lived,

and our Hebrew ancestors would have been wiped from the face of the earth
if the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah
had not defied the racist laws of the Pharaoh.

They were told to kill Hebrew boys at their birth,

yet the midwives refused, and let them live.

We can well imagine that there were some who said,

“Oh, behave! Be quiet. Do as you are told, and you will be safe.”

Clearly history has shown that Shiphrah and Puah refused to go along.

Moses’ mother and sister also defied the order to practice genocide by hiding the baby,

They set him in the reeds near where they knew Pharaoh’s daughter bathed.

She saw a baby weeping – i.e., crying without making a sound.

*What do you think it takes to teach a newborn to cry silently
lest the child be heard and found out?*

Even though Moses was raised as an elite in Pharaoh’s house,

he had compassion for the whole people of God.

One day, Moses witnessed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew.

He intervened, killed the Egyptian, then fled into the wilderness.

God saw the suffering of God’s children, so God intervened.

God called Moses to serve as God’s liberator.

Moses returned to defy and decry the law of the land that some people be enslaved

while others benefit from their back-breaking labor.

Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt and into the wilderness,

always moving, moving toward the Promised Land.

Mosheh drew them out from drowning in slavery;
he *mashah* his people, he drew them out to freedom.

Names matter.

Relationships matter.

The Apostle Paul had compassion for his people, his churches, his communities.
In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul encourages his people to tell their stories,
to preach and prophesy and proclaim the Good News
of what God has done for them.

Let's be honest here: Paul is a fine theologian but not much of a sociologist.
While doing his clunky best to encourage men and women
to pray and prophesize in public worship,
he trips over himself,
getting tangled up in head coverings and hair length.

Three chapters later, in 1 Corinthians 14,
Paul is busy teaching the newfangled value
of one person speaking at a time,
of listening and interpreting in an orderly fashion in worship.

Suddenly a strange paragraph in parenthesis appears out of nowhere.
This paragraph is not in the original transcripts of the Letter to the Corinthians,
then it appears in the 300s,
then in the 400s it disappears,
and then it appears once again and is included
in the King James Version of the Bible.

The paragraph in parenthesis reads (1 Cor. 14: 34-36):

(As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?)

How could Paul deny women an active, equal, engaging part in Christ's Church?[3]
Did he?

Are these the writings of a redeemed soul who empowered Priscilla
as well as Phoebe to proclaim God's love?
Are these the instructions of the same guy who called Lydia to preach,
who preached specifically to women on the banks of the river at Philippi,
who depended on women to help spread the Gospel
west across Europe and south into Northern Africa?

Does this sound like a man upon whom Jesus felt compassion?
On the road to Damascus, Jesus stopped Saul dead in his tracks
and said, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*"
In turn and in time Paul stopped hating and hurting.
He put aside his racist, supremacist attitudes;
he took up the mantle of building churches,
churches grounded in God's grace and redeeming love.
That is the Paul who speaks to our hurts and hopes.

Biblical scholars have devoted themselves to analyzing this passage in 1 Cor. 14,
a pericope that stands out like a sore thumb,
one that has been used as a weapon, a bludgeon
to subjugate and silence half the world's population.
Best guess by biblical scholars is that this is an interpolation,
a paragraph written in someone else's hand
in an apparent effort to stifle women named and unnamed,

women whose stories are known to God
and who deserve the right and opportunity
to speak their mind in worship,
in church classrooms,
in the Christian faith community and in the human context.

Names matter.

Relationships matter.

Love matters.

Prejudice and sexism, divisiveness and discrimination
will raise their ugly heads to suppress and subjugate.
Words with evil intent may even be dropped into sacred scriptures and liturgies.
Words to deny women their names, legacies and loving contributions
may be a part of our vernacular or our common story.
In a Bible replete with testimonies, tenets, and tales
that call out for compassion and caring,
too often the few, minor, nasty or negative passages
are pointed at and lifted up and amplified
as if these texts are all that really matters.

Hang on: here is where I quit preachin' and get to meddlin'.

Christians have repeated lies and hatred often enough, loud enough, widely enough
as if they are true and the Truth and have a modicum of veracity.
Is it any wonder the Church of Jesus Christ is confused?
Churches are confused
about whether women should "speak in church" or be ordained.
Churches are confused
about whether patriarchy is acceptable.
Churches are confused
because they feel threatened by women in places of power or authority.
And when the Church is confused, when the Church is not clear,
it is no wonder that our neighbors are added,
that the moral center of the nation and world is off its axis.

Two of the saddest things – and there were many sad things –
about last week's march of white supremacists in Charlottesville
were (A) how emboldened they feel in today's climate,
and (B) how young they are.
A church that is confused about sexism or racism
cannot and is not speaking to our young men and women
about compassion and caring,
about knowing our neighbors names
and not calling people everything but a child of God.

It is not a far leap – it's barely a baby step –
from accepting biblical errors of omission or sexism or prejudice
as normal and acceptable modes of behavior,
to saying it is okay for us to be sexist or racist or discriminatory.

It is not okay that someone added hateful words to God's word;
and it is not okay to follow such teaching as we walk off a cliff like lemmings.

These are the realities of the world in which we live.

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.^[1]

Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name,

And they're always glad you came.

Names matter.

Relationships matter.

Love matters.

You matter, because someone's daughter drew you out and liberated you.

You matter, because Jesus said, "I say to you, rise!"

You matter, because God loves you, and we do, too.

You matter, and so does the soul to your right and your left,
physically and politically and personally.

Learn the names of the unidentified people in your life
whom Jesus insists have a voice, an impact, influence, a place at the Table.

And then, and then, over and over again
express the happiest sound known to humanity:
the sound of their name out loud.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] "Where Everybody Knows Your Name" by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo

[2] [Exodus 2:10](#) Heb *Mosheh*; [Exodus 2:10](#) Heb *mashah*

[3] All of the Women of the Bible, Edith Deen. Page 375-376.

[4] "Where Everybody Knows Your Name" by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo