

Lay pastors' intensive
October 2003
FEMINIST EXEGESIS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Reading the New Testament with new eyes: “the hermeneutic of suspicion.”

Who made the confession: “You are the Christ?”

Every year the lectionary includes the story of Peter, in response to Jesus' question: “Who do you say that I am?”, responding: “You are the Christ.”

But in John's gospel, Martha says to Jesus: “Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

How many sermons have you heard preached on *that* text?

Feminist exegesis is the work of women who from about 1970 on started reading the Bible with new eyes. They began to realise that what we hear in the Biblical stories has been conditioned by the interpretation of male scholars and preachers over hundreds of years. And those scholars started with certain assumptions: that men were leaders in the early Christian community, just as men were leaders in the church they knew; that women's role was always a subsidiary, servant role, so that any women who appear among Jesus' friends and in the early church must have surely been there as helpers rather than leaders. Feminist scholars apply to their reading what is known as the hermeneutic of suspicion. That is, they hold suspect the traditional readings of the text and try to see what the writers actually said.

In the Old Testament, there are a few stories which show women as strong, feisty, even violent leaders, boldly slaying the enemy. We don't hear those stories – and maybe we women don't want to identify with their violence. But in excluding them from the tradition, we perpetuate the understanding of women as meek helpmeets.

So, let's look at a couple of texts from the New Testament.

Mark 5: a story of two women (and the symbolic significance of twelve?).

What does this passage tell you about the woman with the haemorrhage? *Read and note.*

One of the worst things about being a woman in Jesus' time was that once a month you were considered unclean. We catch glimpses of that feeling still when women talk about “the curse”. We have heard it in the church, when women were barred from serving near the altar (and therefore from becoming priests) because of this uncleanness. In Jesus' time, anyone who touched a menstruating woman became unclean too. So once a month you were meant to shut yourself away so that you didn't contaminate anyone else. And so this woman would have been unclean and meant to keep to herself for twelve years. It's no wonder she was afraid of being found in the crowd. But it's also no wonder that she took the risk of getting close to Jesus to see if she could be cured. Jesus realised that someone had drawn on his healing power and engaged the woman in conversation. By the Jewish rules she had made him unclean. But this is apparently of no concern to Jesus.

The twelve year old girl:

To touch a dead person also made you unclean. That is one reason the priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan walked by on the other side – just in case the poor man was dead and therefore made them unclean. But Jesus touched the girl, the young woman, (for you become a woman at twelve in Judaism) and restored her to life.

So these women in Mark's gospel become a symbol of the breaking down of the barriers between clean and unclean.

Chapter 7 of Mark's gospel shows us Jesus having an argument with the Pharisees over whether the disciples should wash their hands before eating. And Jesus in his teaching there breaks right through the clean/unclean divisions.

His teaching about clean/unclean is followed by a story about another woman: the Syro-Phoenician woman who comes and asks for her daughter to be healed. It is an amazing story. Jesus doesn't want to help her because she is not from the house of Israel. But she very cheekily insists: even the dogs are entitled to the crumbs from under the table. In fact, what this woman does is to make Jesus practise what he has just preached! She pushes him to consider the practical implications of what he had just been saying. If the barriers between clean and unclean have really been broken down, then *everyone* has a right to Jesus' help.

So, that's the first thing we discover: the women in Mark become a symbol of one of the most important points in Jesus' teaching: that everyone is acceptable to God. There are no barriers.

But we also see women as having a persistent faith, courageous, feisty, willing to argue with Jesus.

Now, reflect on another question: who were the three disciples closest to Jesus?

Then, notice the difference between the male and female disciples in Mark's gospel. Early in the gospel, Mark tells us that Jesus chose Twelve to be especially close to him. And of those twelve, three in particular seem to have had a special place: Peter, James and John. They were taken into the house with him when he went to heal Jairus' daughter; they shared the Transfiguration experience with him; they were there with Jesus in Gethsemane.

But repeatedly the men failed to get the message about what Jesus was trying to tell them.

Read the following passage (in pairs). What picture of the disciples do you get from this story?

Mark 4:10 – 13: After the story of the sower, Jesus asked them: "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand my other parables?"

Mark 6:47-52 After the feeding of the 5000, when Jesus came to them walking on the water, we are told, "they did not understand about the loaves."

Mark 8: 31-33 He tells them about his impending death, and Peter refuses to believe that he will die.

Mark 9:33-37; Mark 10:35-40 Jesus talks to them about humble service, and what do James and John do? – ask for the chance to sit on each side of him in the kingdom.

Mark 14:32-42 Peter, James and John fall asleep in the garden, just when he needs them most.

Mark 14:43-46 Judas betrays Jesus.

Mark 14:66-72 Peter denies him.

Mark really gives a very negative picture of the male disciples.

The women on the other hand are represented as understanding the message and remaining loyal to the end.

Mark 14:3-9 It is just before Passover, when the plot to kill Jesus is taking shape. Jesus is eating in the house of Simon the leper and a woman comes with a jar of ointment and pours it on Jesus' head. There are two important things about this story: to anoint someone's head is to anoint them as king. And the woman dares to perform this authoritative task. (It is interesting that the lectionary only includes Luke's version of this story, where the woman is said to anoint Jesus' feet). But what is more important is that the woman in Mark has understood what the men have refused to accept: that Jesus must die. And so she anoints him as though for burial. And we are told that wherever the good news is preached in the whole world, she will be remembered for what she has done.

Mark 15:40-41 The disciples seem to have fled after Jesus was captured. But the women faithfully stay with him, watching him at the hour of his death. It is the women we find at the cross. Now that is an extremely dangerous place to be. As friends of this convicted criminal they could have been arrested and punished. Yet they refuse to desert him. ON each side of the passion story in Mark we find women who are symbols of fidelity and understanding.

Just as we were told there was an inner group of three men, (all of whom misunderstood and deserted Jesus), now we are left with an inner group of three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses (now that may have been the mother of Jesus, since in ch 6 James and Joses are named as the brothers of Jesus), and Salome. They were present at the cross. They were first at the empty tomb. And they were the first to know of the resurrection.

True, they fled from the tomb in fear and amazement and we are told they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. But the Bible makes it quite clear that to meet with the mystery of God is an awesome, frightening experience. We have lost some of that sense of awe. But it is understandable that the women should be afraid. Yet obviously they eventually shared the good news, or there would have been no gospel.

So, we see the women as the breakers-down of barriers, and the symbol of faithfulness and intelligent understanding.

And finally, they are the symbols of servant leadership. The second half of Mark's gospel is concerned with Jesus trying to help the disciples understand that his is the way of suffering; the way of denying self to serve others; that greatness comes, not in lording it over others, but by serving. The male disciples cannot grasp that. Peter is horrified that Jesus' way might lead to death: don't say such a thing! James and John still ask for the best places.

But the women are able to serve him by anointing him. They are able to follow all the way to the cross. To remain with him in suffering.

That gives us some interesting questions to think about. What are the implications of this for women's ministry?

Women through the centuries have really been *made* to take the serving role. That is quite different, I think, from recognising that we stand as equals among Jesus' followers; that we really are included among the disciples; and then *choosing*, because of our understanding of Jesus' message, to exercise our leadership and our ministry in a different style from that traditionally used by men. Jesus frees us from the traditions. We don't *have* to do the traditional women's things because tradition says that's where we belong. But we may then *choose* to accept the way of service because that is what Jesus showed us the world needs. And that makes an important difference, because we are not limited to doing what tradition expected of us. We can look for where the family or church or community needs our particular gifts and we can offer them freely in response to Jesus' call to give our lives for others.

So, women may not be mentioned all that often in Mark's gospel. But they have a very significant place in showing what the gospel is all about.

You might like to go home and read Mark with new eyes!

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(slightly edited by Rohan Pryor, July 2015)