

Jesus Transforms Cultural Norms: Luke 10:38-42

This is a sermon I first preached in June of 2013. I told the congregation then that in over 10 years of preaching, I had never preached a sermon specifically on the topic of women. I had not felt a particular need to do so, especially since we are all one in Christ. Nevertheless, the Lord clearly put this passage, as well as the direction it took, on my mind and heart.

After the service was over, a gentleman who is a man of few words, made a specific point of saying to me twice: “I hope this is not the last time you preach this sermon. This is a message that is needed.” And another gentleman said “this is a message that needs to be heard.” So I took it as the Spirit’s prompting, and once again I am preaching on that same passage today.

So, first of all, I’d like to be clear. Scripture does not promote any kind of wild-eyed, unbalanced feminism that seeks the good of women at the expense of men. Yet at the same time we cannot overlook the dignity and transformation Christ brought about in the lives of women. So with that introduction, let’s begin.

Malala Yousafzia was a student in the SWAT valley of Pakistan where the Taliban had often banned girls from attending school. Her father, a school owner and educational activist, had supported and encouraged her education, thus defying a deeply held belief by many in the area that girls were the property of men -- destined to stay home, forgo school, and marry young.

At the age of 11, Malala began writing a blog under a pseudonym for the BBC, detailing her life under Taliban rule and her views promoting education for girls. Soon a New York Times documentary was filmed about her life. She rose in prominence as she continued to promote girls rights. On October 9th, 2012, Yousafzai was shot in the head and neck by Taliban gunmen in an attempt to stop her from speaking out. She was unconscious and in critical condition, but later improved enough to be moved to a hospital in Britain for intensive rehabilitation. She later returned to school in England and last fall, she became the youngest recipient in history of the Nobel Peace Prize.

This story reminds us that throughout history and to this day, women have suffered from oppression. Oppression is “the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner.”¹ Unfortunately, history demonstrates that this has most often come at the hands of men. Of course not all men have oppressed women. Nevertheless, historically in most cultures, women have had a lesser place than men.

Cultural preferences for boys over girls is still deeply rooted, particularly in India and China. It is said that by the year 2020 “more than 24 million Chinese men of marrying age could find themselves without spouses.”² In Canada, it was less than 100 years ago that women were fighting for the right to be defined as persons under the law; and it was only in 1960 that all women of every ethnicity had the right to vote.

When it comes to the time of Jesus and our Scripture passage, Greek women were seen as inferior to men and were controlled by men. Their social status was similar to that of slaves.

¹ dictionary.com

² <http://news.discovery.com/human/life/china-birth-rate-single-men.htm>

Wives were required to retire to women's quarters rather than eat or interact with male guests. Respectable Greek women could only leave the house with a trustworthy male escort. They were not to speak in public and were not deemed worthy of education.

When it came to the Romans, wives along with their children, were completely under the control of their husbands. Husbands owned their wives. Roman women were not speak in public and were not deemed worthy of education.

Finally, when it came to Jewish women, first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that a woman is "in all things inferior to the man." One of the regular prayers of Jewish men was "Blessed are you, King of the Universe, for not having made me... a Gentile, a slave, or a woman." Jewish wisdom literature said that "he that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna [hell]."

Women were regarded as private property. They were to be seen in public as little as possible and (just think about this when you consider Christ's interactions with women), it was considered shameful for a Jewish man to speak to a woman in public. Synagogue worship was segregated, and there was a separate temple court for women. Jewish women were barred from public speaking and could not receive an education. So it is with this background in mind that we come to the story of Jesus, Martha and Mary.

"Now while they were on their way, it occurred that Jesus entered a certain village, and a woman named Martha received *and* welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister named Mary, who seated herself at the Lord's feet and was listening to His teaching. But Martha, *overly occupied and too busy*, was distracted with much serving; and she came up to Him and said, Lord, is it nothing to You that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me... *to lend a hand and do her part along with me!* But the Lord replied to her by saying, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; there is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42 AMP & NLT).

There is much richness in this passage which we can all too easily take for granted. The importance of gracious hospitality, the place and importance of friendship, and of course a Spirit guided balance to be found between serving Christ and taking time to intentionally listen to Him. However today our focus will be on an often overlooked part of this story where Jesus, as He so often does, transforms cultural norms.

First, we need to understand something about rabbis. Jesus was often addressed as rabbi or teacher. When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, he said: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God..." (John 3:1). It was not a term Jesus actively encouraged yet it was second only to "Lord" as the most common title for Him in the gospels. Ray Vanderlaan gives further insight to the role of rabbis.³

Gifted male students would approach a rabbi and ask if they could follow him. In other words asking "do I have what it takes to be like you?" (And Jesus broke this particular religious and cultural pattern by choosing His own disciples.) Disciples trusted their rabbi and followed

³ followtherabbi.com

him everywhere, watching His every move. Their deepest desire was to follow Him so closely that they would start to think and act like him.

And as we come to our story, we find Jesus the Rabbi, likely with several of His male disciples, in the home of Martha and Mary. A Rabbi would often sit on a raised pillow or chair as His disciples sat around Him at His feet to listen and learn (and this is likely where we get the saying “I learned at the feet of the master.”)

Women were not to be found while men were busy talking. They would be in their own quarters, or cooking, and that’s where we find Martha. Martha has offered Jesus hospitality and she is in the food prep area where it is right and proper for her to be. But where do we find Mary? Before we answer, let’s pause to consider again the heavy weight of untold years of culture, tradition and practice that shouted: What you think does not matter. You cannot speak with men. You cannot speak in public. You cannot be educated. Your place is in the kitchen.

So where do we find Mary? Sitting at the feet of Jesus. Jesus had welcomed and accepted Mary completely, saying in essence “yes, Mary, you too have what it takes to be like Me.” He sets Mary free to do what only men would, could or should do: sit as a disciple at the feet of the Rabbi Jesus.

In teaching Mary, Jesus violated centuries of tradition and rabbinic law, summarized by Rabbi Eliezer: “Let the words of the Law [Torah] be burned rather than taught to women. . . . If a man teaches his daughter the law, it is as though he taught her lewdness.” So we can begin to see how radical an act this was in a world where women had no rights, were seen as the property of men, were not to speak to men outside their family and were certainly not to be educated by Rabbis.

What an amazing thing Jesus did by inviting Mary to cross that line as He transformed a clear cultural norm. He gave great dignity and worth to women. What trust Mary had in Christ to cross such a clear cultural boundary. This was a profound cultural shift, not only for women, but for men too! Nothing to hold back their mothers, sisters, daughters...

So what impact did Jesus’ treatment and elevation of women have? It is said that the explosive growth of Christianity in the first centuries was due in large measure to the fact that Christian men treated the women in their lives differently. If a disease was going through a community, most men would leave their families behind until the disease had run its course. Christian men stayed. They were committed to their wives and to their families. Men were transformed and women were transformed.

Many centuries later in 1669, Susannah Wesley was born. Uncharacteristically for the time, her father, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Annesley, taught Susannah to read and to think for herself. When she married the Reverend Samuel Wesley, Susannah was fiercely determined to raise children who would honour God. They were taught to pray as soon as they could speak and took part in regular family worship. Susannah set aside an hour every week for each of her 10 children. She would ask about the state of their souls, their progress, fears, expectations, and goals in other areas of life. She home-schooled all the children, in Latin, Greek and classical studies, including the girls.

Due to the very narrowly focused preaching of a supply pastor while her husband was away, Susanna assembled her children on Sunday afternoons for family services. This included reading one of her husband's or father's sermons. Before long, over two hundred local people were attending, while the Sunday morning service dwindled to nearly nothing. Their mother's godly example and ability to think for herself had a deep impact on the lives of her 10 children including John Wesley. It is rightly said that Susannah is the mother of Methodism.

Though it took some time, Christ soon used Wesley to transform cultural norms as Wesley came to support women in ministry in the 1700's. They lead classes, taught and preached. When he was asked why he encouraged certain females in preaching, he answered, "Because God owns them in the conversion of sinners, and who am I that I should withstand God?" In 1787, he formally gave the following authorization: 'We give the right hand of fellowship to Sarah Mallet and have no objection to her being a preacher in our connection so long as she preaches the Methodist doctrines and attends to our discipline.' Unfortunately, not all Methodists agreed, and forty-four years after John Wesley's death, the main Methodist conference prohibited women from preaching.

Nevertheless many women ignored this and kept doing what God was calling them to do. This included U.S. Methodist Phoebe Palmer born in 1807. She spoke to mixed groups of men and women (including bishops, and ministers of other denominations). She is called the mother of the Holiness Movement and at her instigation, missions began, camp meetings evangelized, and an estimated 25,000 Americans came to faith.⁴

So, is the dignity, education and treatment of women still an important topic today? Let me quote from a Washington Post article (Aug 13th, 2013): "Let's begin with a working (and provable) premise: Women, if allowed to be fully equal to men, will bring peace to the planet. This is not so far-fetched a notion. One, men have been at it for thousands of years, resulting in millions and millions of corpses. Two, countries where women are most oppressed and abused are also the least stable. Three, as women become more empowered, especially financially, countries become more stable. When women have money, they can feed their families, get health care, educate their children, start businesses and so on. The ripple effect is stronger families, stronger communities and ultimately saner nations."⁵

So if both men and women benefit, how can we encourage the women in our lives, whether mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, wives, daughters, granddaughters, nieces, friends, neighbours or others? In Christ's name let us call forth and encourage the gifts and calling we see in them.

Let me switch gears for a moment, as I tell you the story of a man through whom Christ is transforming a cultural norm. My friend comes from a country in Africa where men did not do childcare, cooking or cleaning. He told me the story of someone else from Africa with a Ph.D that was not recognized here. This man would not work though his wife found a job. Yet when she came home, even the children's diapers were not changed because "my mother in Africa would turn over in her grave." They and others in similar situations, ended up being divorced. Well, God lead my friend to Canada where he acquired two master's degrees. He heads his own

⁴ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/moversandshakers/palmer.html>

⁵ Kathleen Parker http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kathleen-parker-hillary-clinton-power-in-2016/2013/08/13/60c59640-044c-11e3-a07f-49ddc7417125_story.html?hpid=z2

ministry, is an elder at his church and preaches regularly at various churches and conferences. He is also a husband and father whom Christ has called to transform a cultural norm.

In complete contrast to the African culture he grew up in, he has been a stay at home dad, caring for their growing family, while his wife works. During the week, he has taken care of their 5 children, cooked meals, changed diapers and looked after the home. Like Mary, he too crossed a cultural boundary, and my respect for him as a Christian and as a man, is boundless.

Brothers and sisters, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” Is there a cultural norm in our lives, our family, our church or our community that Christ wants to transform in and through us? Is there a boundary that Christ is inviting us to cross today? Is there someone we know who is shackled by cultural norms that are holding them back? Can we pray for them, encourage them, come alongside them in Jesus’ name? Or might you be someone who needs the freedom that Christ gave to Mary?

Let me close with these excerpts from a talk Frank Viola gave in 2002, in a somewhat “macho” country in South America.⁶ Hopefully it will be an encouragement to all of us to help the women in our lives to see themselves through Christ’s eyes:

“In Jesus Christ we find God’s view of a woman. Not man’s view. Not the American view. Not the European view. Not the Asian view. Not the African view. Not the South American view... But God’s view! By His actions and His words, we discover God’s view of a woman. And that view was utterly contrary to the prevailing view of His day. Consider this. When God decided to make His entrance upon this planet, He visited a woman! The life of God, brothers and sisters, was first placed in the womb of a woman before it got to you and me. Before the life of God came into any man, it was first placed inside of a woman. And God was not ashamed!

Sisters, this is your Lord’s view of a woman. Take your high place.

But that is not all. As Jesus ministered, He ripped down all social conventions that were pitted against women. On one occasion, He rose to the defense of a woman caught in adultery. He became her attorney and saved her life. And God was not ashamed.

Jesus was noted for palling around with sinners. He supped with prostitutes and tax collectors. We are told in John Chapter 4 that He met a woman, and He did something that shocked the disciples. *He talked to her in public!* And He was not ashamed.

Not only was she a woman, but she was a divorcee. But not only was she a divorcee, she was an adulteress actively living in adultery. But not only was she a woman, a divorcee, an adulteress living in adultery, she was worse than a Gentile. She was a Samaritan—a half-breed. A Samaritan was a person with whom Jews were never to talk. But your Lord talked to this divorced, adulterous Samaritan woman in public, and He forgave her of her sins. And He was not ashamed. Sisters, take your high place. This is God’s view of a woman.

But that is not all. Jesus Christ had a custom of using women in His parables and making them heroes. He talked about the woman who searched and found her lost coin.... He spoke of the widow who dropped all the money she had into the temple treasury and praised her for doing so. And He was not ashamed.

Sisters, take your high place. This is God’s view of a woman.

⁶ <http://frankviola.org/2012/01/30/godsviewofawoman/>

Once Jesus was dining with a self-righteous Pharisee. And in walked a woman. But this was not just any woman. She was a woman of the streets—a prostitute. Upon seeing the Lord, she dropped down to her knees and did something unsettling. In the presence of Pharisees, this woman unbound her hair and poured costly perfume upon the feet of our Lord. This unclean woman touched Jesus Christ! In public! She wept, washed His feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair. This scandalous and improper act mortified the self-righteous Pharisees. At that moment, these religious leaders lost all respect for Jesus and doubted that He was a true prophet. But your Lord was not ashamed.

Sisters, take your high place. This is God’s view of a woman...

When Luke writes his Gospel, he refers to the twelve disciples with the shorthand phrase *the Twelve*... But Jesus also had a group of female disciples. Luke also used a shorthand phrase to refer to them. He simply calls them *the Women*. They were the Lord’s disciples also—the female counterpart to the Twelve. The Women followed the Lord wherever He went, and they tended to His needs. And He was not ashamed.

Sisters, take your high place. This is God’s view of a woman.

But there is more. The greatest disciples of Jesus Christ were not the Twelve. They were the Women. The reason? Because they were more faithful.

When Jesus Christ was taken to die, the Twelve fled. They checked out. They said, "See ya!" But the Women stayed with Him. They did not leave. They followed Him up to Calvary to do what they had been doing all along—comforting Him, taking care of Him, tending to His needs.

And they watched Him undergo a bloody, gory crucifixion that lasted six long hours. To watch a man die the most hideous and horrible death is something that goes against every fiber that lives inside of a woman. Yet they would not leave Him. They stayed the entire time. And He was not ashamed. Sisters, take your high place. This is God’s view of a woman...

And when He rose again from the dead, the first faces He met—the first eyes that were laid upon Him—were the eyes of women. It was to them that He gave the privilege of announcing His resurrection. And He was not ashamed.

Sisters, take your high place. This is God’s view of a woman.”

Brothers and sisters, we are all the beneficiaries of what Christ did for women. As men and women, we can work side by side, free to use our gifts and follow His leading, both as individuals and as a church. And whether we are male or female, young or old, for freedom Christ has set us free. For His sake, and for the sake of the world He loves, let not any of us hold back in our gifts and calling. Like Mary, let us sit at the feet of our Rabbi and Master Jesus in wholehearted love, devotion and commitment and hear Him whisper “come follow me, because by my Spirit, you have what it takes to be like me.”

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 LUKE 10:38-42
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