

It would not be unusual for a rabbi to have students (disciples) with him as he traveled around the countryside but to have women included in the group would be unthinkable in Jewish culture. Even having a conversation with a woman would be frowned on and would raise eyebrows in the community. And yet, the Gospel writers do not shy away from the fact that Jesus not only had encounters with women but actually record women who were with Jesus. They even go so far as naming some of them! These women and Jesus were willing to go against the accepted cultural norm of the day. Who are these women?

We begin first with the story of a woman who finds forgiveness and restoration at a dinner party given by one of the Pharisees. Here in this scenario an unidentified woman breaks all cultural norms and touches Jesus.

Do you remember the story of the women at the well (John 4)? She comes to the well at noon time in order to avoid contact with the other women of the community who would come to the well early in the morning or in the evening (coolest times of the day). Her reputation is not the best in the community and it is always best to avoid confrontation.

This unnamed woman in Luke's Gospel is in the same situation. She should not have been at this dinner party. Even though the community would often gather around and watch and listen to the activities she would not be an acceptable presence in the crowd. She is a woman of questionable character. Everyone in town knows her reputation. Simon, the host, comments that even Jesus should have known the character of this woman and he should have sent her away. This is not the type of individual a rabbi would associate with.

We are often known by the associations we keep. How many times have we warned children or others about the reputation of the people they are keeping company with? We want their reputation not to be destroyed by the reputation of another.

The woman comes to Jesus looking for the restoration and forgiveness the Psalmist in the 32nd Psalm speaks about. She sees hope in Jesus that she has not seen in others. Jesus sees her as a human and one filled with all the potential of God. One in need of forgiveness and restoration to community. There is for her a chance at a better tomorrow. But, she is caught in a trap, her reputation. It is a trap she cannot get out of because everyone in the community knows her and her activities.

Remember our sons looking for work as teens. Almost every place they tried was looking for someone with experience. They both bemoaned, "How can we get experience if no one will hire us?" They were caught in a trap. Jesus offers to this woman a second chance. He offers reconciliation, forgiveness and hope for a new start, a new life. An escape from the trap she is in.

Luke then moves on to these other women. These are not women who have a brief, chance encounter with Jesus. These are women who have traveled with him and the disciples. Although they are named here in Luke's Gospel and others we know very little about them. Some have tried to build a history of their lives but it is speculation at best.

Luke begins with Mary of Magdala or Magdalene. He tells us that she is one who Jesus cured of seven demons. We have no idea of the demons; it is an indication that she was very ill. She would have been, like the women in the story, ostracized from the community. She too was living without hope before Jesus entered her life. Now restored, she has devoted herself to the care of Jesus and the disciples. She is one of the women present at the cross (Mark 15:20). She is also present at the tomb for the burial and resurrection (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:55-24:12). The disciples have all deserted Jesus but the women stay. She is one of the first people (if not the first) to see Jesus after the resurrection. Jesus even speaks her name (John 20:11).

Joanna, the wife of a steward in Herod's household is mentioned next. She is a woman of rank and privilege. Today, we might say she was a member of society. She is also mentioned as being present at the tomb and resurrection (Luke 24:10).

And then there is Susanna. At least we know her name!

Luke says that these and other women "*provided with Jesus out of their resources.*" These were women of some means. They had expendable income of their own. They did more than just hang around. They provided for the needs of the disciples and Jesus. I am sure there must have been "rumors" but this does not seem to bother Jesus or the Gospel writers. These women helped keep the ministry going. I am not sure if we realize the impact of these images that Luke and the other Gospel writers give us. This was revolutionary!

When you think about it, isn't it women who have kept the church/ministry going over the centuries? Bessie became a deacon in the 1930's because there were no men in the congregation. She did not think she should be one, but what else could she do if the congregation was going to survive. She and a handful of faithful women saw that the pastor's salary was paid, the sick were visited and the communion shared. Because of her and these women the congregation exists today.

I thought of another woman who would spend a part of each day walking up and down the highway collecting cans and bottles for recycling (each had a deposit for refund). She did not need to collect them. She was well provided for. But, her husband refused to give her any money for the Church. He would "let" her go whenever she wanted (which was whenever the doors were open) but none of his money would support the church. Thus, her bottle and can money was given. This was her way to do more than be a presence.

And Luke goes on, there we other women who are not named. Women who made an impact of Jesus' ministry. Women who were willing to break the cultural norms of their day and be with Jesus and the disciples. In a world where women were "commodities" these are remarkable women mentioned in these passages. Jesus saw women (and others) as persons, people loved by God and people God is able to use to advance the Kingdom. They were recognized, healed, restored, forgiven and some may have been leaders in the early church. These are remarkable stories. Stories that still need to be told from generation to generation.

As I was reading through the verses concerning these women and others, I came across one that I have read and reread but the impact of it never really hit me. It speaks of the love of these women for Jesus and their presence in both his life and his death. Joseph of Arimathea has received permission from Pilate to bury the body of Jesus. He has used his own newly hewn tomb for the burial chamber. As he rolls the stone to close the tomb Matthew states, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb" (Matthew 27:61).

Who are these women?

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989