

Mother's Day – 2013

There has been a great conspiracy of silence in holy mother church to keep the voices of women away from the people of God. According to clerical men throughout the ages, the only voice both men and women needed to hear was the voice of one who said, "Be it done to me according to your Word." Obedience and humility and meekness were dished out to us as our portion in church life. Just this week, Pope Francis told sisters who have worked in the vineyard not to behave as "old maids," whatever that means. Disrespect towards women flows from the highest level in the Roman Catholic Church.

Male prelates have always chosen which stories we were to hear. Thus the stories which dealt with women were rarely, if ever, chosen to be read during mass. And since Catholics were forbidden to read scripture until the 1940's because, according to my grandmother, "They might get the wrong idea," the vast majority of Catholics never heard the story of Miriam, the prophet sister of Moses, of Huldah, who interpreted the scrolls found in the temple during the reign of King Josiah. They never knew that there was a deacon named Phoebe or an apostle name Junia. They never knew that Prisca had a house church of which she was the head or that Paul listed the names of women who had active roles in the church, names which we read today in honor of Mother's Day. Most of us didn't know because the powers didn't want us to know. Because if we did know about Huldah and Phoebe, and Prisca, we most certainly would have gotten the "wrong" idea.

The stories of these women were not only suppressed, they were also explained away or trivialized. I can't tell you how many homilies I heard over the course of the years about the alleged sisterly spat between Mary and Martha- preached by men, no less. There was never a mention that Mary's sitting at the feet of Jesus indicated that she was his student.

In the gospel of John which we read today, Martha acknowledges Jesus as the savior who has come into the world, using almost the same exact words of Peter who was awarded the keys to the kingdom of heaven. For that most important acknowledgement, Martha got.....nothing.

And of course, we were not given the name of the woman who recognized Jesus as the messiah by publicly anointing him even though Jesus directed that generations who followed should honor her. The evangelists sort of forgot to write down her name.

The powers in the institution would have you believe that women had nothing to do with Jesus except tending to his needs because that's how the powers in the institution use women. The old pope and the new pope have a little gaggle of nuns who cook and clean for them, as if they can't wash their own clothes. Nothing infantilizes men than having women care for their every need.

In reality, we know that the women traveled with Jesus and were addressed as disciples. In the gospel of Luke, the angel at the tomb reminds the women that Jesus had told them that he was going to die and rise from the dead. The women remembered those words and went to tell the rest of the disciples. If you look back at chapter nine in Luke, it begins by saying that Jesus was praying alone with the disciples. The women were there and were regarded as disciples as much as the guys are.

If they were, indeed, the disciples of Jesus, they were present at the Last Supper. It's not as if they cooked the meal and were asked to leave. It was the Passover meal, a family feast. The women would have been present and prayed the Seder prayers they were entitled to pray according to Jewish liturgical practices.

They obviously followed Jesus to the site of his execution and knew where he was buried because they returned on Easter Sunday. The apostles, as you know, all ran away.

But there's more. After the ascension, all of the Jesus' followers returned to Jerusalem. Luke lists them. He names eleven men and mentions some of Jesus' brothers who are neither named nor numbered. Then Luke says there were women and mentions Mary the mother of Jesus. There were 120 total. One of my seminary professors used this verse to say that there might have been fifteen men or so among the original followers of Jesus and the rest were women! Check it out!

Mother's Day is a special day when we honor our mothers and those who acted as mothers towards us. It should also be a day when women in the church reclaim their role as disciples, every bit as equal to the men. This weekend, our sisters and brothers in the institutional church will be reading about the value of male circumcision for those intending to be Christian when in reality, the new covenant was first entered into by God with a young woman named Mary when God asked her to be the mother of Jesus.

They will be reading about the New Jerusalem with twelve rivers in honor of the twelve apostles, most of whom we never hear of again after the first couple of chapters in Acts. Paul's letters, the earliest writings in scripture, written decades before the first gospel, list a whole new cast of characters who were involved in the early days of Christianity, many of them as we read, were women. Who are these women? Why didn't scholars try to find out? What did they do? Why have they been consigned to anonymity? What might it be like to learn of the name and fate of the woman who anointed Jesus? Why don't we change things so we do hear more about women in the early days of Christianity? Why do we settle for men who call our sisters in Christ, "Old maids?"

We won't be able to answer these questions any time soon. But we need to ask them loud and clear, especially when men at the highest level of religious leadership patronize their sisters and make disparaging comments about them. When we observe how women are treated in the world, we know that these men who claim to speak for God should be doing a better job. As I said, the disrespect towards women flows from the very top.

We know that our foremothers in faith followed Jesus in all faithfulness until the very end. And so, Mary and Martha of Bethany and Mary Magdalene and the other women Paul named are, at the very least, as important as are Peter, James, and John, whom Paul accuses of dividing the Body of Christ.

But we're really not here to make comparisons. We are here because we are also faithful disciples of Christ, made in the image and likeness of God who does not play favorites or lift up on subset of people over another.

We are here because we know that the kingdom of God will never arrive if all of God's children are not regarded as being equal in the sight of the that loving God. And we know that the current vision of what seems to suffice as the kingdom of God doesn't work for half of the people of God.

As long as men – celibate men, no less- think they can define motherhood and womanhood, reproductive policies and marriage and child rearing –without the input of those affected by those policies- there will be no justice in the world. As long as our stories are not proclaimed as the gospel in the church were the faithful gather on Sunday, women will remain second class citizens in the church and by extension, in the world.

We must no longer allow anyone to define us. We must no longer give people more time to arrive at the conclusion that women are equal in the sight of God. The time is now and the place is anywhere where injustice exists. To do any less is to tinker with the kingdom. And our God is not a tinkerer.

Eileen M.DiFranco, RCWP
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