

## NAMELESS BUT NOT POWERLESS

As some of you may know, I teach a women's Bible study called Women of the Word. Lately we have been studying some biblical women who have often been eclipsed by their more prominent male counterparts. We've been discovering some interesting facts. First, most biblical women are nameless. Of the 805 women who appear in the Bible, including the Apocrypha, only 205 women have names. So there are 600 biblical women whose history and heritage remain a mystery. **However – and this is important - being nameless doesn't mean being powerless.** This morning I want to focus on 3 nameless - yet powerful - women in Mark's gospel. Their actions can be viewed as submissive, courageous, grateful, desperate, risky, rude, and - last but not least - faithful. Because they are nameless, each character invites us to stand in her shoes. In other words, because these women have no name, they could wear your name, or the name of someone you know whose faith is an inspiration.

### **I. Simon Peter's Mother-in-Law - Mark 1:30-31**

The first woman mentioned in the whole New Testament is Simon Peter's mother-in-law, who is ill with a fever. Because she is living with her son-in-law, she is likely a widow. Her story is told in 2 brief verses.

*Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

This woman's response to the healing presence of Christ is to serve him and others. Her actions are immediate, proving that she is able-bodied and has in fact been healed – but also likely indicating that her gratitude was heart-felt. This healing miracle is often interpreted as a universal paradigm of discipleship. In other words, we should all be like Peter's mother-in-law. When Christ comes into our lives, our grateful response should be service to Christ and others.

While there is nothing wrong with this interpretation, it ignores another way to understand this woman's service. What is not evident in our English translations is that the Greek word for "to serve" (*diakon-EE-o*) – from which we get the word "deacon" – can mean to serve, not just in a general sense, but as an intentional act of faith in Christ. In other words, this woman's service may identify her as a disciple of Jesus – as being part of the burgeoning Jesus movement. Was Peter's mother-in-law in fact Jesus' first female disciple, or is her service merely to be understood as an act of middle-Eastern hospitality? Both views are possible. For now, I want you to think of a person in your own experience whose loving response to Christ is to serve him by serving others. Remember that name.

## **II. The Woman with the 12 Year Hemorrhage – Mark 5:25-34**

*Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. <sup>26</sup> She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup> She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”*

*And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” <sup>32</sup> He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup> He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”*

The sick woman is identified by neither name nor family ties, so she may also be a widow. At some point she must have been a woman of means, since we learn that she has spent all her resources seeking a cure. Note how this woman is described:

- bleeding (which according to Jewish law makes her religiously unclean),
- powerless socially (because she is female and attached to no man)
- powerless financially (since she is penniless), and
- in danger of dying (since her medical condition was getting worse).

Needless to say, these are dire circumstances. Yet this woman takes charge of her own situation, and unlike the previous healing where Jesus comes to Peter’s mother-in-law in the privacy of her home, this woman takes the initiative and goes out to Jesus in a public setting – in front of God and everybody! Acting on her belief that Jesus is her only remaining source of healing and hope, she touches the hem of Jesus’ garment and is healed immediately. Then her joy is mixed with

terror, when Jesus senses that in some way power has left him. He stops and asks who has touched him – who is responsible for his weakened state?

Now the spotlight is on this woman. Will she run, remain silent, or take responsibility for her actions? Though she had everything to lose, the text says that *“she fell down before Jesus in fear and trembling, and told him the whole truth.”* This once sick and marginalized woman becomes bold and courageous. She gives public witness to her faith in Jesus as healer, and he rewards her by saying, *‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’*

This nameless woman is a powerful model of faith put into action; of faith that pays no attention to obstacles; of a faith that is completely confident in the power of Christ. Think now of a person whose faith is unswerving; who will not allow life’s limitations to have the last word. Remember that name.

### **III. The Syrophenician Woman – Mark 7:24-30**

*Jesus entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.* <sup>26</sup> *Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.* <sup>27</sup> *He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”* <sup>28</sup> *But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”* <sup>29</sup> *Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”* <sup>30</sup> *So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

The account of the Syrophenician woman is remarkable in every way. The story opens with Jesus seeking a moment of solitude from the crowds by entering a house. Desperate to get help for her daughter who had an unclean spirit, the Syrophenician mother enters the house where Jesus is. This is shocking. This woman is not an invited guest – she is an intruder – an unwelcome interruption - and to make matters worse, she is both female and Gentile. Talk about a pushy woman...but she was desperate. She begs Jesus to cast out her daughter's demon. And here is where it gets a little ugly. Jesus says to her, *'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'* Ouch. There is not much way to soften these words of Jesus, though some commentators point out that the Greek word translated here as "dog" actually means "puppy." Just who is Jesus calling a "puppy" at best and a "dog" at worst? Unfortunately in the first century, Jews sometimes referred to non-Jews as dogs. Paraphrased, Jesus is saying, "If I am going to use my healing power, I am not going to use it for Gentiles, but for Jews – for the children of Israel."

Without missing a beat, this gutsy woman snaps back a shrewd response that reminds Jesus that his God-given power is for the benefit of all God's children in need – both Jew and Gentile. Turning Jesus' dog imagery back on him, she says, *'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'* Her words hit the bullseye. One commentator notes that this woman not only gets Jesus to talk to

her, she gets Jesus to *listen* to her. Ironically it is this woman - not the Jewish religious authorities or even one of Jesus' own disciples – but this Gentile woman who recognizes Jesus for who he is: namely, the Savior who is not only sent to Israel but to the whole world. Jesus rewards this woman's insight and persistence by instantly healing her daughter. It's the only long-distance healing in Mark's gospel.

The Syrophenician woman is an inspiration in many ways. She asks for the healing power of God, and then argues when the answer seems to be no. She is intrusive, insistent, challenging, stubborn, desperate, and determined. Thank God for her example. Now think of someone you know whose faith won't take no for an answer – and remember that name.

I don't know about you, but when I think of the Christ-like people in my own life, none of them have names that any of you would recognize. The people who have been most instrumental and inspirational in building my faith are folks that others might call the "little people" - don't you just love that dismissive description! ***Well, here is God's truth: there ARE no "little people" in the Kingdom of God. God has not yet created anyone that God does not intend to use.*** Whether we are talking about nameless widows in the gospel of Mark or your football coach in high school, God's power can shine through anyone in ways that

can build up our faith. Among my personal spiritual heroes are a housekeeper, a steel worker, my grandmother, and a Sunday school teacher. How about you?

In closing I want to challenge you to honor your own spiritual (s)heroes. I asked you to identify people whose faithfulness reminded you of the 3 nameless women in Mark's gospel:

- the mother-in-law whose faith/gratitude led her to serve Christ and others
- the woman with the hemorrhage, who despite all obstacles boldly acted on her faith in ways that brought healing and wholeness
- the desperate mother who would not take no for an answer, who trusted in God's healing power for all people not just for some

Think back on the people you identified who remind you of these 3. Pick at least one. The challenge this week is to reach out and let this person know how much their faith has shaped and enriched your own. What a blessing that will be. Let's spread the love. Amen and amen.