

A meditation for baptism and commissioning delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 22, November 13, 2011, dedicated to Elizabeth Janette Hamilton on her baptismal day and to Jacqueline Stith Dean on her day of commissioning, and always to the glory of God!

“Taken Where You Would Rather Not Go”

I Thessalonians 5:1-11; John 21:9-19

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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For a long time I have believed that men and women approach spiritual matters very differently. It seems obvious, doesn't it? Besides that the fact that "men are from Mars and women are from Venus," as author John Gray suggests, we interact with one another and the divine center of the universe in vastly different ways.

Before Gray's best-selling admonition on the gender/relationship difference, Ma Joad, from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) was always one of my favorite truth-tellers on the topic. In the final scene of John Ford's 1940 movie of the book, Ma makes this observation from the crowded cab of the family's broken down truck. Speaking to her husband she observes:

Well, Pa, a woman can change better than a man. A man lives sort of, well, in jerks. Baby's born or somebody dies and that's a

jerk. He gets a farm or loses it and that's a jerk. With a woman, it's all in one flow like a stream, little eddies and waterfalls. But the river, it goes right on. Women just look at it that way. Women are like a river. They just keep flowing along.

Finding women's spiritual perspectives is often difficult in our Judaeo-Christian tradition because only two out of 66 books of scripture bear the names of women and stories within the other 64 books are often hard to discover and difficult to uncover. In Ruth and Esther, we are treated to the flow of spirituality for women.

Ruth is a Moabite widow of a Jewish man. She is a hard working peasant who lives in a peaceable village. While the world around rages in violence, Ruth slowly and surely keeps her head and heart focused on God. After the loss of her first husband, Ruth takes to highways and along with her mother-in-law Naomi, she ventures through foreign lands to Naomi's homeland, where she eventually meets and marries Boaz. Together, they keep alive the promise of Abraham and Sarah as they conceive, birth and raise their son Obed. Obed becomes the hope of Judaism as he fathers Jesse, who gives us Jacob; and Jacob, David; and David, Solomon. So this line of Obed continues right up to the time and the birth of Jesus.

Ruth is faithful to God when all the "people of God" around her have lost their way. Ruth's is an "*earthy spirituality*" - one that deals with an ordinary person coping with and overcoming the challenges of everyday life. Life is messy, making spirituality messy, too. But with her simple acts of kindness, her heart given to God in everyday living and praying, Ruth moves through the mess into ministry. God is everywhere present in the person and life of Ruth.

Esther is a completely different story. As the (Jewish) queen of Persia, Esther finds herself caught in the vortex of history. The Jews are being set up for extermination by an evil man named Haman. Haman is "the power behind the throne" of King Ahasuerus. Haman is trying to establish laws to ensure the Jews

are wiped out. Like an early day Hitler, Haman is attempting Jewish annihilation. Esther is challenged by her uncle Mordecai to turn things around. He comes to her by night and says, "You have been placed here for such a time as this." She meets the challenge and rises to become the powerful woman her people need her to be. Through her creative and sometimes wily ways, Esther saves the Jews from ultimate destruction. In the end, it is Haman who ends up hanging on the gallows he constructed for the Jews.

Whereas God is everywhere present in Ruth, God is **never** mentioned in the Book of Esther. God speaks to no one. No one speaks to God. God does not intervene on behalf of the Jewish people. We find God to be absent or at least severely veiled in this story. So Esther's spirituality is lived out in her actions to save her people. And we are left to guess that the divine presence is found in the space between good and evil; on the edge of darkness, not fully in the light of day. In Esther, we come to know that spiritual formation is not found behind the security of an arsenal of answers. For Esther, spirituality is about embracing a world infused with ambiguity and mystery, a world in which living by faith is anything but safe and secure. In the end, we encounter the power and presence of God when Esther stands against all odds. Esther's is a spirituality of "standing."

Jackie's favorite song is about the power of standing. Pastor Donnie McClurkin understands the spirituality of standing in his song *Stand*. He sings:

*Tell me what do you do
when you've done all you can
And it seems like you can't make it through
Child you just stand
You just stand
Stand*

*Don't you give up
Through the storm , through the rain
Through the hurt , through the pain*

[Chorus]

*Well, you just stand
When there's nothing left to do
You just stand
Watch the Lord see you through
Yes, after you've done all you can
You just stand*

*Don't you bow, don't bend
Don't give up, don't give in
Hold on, just be strong
God will step in and it won't be long*

*And how can you smile
when your heart is broken
and filled with pain?
Tell me what do you give
when you've given your all
Seems like you can't make it through?*

*After you've done all you can
After you've gone through the hurt
After you've gone through the pain
After you've gone through the storm
After you've gone through the rain
Prayed and cried, you've prayed and cried
Prayed and cried, prayed and cried
After you've done all you can, you just stand.*

*Child you just stand,
when there's nothing left to do
You just stand
Watch the Lord see you through
Yes, after you've done all you can
You just stand.*

You just stand, right Jackie? You just stand. Like Ruth, like Esther, like the river flowing in the stream of women's spirituality, you stand. You stand through desert times, through

dark nights and uncertain days, through times when you don't have a penny - you don't even a prayer - so it seems. You keep on your feet and you keep praying for a bend in the river, for the sighting of hope just ahead. You stand and you flow along!

In today's Gospel, the risen Christ is making breakfast on the beach along the shores of Galilee's sea. He invites his disciples to join him. Truthfully, it is not every day that someone having risen from the dead can make a fire and cook some fish on the stony beach of Galilee. His friends have seen him in resurrection light twice in John's Gospel - both appearances in Jerusalem. Now, as John's Gospel draws near to a close, we meet the risen one, one last time.

Although he is cooking for everyone, Jesus' is singularly focused on Peter during his conversation. Peter still has some reconciling work to do with his savior. Remember, just a few days ago, Peter denied Jesus three times as Jesus was being arrested, beaten, tried and ultimately crucified. Peter told everyone within earshot that he had no idea who Jesus was. Hadn't a clue. Imagine how that must have felt to one being crucified? So when Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?," he is really digging deep with his question! Three times Peter acknowledges his love for Jesus. Each time, Jesus calls his leading disciple to care for the sheep as a shepherd does. By the time Jesus is done with these questions, Peter is rattled! He should be. Finally, Jesus calls Peter even deeper. He says, "*Peter, when you were a child you would run and play and go wherever you wanted to go. However, as an adult, you will be called to a place you would rather not go (meaning the place where Peter would be crucified - upside down on the cross!) . . . Come and follow me.*"

Jackie, when you started this journey, you were not trying in any way to set yourself apart from others. You are still not trying to. But, today, in the name of following Christ, we will set you apart. You did not begin this journey with any plans of being in the spotlight. You still don't seek it. But, today, God's light is especially shining on you.

You are being called to a place you would rather not go. If this call was coming from any other source than the heart of God, you would run away. Like Ruth, you have been called home from a foreign land, to help others find, as you have found, an earthy spirituality, spirituality for every day.

Like Esther, when the Divine is silent or absent or severely veiled, you have been called to stand in the gap, trusting your instincts and knowing that God is present even (or maybe especially) in the seemingly absent times. And even like “Herky-Jerky” Peter, you are called to follow to a place you would rather not go.

Come and follow Jesus - now and always. Trust that God is in all of this. As a woman of faith, may the wellstream of living water flow to you and through you to others on the journey of life and faith. And Jackie, when all seems to break down around you, just stand! Just stand! Amen.

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