

“In Praise of Persistent Women”

8/20/2017, St. Ann
Fr. Jim Plough

The Canaanite woman in today's gospel (Matthew 15: 21-28) is one of the great heroines of Scripture. She would not take “no” for an answer. She continued to negotiate in spite of sharp and even rude comments by Jesus. She, persisted in her quest. She is like the woman who kept searching for the lost coin, sweeping the floor repeatedly until she found the coin, or like the woman who kept knocking on the door when an unjust judge would not listen to her plea. He finally relented. Remember the woman whose back was bent for eighteen years. Jesus healed her, as he did the woman who kept inching forward in the crowd until she could touch the hem of his garment.

There are many persistent women in our country, refusing to give up on seeking equality with men in employment and income. Women still make 75 cents for every dollar men make. This hasn't changed for thirteen years. Watch out! Those glass ceilings won't last forever. More and more women are feisty and persistent.

Our first reading from Isaiah looks to the time when God's house will be a house of prayer for all people (Isaiah 56: 6-7), not just for Israel. The story of the Canaanite woman reinforces that ideal. Jesus healed those outside as well as those within. St. Paul insists that God gifts and his call are irrevocable (Romans 11: 29-32). God gives up on no one. He will persist until his will is finally accomplished. God is like a persistent woman.

Here are some examples of persistent women in our day. Sr. Joan Chittister is a Benedictine Sister, a theologian beloved by many for her persistence in seeking reform in our church and a greater respect for women in our society. In this valley, Sister Karen Bland is a Benedictine Sister who refuses to take no for an answer and has gained the respect of so many beyond the Catholic community. She is like a non-stoppable ever ready battery as she campaigns relentlessly for the homeless and needy through a variety of Catholic Outreach programs. Remember Mother

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Angelica of the Poor Clare Sisters. Many doubted that she would be able to gain lasting support for her television network plans. Today EWTN thrives beyond her hopes and provides highly informative discussions and presentations of Catholic Liturgy so treasured by shut-ins who are unable to attend in person. Mother Angelica's persistence paid off.

Still, women's accomplishments are still underappreciated. Here is a parable. Three men were trying to measure the height of a tall flagpole. The first man stretched as far as he could to the top, but he couldn't reach it. The second man got a chair, stood on it and stretched but still couldn't reach it. The third man got up on the chair, stood on his tiptoes and had the second guy stand on his shoulders and stretch, but they still couldn't reach the top of that flagpole.

Now, there was a woman passing by who saw this playing out. She went over to the flagpole, observed for a minute and unscrewed the flagpole, pulled it out of its stand and laid it on the ground. Then she took a measuring tape out of the sewing kit in her purse. She measured the pole from one end to the next and told the men the length of the flagpole and continued on her way.

When she was finally out of earshot, one of the three men looked at the others to say: “Now isn't that just like a woman? You ask her for the height and she gives you the length.” This parable fits the history of the church. For too long, men have assumed that only they have what it takes to govern and guide the church. That is changing now, but there is still a long way to go.

One of my disappointments in life has been that after being educated by Benedictine Sisters in grade school – to whom I owe much of my vocation – I studied in a seminary for twelve years and never had a woman teacher, only

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priests. Even as a college professor, my first and only woman companion on the faculty came when lay people were finally being hired. She was a brilliant theologian and became a close friend (Mary Jo Weaver). I learned more from her than from most of my priest friends.

When I entered pastoral ministry out here – keenly aware of what I had missed in having few women friends – I was determined to see that I welcomed the opportunity to have women as associates and advisors in the work of the parish. I have benefitted greatly from that experience.

Somehow, the church for too long failed to realize that men and women are meant to complement one another in their relationships. Where one is strong, the other benefits from that strength. Together they can work and achieve more than twice what each could achieve alone. That is so obvious in marriage! I am not saying that a celibate clergy is of no value, only that in isolation, too much is missing.

Finally, a word about women’s persistence today. Some feminists have set the ordination of women to the priesthood as their goal. They want nothing less. I believe this is a mistaken goal. These women see the priesthood as a sacrament of power or superiority. Pope Francis has reminded us that ordination of men should not be identified with power, but with service. Ordination is a sacrament of service, not of power. Women are capable of great service in the church. They do not need to be ordained to achieve that goal.

In the past, theologians commonly stressed the notion that only the priest has the power to consecrate the Eucharist. They saw ordination as a matter of power. Not so today. Feminists need to know that the church sees ordination differently now. I have been reading a collection of excellent articles by American feminist

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theologians in the church. Not one has ordination of women on their agenda. (Mary Rice Hasson, Editor, PROMISE AND CHALLENGE: Catholic Women Reflect on Feminism, Complementarity and the Church (2015).

To conclude, we all need to be persistent, both men and women, to achieve closer harmony in our relationships with one another and with the church. Show persistence! The Canaanite woman in the gospel teaches that lesson admirably.