



Texts in Context

The Ministry of Women: Texts for the Celebration

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TO COMMEMORATE THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ORDINATION OF women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, four Lutheran clergywomen met to discuss texts for this article.* Rather than using seasonal texts from the lectionary, we studied the text chosen for the national celebration of women's ordination, the story of the woman anointing Jesus in Mark 14:3-9. In addition, we considered other biblical texts, ones we might have chosen instead to celebrate women's ordination. These were our texts, then; women's ordination, our context. Throughout our time together, we tried to address our conversations to the pastor and people planning a congregational celebration for this anniversary. We hope our reflections on these biblical texts and on the ordination of women give creative and helpful resources for planning a worship celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of women's ordination and, in it, preaching the gospel.

Mark 14:3-9 and the Ordination of Women

One way to approach this text, we thought, is to think how we would dramatize it. The setting would be simple: a table inside a home. We would need a few actors: Jesus; Simon the leper; a woman; and "some," as the text says. Not the

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disciples, as Matthew says (Matt 26:6-13); not a Pharisee, as Luke says (Luke 7:36-50); not Judas Iscariot, as John says (John 12:1-8); but “some” who were there. For this part, we would have a number of guests on stage, seven or eight. Then there would be Simon the leper, the host, who does not speak. And there would be the woman: she does just three things—she “came,” she “broke open,” and she “poured” (14:3)—and she speaks not at all. According to the Markan text, it is the speaking “some” — we would have a smaller group of three or four be the “some” who speak — and Jesus, who then interpret the events of this story. The “some” become “angry” (14:4) at the woman’s actions and speak angrily about them; then they “scold” her (14:5). In response, Jesus reacts to them — “Leave her alone,” he says (14:6) — and offers another interpretation of what she has done, an interpretation which does not critique but justifies her actions.

This much of the drama is scripted by the Markan text. We could stick with just this much, we thought. We could have Simon the leper, the host, be a living, moving character at the beginning of verse 3, when he is described, and then have him freeze on stage as he disappears from the story. We could have the woman do her three actions, and then freeze, as she neither responds nor speaks in the rest of the story. So, too, with the “some” who speak about the woman’s actions and scold her: when their parts are done, they could freeze, for the Markan script gives us no indication of their response to Jesus’ words. The drama, then, would end with the focus on Jesus. He would be the only character, finally, moving and speaking. Such a dramatization would literally characterize the Markan text, as persons in the story do something or speak and then disappear from the story, until we are left only with Jesus.

This could be a powerful dramatization, we thought, as the focus moves from Simon the leper, to the woman, to her critics, to Jesus; as the focus shifts from the woman’s actions to Jesus’ interpretation of them. The woman’s role in this story would be silently to tell of Jesus. She and her actions would not, in the end, be the focus of the story, but Jesus would be the focus, and the meaning he gives to what she does. This is like preaching, we noted. For in preaching we seek to make the gospel of Jesus known to the hearers of it. In this way, the woman preaches. She preaches not in words but in deeds. She is a mute preacher. Though silent, she reminds us of the woman at the well in John 4, who, after her encounter with Jesus, goes back to her townspeople and witnesses to them; her witness sends them to Jesus; and the focus of the John story shifts from the woman to Jesus as the townspeople say to her, in the end, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

But we imagined another way to dramatize this Markan text. We would work with what is scripted in the text, as we have so far, and then move beyond the text to fill in the story. Instead of characters freezing when their role in the text disappears, they would keep on being living characters in the story. We would have to imagine how they might continue to be in the story. For instance, how would Simon the leper respond to the woman’s critics? Would his outsider status

as a leper lead him to defend the actions of another outsider, a woman? Or would he side with her critics? Or would he be torn between them? How would the woman respond when her critics scold her? Then again, how would the woman respond to Jesus' interpretation of her actions? Would she be surprised? Would she nod in agreement? Playing out Mark's account in this way opens up numerous interpretive questions.

As we considered these questions of interpretation, the most important to us seemed to be the issue of prominence of character. In our first dramatization, the woman recedes as Jesus takes center stage to interpret her actions: though Jesus talks about her actions, the focus remains on him. However, if the woman continues to be a living, reacting character in the story—as she does in this second dramatization—what is the balance between her character and that of Jesus? Might she even upstage Jesus as he shares the stage with her, interpreting her actions and telling us that, “Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of also, in memory of her” (Mark 14:9)? With her actions, the woman points us to Jesus, telling us that he will die. But Jesus also, in turn, points us to the woman. He implies that as she anoints him beforehand for burial, she preaches the gospel—that he will die. Furthermore, he connects the preaching of the gospel with the telling of her story: wherever the gospel is preached, her story will also be told in her memory. With the woman still on stage—a living character, reacting to Jesus' words—where will the audience be looking as Jesus says these words? At the woman? At Jesus? Where do we want them to look?

The dilemma we were experiencing with this dramatization is one we often struggle with in our own lives as ordained women. One of us had recently preached her first sermon in her new position as pastor. She related how, before she preached, she was talking with a friend in the congregation, describing some of the pressure she felt as the first woman pastor of that congregation to preach there. The friend had asked, Did she really feel pressure as a woman? Didn't she think instead that when she climbed into the pulpit, people would sort of “neuter” her, and just hear her preach like anyone else? It is a wonderful question, we thought. But while twenty-five years may seem like a long time, long enough for ordained women to be like anyone else, it is really a short time. We still experience the newness of our ordination, for ourselves and for our congregations. And a dilemma we face often is, where are people looking? At the new woman pastor or at Jesus? Where are we pointing? To ourselves or to Jesus?

There are reasons for such dilemmas, we thought. One of the reasons people are looking at us is that they are seeking to find out for themselves whether or not an ordained woman can tell of Jesus. They do not assume it; they wonder about it. So they are scrutinizing us and their experience with us. And while we need to be careful about this, one reason that we may seem to be pointing to ourselves is that it is a new thing for ordained women to be drawing on their life experiences as women for preaching the gospel: the newness of it can make it seem more prominent, and the gospel diminished. But this story in the Gospel of Mark tells us that a woman—a silent woman—preaches the gospel. It tells us, also, that as God's story

is preached, this woman's story will be told, too. A woman tells of Jesus. A woman's story tells the gospel.

It is a silent woman who preaches in this story. In our second dramatization, we struggled with the woman's silence, wondering whether we should have her speak, even though she is mute in the Mark story. We recognized that she stands in a long line of silent women in the Gospel of Mark: Simon's mother-in-law (1:29-31); the daughter of Jairus and his wife (5:21-24a, 35-43); the poor widow (12:41-44); the women at the cross (15:40-41), and later that same day at the tomb (15:47); the women at the tomb on Easter morning (16:8). These women all have encounters with Jesus—living, dead, resurrected—and do not speak. There is only one woman in the Gospel of Mark who speaks directly to Jesus: the Syrophenician woman, whose one spoken sentence breaks women's silence with Jesus in the gospel (7:28). Otherwise, women speak indirectly to Jesus (3:31; 5:33; 7:26), or they do not speak at all with him.

What is the effect of all these silent women in the Gospel of Mark, we wondered. Do they work to encourage women's silence in the face of Jesus? Or do they rather work as a critique of women's silence? We read the Gospel of Mark knowing that though it depicts women as saying "nothing to anyone" (16:8), the women eventually speak, because we have heard the story. A silent woman in our dramatization could serve, then, as a critique of that silence, and prompt speech in the hearers of the story. On the other hand, perhaps the silence of women in the Gospel of Mark is a critique of women's speech. At the end the women say "nothing to anyone": it is not their speech but the power of the gospel that tells the story. A silent woman in our drama would show that it is not her words, but Jesus, telling the gospel. This theology of her provocative silence made us think, in the end, that we would have her remain mute in our dramatization of this Markan story.

We debated other ways this story is empowering for us as ordained women. Jesus says of her, "She has done what she could" (14:8), i.e., "She has done what was in her power to do." Jesus takes her offering and gives it meaning, makes it proclamation. This is empowering for us: we do what we can; Jesus is the one who makes our ministry effective. But we noted also that we learn from this story in negative ways. It tells us of women's silence: women do not speak, people do not hear them when they do. And it tells us of how the woman has not been remembered in the way Jesus says she would be: if her story will be told wherever the gospel is preached, why is her story included only once in the three-year lectionary, and then only in the longer reading for the Sunday of the Passion, Cycle B, we wondered. Or again, why isn't she remembered when we anoint a child's head in baptism? Such struggles with this text prompted us to consider other texts for a celebration of women's ordination.

Other Biblical Texts and the Ordination of Women

We asked ourselves, If it had been up to us to choose the text for this celebration of women's ordination, which would we choose? One of us responded

immediately, "The women at the empty tomb." We asked her which account. She said it didn't matter, because she thinks even in the Gospel of Mark the women speak eventually. Powerful for her is that women are the first to see and hear that Jesus is risen, and they go and tell.

Another suggested the story of Huldah, the prophetess, in 2 Kings 22. During the reign of Josiah, the book of the law is rediscovered and read to King Josiah. Seeking to know what this book means for him and the people, he sends priests to Huldah to find out what the Lord says. She speaks to them the prophetic words, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel...." In response to the words of the Lord, told by Huldah, Josiah institutes sweeping religious and political reforms. The woman who chose this story was moved by the way it tells of political and religious leaders turning to Huldah for the word of the Lord.

One woman said that the most powerful words for her are Jesus' words about the children: "Let them come, forbid them not." Another said she would choose the story in John 4 of Jesus and the woman at the well: she engages in sophisticated theological conversation with Jesus, and responds by becoming a missionary, bringing others to Jesus. Another said she has always liked the story of Sarah hearing the news that she will have a son: she laughs at God, and it takes guts to laugh at God, this woman said. And God does not strike her down, but instead gives her Isaac, more laughter, and pleasure in her old age.

As we offered our alternate choices of texts for the celebration of women's ordination, we noticed that we were turning not to difficult texts about women in scripture, but to heroic biblical stories of women. We talked about our deep need for role models in the faith. One woman said that she reads scripture with this question in mind, "Whom do I want to be like?" "I'm always searching for women to be like," she said, "so I'd like a story for the ordination celebration that shows me who I want to be."

Further Issues for Preaching on the Ordination of Women

In addition to these issues for preaching, we also raised in our conversations some other contextual issues for preaching at a congregational celebration of women's ordination. One way to celebrate women's ordination, we observed, is to place it among the other ministries of women. In every congregation, women have been faithful servants and leaders — as missionaries, as workers in the women's organizations, as teachers, quilters, singers, Bible study leaders. Ordination is now one more way women are called to serve and lead. At the same time, we noted, the ordination of women is also different from other ministries: it is the ministry of word and sacrament. This needs to be acknowledged and celebrated also. We want to recognize the ministry of women; we also want to celebrate on this occasion the ordained ministry of women.

An event like the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of women is also an occasion to raise questions that could help prepare a congregation eventually to receive a woman pastor. The preacher could ask in a sermon, "Could a woman be a pastor here?" Or, "Could a woman be a senior pastor here?" "What are the things

that would make this possible? What are the difficulties? How can we address them?" A sermon at a celebration of women's ordination could challenge us to examine and expand our notions of women's ministry.

This anniversary of the ordination of women is also a time to give thanks, we stressed. Thanks to God for preparing the church to receive women's ordination. Thanks to the seminaries who have trained women for ordination and to the congregations who have received them. Thanks to all the people who have supported women's ordination and ordained women. It is a time, too, to hope, hope that the church will continue to open itself to the ministry of ordained women, so that women, along with men, might tell their stories and preach the gospel to the whole world. ☩

In the Next Issue...

Texts in Context will consider lessons from 1 Corinthians for the Epiphany season.