

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

Sermon: My Fair Lady

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, August 20, 2017

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 15:21-28.

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

²⁷ "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.

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On a rainy night in old Edwardian London, a group of opera patrons are waiting under the arches of Covent Garden for taxi cabs. Eliza Doolittle, a scruffy-looking Cockney flower girl, accidentally runs into a young man called Freddy. She admonishes him for spilling her bunches of violets in the mud, but she cheers up after selling one to an older gentleman.

She then flies into an angry outburst when she notices a man copying down her speech. The man explains that he studies phonetics and can identify anyone's origin by their accent. He laments Eliza's dreadful speech, asking why so many English people don't speak properly and explaining his theory that this is what truly separates social classes, rather than looks or money.

He declares that in six months he could turn Eliza into a lady by teaching her to speak properly. He introduces himself as Professor Henry Higgins. That brief encounter starts Eliza down a path and the very next morning she knocks on his front door, asking for speech lessons so she can get a job at a proper flower shop.

Professor Higgins accepts her request, but not before making a bet with his friend, Colonel Pickering, that he can indeed accomplish this transformation of Eliza in six months. And so, the stage is set. Professor Higgins, a confirmed bachelor who admittedly does not understand women, uses Eliza to prove he is the master of his craft. And, rather than being the kindhearted man he thinks he is, we see that he is a rather self-absorbed man who treats women with terrible disdain.

Now I love this musical. I love the music. I love the fairy-tale transformation. For many years after seeing this show for the first time, I wanted to be Audrey Hepburn when I grew up. Now how cute is that!

Except, now, looking back, I am reminded of the phrase my mother used to say to my brother, sister and I when we were outside playing with the neighborhood kids – we would be goofing off and taking risks and my mother would say – “It’s all good fun until somebody gets hurt.”

And, you know, somebody gets hurt. The secret of the bet between Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering is ultimately laid bare as a betrayal of trust, as a misogynist act from a sexist man who holds the power. Somebody’s heart gets broken. Somebody’s self-image is dismantled. And then, from the place of brokenness, a new question emerges – that maybe there is another way to live, another way to engage the world. Maybe sexism doesn’t have to govern the relationships between men and women; maybe Eliza’s breakthrough also brings a breakthrough for Professor Higgins and frees him from his sexist rants.

There are actually several Broadway musicals where the lead performance is by a woman who, time after time, keeps picking herself up, dusting herself off, and starts all over again. Or women who, against the odds, keep persevering to achieve their goals -- “Mame,” comes to mind. So does “Gypsy” or “Hello Dolly” or even “The Sound of Music” (which, by the way, we get to sing next week, so don’t miss it). I find it fascinating that a Broadway Musical can sometimes show us what we cannot speak to one another – that women are often not expected to achieve much at all. Heck, even in recent weeks the former software engineer at Google thinks that women are biologically ill-suited to be, you guessed, software engineers. Yet Broadway can show us empowered, confident, tenacious, and smart women who achieve their independence, equality and who make a difference.

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Then we read a story from 2,000 years ago when women had an even more proscribed role in society and were considered second-class citizens. This story where a Canaanite woman (see, right there, Matthew couldn't even be bothered to tell us her name, to remember her name, to give her a name), a crazy Canaanite woman runs up, screaming at the top of her lungs about her demon-possessed daughter. Unwittingly, she played right into every stereotype the disciples harbored against her. She was shrill, loud, overly direct, presumptuous, and her family had a problem with a demon.

Jesus himself said, well, nothing, he said nothing, which probably made the disciples assume he was thinking the same thing they were: "how can we get out of this highly uncomfortable situation?!" Since Jesus' silence gave the disciples an opening, they say to Jesus, "Let's ditch this woman now! Her crying and screaming is driving us crazy." And Jesus then says, either just to himself or to the disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

In the ears of the disciples, that was the equivalent of Jesus' saying, "I agree! Let's get rid of her because when it comes to our ministry, this woman doesn't count." We don't know whether she heard Jesus say that. Even if she did, it did not deter her in the least. Instead she kneels in front of Jesus and again begs Jesus to help her.

And that's when Jesus says it. Remember, just last week we read that Jesus fed 5,000 people from the bare basket of bread and fish. And immediately following this story he will feed bread to 4,000 other people. As we know, Jesus is the bread of life. This story of the Canaanite woman is placed between two stories of Jesus feeding the people – all people. And this woman is asking for a place at the table, but Jesus, chillingly, relegates her to the floor of life.

I know this is harsh to hear, but Jesus says to her "It's not right to toss perfectly good bread meant to feed children to dogs." And, there it is. Jesus calls her a dog. I'm pretty angry about that. I'm actually quite upset about that. It's a slur, an epithet, and most scholars say that the disciples probably agreed with him. Women were dogs.

And then we get down to business. The woman does not protest her dog status but instead actually uses it to press her point. "OK, so I'm a dog, but even they get crumbs and leftovers from the master's table, don't they!?"

I don't know of any other place in the Bible where Jesus expresses surprise. But he does here. Something, like a lightbulb, has just gone off in his head or maybe it was even a light bulb in his heart. And Jesus says "Hey! You have great faith! You're right! So, okay, your request is granted." And it was. The daughter was released from her demon at that very moment, Matthew says.

What does it take to be a woman in a man's world? How far have women's rights come? How far have we yet to go?

In February, Senate Republicans voted to silence Senator Elizabeth Warren from reading out loud a letter written by Coretta Scott King (Martin Luther King Jr.'s widow) during a debate over Senator Jeff Sessions' nomination for Attorney General. As Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell explained at the time, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted."

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After her dismissal from the Senate chambers, she moved to the hallway and continued to read this letter against Sessions' nomination. Within 24 hours, Senator Warren's video had been seen by two million people. So instead of 100 members of the Senate listening to her, she now had an audience of over two million people. So silencing her didn't go as he had planned.

The phrase "Nevertheless, she persisted" is now part of the t-shirt lexicon for women's marches. It is a truth that has resonated with every woman I know – we must persist. The power is stacked against us, the opportunity is often closed to us, the sexism of low expectations fills us with anger and then, what do we do? We persist.

The Canaanite woman persisted. Like Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Senator Hillary Clinton, First Lady Michelle Obama, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and even Eliza Doolittle – they all persisted.

When I was in seminary, I sang in a small ensemble called the Choraliers. We were directed by the famous hymn composer Rev. Dr. Carlton Young. Sixteen voices – four sopranos, four altos, four tenors, for basses. Each person could have been – and sometimes was – a soloist in their own right.

One week we were practicing in sectionals – that's when each of the four vocal groups practice their own part off to themselves. The associate director, Helen, was working with the women sopranos and altos. Dr. Young had written a particularly difficult but deeply moving arrangement of "Simple Gifts."

There was complexity to the chord arrangements and the movement of the alto part was not particularly tonal – I mean, it just didn't have its own kind of melody because it was working against the theme of the song.

You know this song, an American classic.

'Tis a gift to be simple
'Tis a gift to be free
'Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
It will be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend, we shant be ashamed.
To turn, turn, will be our delight,
'Til by turning, turning, we come 'round right.

The tricky part was right there in the chorus. "To bow and to bend, we shant be ashamed." Helen stopped the rehearsal. She looked at us – eight women, studying to be ordained as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, called by God to serve the church universal. Out of the 350 students at Candler School of Theology, there were less than 35 women, less than 10% of the student body – so the eight of us in the Choraliers represented a full 25% of the female student body.

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Helen looked at us and said, “How often as women are we asked “to bow and to bend”? How often are we told that we need to hold our tongue, behave a certain way, fit a particular image or stereotype?” She said, “It’s like this: We will not be ashamed to be who we are and we are strong women. God’s presence and grace is our ability to bow and bend because we are resilient. We bend right back and stand strong and upright.” It was a profound insight.

Eliza might not have had Helen as her choral director and spiritual guide. But Eliza was all about pursuing her dream and becoming something new in the world, something meaningful. And if what it took to get there was to persevere and, occasionally, to bow and bend, then, so be it. Eliza knew what the Canaanite woman knew. Her responsibility in her own life was to persevere.

And Professor Higgins? He had to come to his own feminist transformation – he had come to his own insight that he had been changed by his encounter with Eliza (now, admittedly, his transformation is incomplete in this musical since, in the very close scene, Higgins still asks Eliza to fetch his slippers.) But you get my drift.

The Canaanite woman’s responsibility in her life and her responsibility for her daughter was to persist. And Jesus had to come to his own feminist transformation. It was there all along, after all, Jesus is fully divine. It was just that fully-human part of Jesus that had been caught up in the social norm that men were superior and women had no place. Jesus had to break the bonds of sexism of his day.

You get this. You know this. I don’t have to tell you. This is not new to you. Women carry half the world. Women lead, women think, women teach, women sing, women bow and bend, and women stand up. Like Heather Heyer in Charlottesville just last weekend. Women stand up.

Everyone – all sexes, all genders, all races, all clans, all nationalities, all neighbors, all social classes – everyone gets to thrive and grow. This is a place where you are not only welcome, but also where we persist in our dreams and we claim who we are. This is a place where the Higgins’s of the world can turn themselves around and learn to share power and authority, to value each person, to respect the differences and discover equality. This is a place where we look around for the Eliza’s in our lives and give them all of the encouragement we possibly can for their’s is a difficult and arduous path.

Respect yourself. Respect women. Or, at least, that’s what Jesus did.

Amen.