

One of Us

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There are about 800 women mentioned in the Bible.¹ They are mothers, daughters, wives and widows; prophets, soldiers, and martyrs; prostitutes, slaves, and queens. Some of them you know by name: Mary, Martha, Miriam, Eve, Sara, Rebecca, Esther, Ruth, Naomi. Others, you may have never heard of like Tamar, Gomer, or Dinah.

Of the 800 women in the Bible, about 600 of them are unnamed, meaning we remember them because of the role they played, but their names, their identities, are missing. These are women you most likely know by association: Pharaoh's daughter, Job's wife, the woman by the well, the woman who washed Jesus' feet, Jephtha's daughter.

Statistically speaking roughly 26 percent of the people mentioned in the Bible are women. But when you factor in who is given a name, that figure drops to eight percent.² Now, maybe these statistics surprise you or maybe they do not; after all the Bible was written thousands of years ago when women were mistreated, undervalued, and had very little power within society.

Out of the 66 books in the Bible, only two are named for women, and based on traditional assessments of authorship, it is unlikely that any scripture was written by women.

Since much of the absence of women in scripture can be blamed on the patriarchal time period, one could argue that if the Bible were written today, in our post-feminist world, women's voices would not be lacking.

And maybe that is true. However, according to recent statistics from the United Nations, roughly 200 million women are missing from our world today. And by missing, the UN means they were killed because of their gender; they were erased for no other reason than because they were women.³

Some of these missing women were born into poverty in countries where a baby girl is killed because she is one more mouth to feed. Even if the daughter does live, she often remains nameless: daughter one, daughter two, so little is her worth to the family.

In India a little girl dies from discrimination every four minutes. Most likely she will die of malnutrition, a failure to be vaccinated, or a treatable medical condition. She has half the likelihood of survival than that of her brother.⁴

Across the Middle East and Asia, anywhere from five to six thousand women die every year in honor killings.⁵ And every 90 seconds somewhere in the world a woman dies because she did not have access to maternal health care. That is the equivalent of five jumbo jets full of women who die from pregnancy complications every day.⁶

Every year, between one and three million women die from neglect or are killed because of their gender. This is more than the yearly total of all the people who die of AIDS and all the people who die of malaria.

When you add it all up, those 200 million missing women equal more than all those killed on the battlefields of all the wars of the twentieth century and all the people who were slaughtered in the genocides of the twentieth century.⁷ And, that

200 million missing does not include the women who are still alive but are among the countless victims of sexual violence; women who go missing as they are trafficked across borders; women whose bodies become commodities of war; women who are abused by strangers, friends, and family.

The majority of these women live in countries not our own, impoverished countries, countries ruled by archaic religious code, countries ravaged by war and oppressive regimes. But then, in the United States, every fifteen seconds a woman is battered by her partner.⁸ And in our own Fairfield County, 44 percent of single mother households live in poverty.⁹

It is mind-numbing, really, to consider these facts, to try to chart the nameless, faceless women who make up such stark statistics. And even as eye-opening as this data may be, the truth is that it is not particularly motivating. Where do you even begin when the problem is so large and there is no straight-forward solution? That's the irony: As much as we rely on statistics to make a point, they rarely motivate social action. In fact psychological studies suggest that an onslaught of data more often than not creates the opposite effect, desensitizing people to the point where they are numb to large-scale suffering.

Paul Slovic is a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, and he has won numerous awards for his research in this area. His most recent article is titled "If I look at the mass I will never act." In this article, Slovic says that human interest in helping victims drops as soon as the number of victims rises above one.¹⁰ And when it comes to eliciting compassion, he says the most important criteria are that the victim has a face and name.¹¹ A face and a name—who were these people behind the numbers? What did they look like? What were their hopes and dreams? What did it sound like when she laughed? Does her family miss her? What was her story? That is what matters. Who was she?

Novelist Barbra Kingsolver illustrates this point well when she writes,

A newspaper could tell you that one hundred people, say, in an airplane, or in Israel, or in Iraq, have died today. And you can think to yourself, "How very sad," then turn the page and see how the Wildcats fared. But a novel could take just one of those hundred lives and show you exactly how it felt to be that person rising from bed in the morning, watching the desert light on the tile of her doorway and on the curve of her daughter's cheek. You could taste that person's breakfast, and love her family, and sort through her worries as your own, and know that a death in that household will be the end of the only life that someone will ever have. As important as yours. As important as mine.¹²

Which is why as shocking as it is to hear that five jumbo jets worth of women die every day from complications in pregnancy, complications that are largely preventable through modern medicine, it is far less effective than telling the story of Prudence Lemokouno, a woman in Cameroon who died from a ruptured uterus because her family could not scrape together the \$100 fee the doctor wanted to perform the surgery necessary to save her life.¹³

To say that only 22 percent¹⁴ of girls in Pakistan receive an education creates far less outrage than the knowledge that one little girl, Malala Yousafzai, was shot by

the Taliban for insisting that girls have the right to go to school. In an interview with CNN Malala said, “I have the right to education. I have the right to play. I have the right to sing. I have the right to talk. I have the right to speak up....”¹⁵ Her words are a painful reminder that what so many of us consider to be every day actions are, for many of the world’s women, an outrageous rebellion.

In the weeks following her shooting, as Malala slowly recovered, she was given the title “daughter of Pakistan.” This title was an indication that her story had grown beyond her own personal fight for an education to encompass the stories of all Pakistani women and girls. To name her “daughter of Pakistan” was to say, “She is one of us.” Her story is our story.

So, to say that there are 600 unnamed women in the Bible is one thing, but to tell you the story of one woman, the woman from our text for today, the only woman to ever be called a “daughter of Abraham” is probably going to have more of an effect. We are told that the woman had been crippled for eighteen years, which would have been half her life given the life expectancy for women back then. Additionally, we are told that the woman was bent over and unable to stand up straight, meaning she could never meet another person face to face. The world around her was one defined by the ground in front of her toes. It is accurate, many scholars attest, to interpret Luke’s description of her handicap as highlighting her diminished status as a woman.

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue when he saw her. The text tells us that she “appeared,” which probably means she hobbled into the back of the synagogue, her physical condition making it difficult to make a quiet entrance. Unlike most of us, who would look away out of politeness or even embarrassment, Jesus looked straight at her. He then stopped what he was doing, put out his hands, and healed her.

With that one act, he drew every eye in the synagogue to her, and for quite possibly the first time in her life, the woman was the center of attention. Then she stood up straight, another first, and she could see world around her in a whole new way; most importantly, she could see the One who healed her clearly; standing in front of him, she could see his face.

The synagogue leader was furious. “The Sabbath is holy,” he said. “It is not the day to heal.” To which Jesus replied, “Ought not this daughter of Abraham, who has been bound for eighteen long years be set free on the Sabbath?” In fact, what day is more appropriate for healing than the day set aside for God?

Now you could argue that by calling her a “daughter of Abraham” instead of by her proper name, Jesus was actually doing the woman a disservice, identifying her by her proximity to a man. However, I would suggest that by naming her a “daughter of Abraham,” Jesus gave the woman a story. He gave her a place in history and her share in the future promised by God. To give this woman that name in front of an all-Jewish crowd was far more powerful than any other name would have been, because with that name, Jesus gave the woman her identity as a child of God. “She is one of us.” Jesus said. Her story is our story. And as long as she is crippled, we all are.

What better day than the Sabbath to hear that message? And what better place than a synagogue, or even a church, the place where we all come to be reminded of who we are, the place where we all remember in whose image we were made, the place where we all find a new vision of the world and a future for which we can hope? What better place than a church and what better day than this one to be reminded that as long as there is one girl trafficked across a border, as long as there is one girl

who cannot attend school, as long as there is one woman whose life is crippled by oppression, our work is not done?

For her story is our story because we are all children of God. So of all the healing stories in the Bible, this one may not stand out as the most impressive: a hunched, nameless woman stood up straight for the first time. But take that miracle and multiply it by 200 million and then think if we all took just one, one name, one face, one story we saw as our own. What the world could look like would be hard to imagine; the possibilities are as endless as the stars in the sky.

But here is a hint. It would be like yeast, Jesus says, when mixed with three measures of flour. You just step back and just watch her rise.

Notes

1 Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross Shepard Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001).

2 Elesha Coffman, "How the Other Half Lived," *Christianity Today*. August 2008. (Online Only)

3 Marie Valchova and Lea Biason, eds., *Women in an Insecure World: Violence against Women Facts, Figures and Analysis* (Geneva, Switzerland, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2005).

4 Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity For Women Worldwide* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Meyers, Craven, and Kramer.

8 <http://www.feminist.com/antiviolence/facts.html> (accessed September 23, 2013).

9 *Holding up Half the Sky: A report on the status of women and girls in Fairfield County*, The Fund for Women and Girls, April 2007, <http://www.fccfoundation.org/Library/FCCF%20Documents/Reports%20and%20Publications/FCCF-Fund-for-Women-and-Girls-Holding-Up-Half-the-Sky-Report.pdf>, (accessed September 23, 2013).

10 "If I look at the mass I will never act: Psychic Numbing and Genocide," *Society for Judgment and Decision Making*, Volume 2, Number 2, April 2007, 79-95.

11 Ibid.

12 Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tucson* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

13 Kristof and WuDunn.

14 <http://web.worldbank.org/WEBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/0,,contentMDK:21441267~pagePK:146736~piPK:146830~theSitePK:223547,00.html>

15 <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/world/2012/10/10/sayah-2011-interview-malala-yousufzai.cnn> (accessed September 27, 2013).