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"Panoramic Mountainous Estuary Landscape, with Christ and the Woman of Canaan" (detail) by Lucas Gassel, mid-16th century (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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August 15, 2020

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Try it. Name a time when a man got Jesus to change his mind. In a Gospel we'll soon hear, Peter tried to sway Jesus from accepting suffering — but Jesus quickly stopped that conversation.

We see plenty of men questioning Jesus, but apparently no guy ever convinced him to change his mind. But women? Well, as Matthew would say, "Behold!" (That's Gospel talk for, "Hang on to your hats!")

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

Psalm 67

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

In John's Gospel, Mary told Jesus that the wine at a wedding was about to run out. Although he seemed to disregard her implicit request, he quickly provided far more wine than anyone had hoped for. In today's Gospel, Jesus jousting verbally with a clever pagan woman, and, "Behold!" Jesus ceded his position.

Perhaps it might be better to say they conceded, suggesting that both sides were involved in the resolution: She placed her faith in him as Lord and he responded to her need.

Matthew positioned this story immediately after an unfriendly interchange between Jesus and some of Jerusalem's elite, the religious purists who critiqued the disciples' irreligious table etiquette. Jesus undercut their complaints by saying that nobody is defiled by food, while what comes out of one's mouth reveals and reinforces what's in the heart. Then he ran into a woman who was ready to use her mouth.

Scholars and preachers make excuses for the way Jesus talked to this unnamed woman but their justifications are generally more pious than historically probable. The story is stark: Jesus first ignored and then insulted this woman. He acted like a man of his time. This audacious woman, whom later tradition named Justa, started with two strikes against her: her gender and the fact that her people, the Canaanites, were traditional enemies of the Jews.

Justa flouted both those disadvantages. She breached her gender role by approaching a man for help. She defused the ethnic antagonism by calling on him as the Son of David, thereby showing respect for him and calling on the Jewish tradition that made kings responsible for the welfare of widows, orphans and foreigners.

Hearing him say that his mission was only to Israel, she simply intensified her approach and bowed before him as one who worships. He retorted that his mission was to God's children, not foreign dogs.

Rising to the occasion as no one ever had before, she used his own words to disarm him. Picture her at his feet, looking up with a unique combination of pleading and mischievousness. Throwing him entirely off guard, she replied: "Ah Lord, but those puppies jump for the scraps wherever they fall!"

That got him. "O woman, great is your faith!"

Of all people, Justa, like the centurion whose servant Jesus healed, expressed the sort of faith Jesus sought but didn't find in his disciples. In fact, her faith was great enough to call Jesus to enlarge his vision.

Justa and Mary are unique personalities in the Gospels. While many people moved Jesus to compassion, these two women opened his mind to new possibilities. In John 6, when Jesus asked Philip where to find bread for the crowd, the author quickly explained that Jesus already knew what he was going to do. But there is no such pretext when Jesus produced wine after telling his mother, "My hour has not yet come." An honest reading of Justa's story depicts the second woman who influenced Jesus to change his plan and welcome the faith of foreigners.

The passage from Isaiah chosen to comment on this Gospel makes a similar point. Isaiah tells the Israelites who have come back from exile that salvation is not limited to their nation alone. The people who see themselves as belonging to God must understand that God's house is a place for all people. Later, Isaiah (66:21) tells his people that foreigners can be priests just like Israelites.

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Why did Matthew tell us this story? First, the story illustrates the kind of faith Jesus sought. Justa believed that Jesus not only could, but should respond to her need — gender and nationality aside. Additionally, the story depicts Jesus adjusting his plan because a woman led him to see something differently.

In our day, the document produced by the Amazon synod calls the church to be as open as Jesus was. That meeting called the church to "synodality," a way of moving forward in harmony by listening to God's call together. They said this includes paying special attention to the laity and favoring the participation of women, including the possibility of ordaining them to the diaconate.

We might look at today's Gospel as the prototype of the synod on the Amazon and the future of the church. Behold! God may be calling the church to a newly open mind.

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A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 7-20, 2020** print issue.