

Series: Doctor's Notes
Sermon: Women: Elevating Jesus, Elevating Church (Motif of women)
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Let me start today with a question.

How much is a little girl worth?

This is the question sexual assault survivor Rachael DenHollander asked the court as she gave her full victim impact statement about Larry Nassar in January, 2018. Nassar was a renowned, Olympic gymnast doctor whose sexual abuse of young gymnasts went unchecked for years, despite the desperate pleas of hundreds of little girls who reported him to senior staff.

Decades later, Nassar was finally held to account, and in one of the most riveting trials the USA may ever know, 150 women confronted Nassar with victim impact statements, as the judge refused to allow silence to corrode their lives any longer.

Rachael DenHollander, was the brave young mom, lawyer and practicing Christian who was the first to press charges against Nassar, and begin the long, excruciating road of holding a sexual abuser to account. She was the last to speak directly to Nassar. You can watch her statement or read it easily online by simply googling "Rachael DenHollander victim impact speech" and I commend you to do this as a timely and significant watershed moment of our time.

But in this speech, Rachael asks, "What's a little girl worth?"

Rachael, in her plea to the judge for the maximum sentence to be handed down to Nassar recalled her guilt and grief that drove her to become the first woman to begin the process of demanding justice. Rachael spoke these words to the judge:

Your honor, the worst part of this process was each name, each number who came forward to the police [and] with each Jane Doe, I saw my little girls and the little girls that were. The little girls who walked into

Larry's office that I could not save because no one wanted to listen. And while that is not my guilt, it is pain I still carry and pain I share with them.

I cried for them, and with every tear that fell I wondered who is going to find these little girls, who is going to tell them how much they are worth, how valuable they are, how deserving of justice and protection?

Who is going to tell these little girls that what was done to them matters? That they are seen and valued, that they are not alone and they are not unprotected? And I could not do that, but we are here now and today that message can be sent with the sentence you hand down you can communicate to all these little girls and to every predator to every little girl or young woman who is watching how much a little girl is worth.

The bowels of injustice run deep and history has shown--and tragically continues to show--that injustice is often most prominently wielded on women. As a "getting to know you" question, people sometimes ask, "If you could live in any time, what time would it be?" For any little girl in any society, our only answer is "right now." The freedom, dignity, and even humanity we are beginning to enjoy as women has only been possible in the last fifty or so years of the entire history of humanity. And Rachael's story shows that this freedom is yet fraught with danger.

I do not take it for granted that it is only in my generation that the stigma against women in ministry is finally starting to abate. Still, I chose to practice ministry in BC rather than my home province of Alberta because in all my growing up years, I never once heard a woman preach or hold any position of mutual authority in the church. The Christian culture in BC is more receptive to women in ministry and so I made the difficult decision to live away from my family so I would stand a better chance at fulfilling my passion to preach and teach God's word without hindrance or question. Although, in my city of 90,000 people, to my knowledge there are only three preaching and teaching Christian female pastors, myself included. So, being a female pastor is a privilege I do not take lightly. But, the position I enjoy in society today is nothing like the horror women endured in the time of Christ.

So, before we get to Luke and his motif of women in his writing, we need to take a step back and ask ourselves What was a little girl worth in the Greco-Roman world? What we find may surprise us.

First of all, some statistics.

Rise of Women

Did you know that men greatly outnumbered women in the Greco-Roman world? Historians estimate that in Rome there were 131 men to 100 women, and in Italy, Asia Minor, and North Africa, the ratio was even higher at 140 men to 100 women. Why was this?

Historian J.C. Russell unpacks for us that this could only happen with some “tampering of human life.” Enter infanticide and abortion. Exposure of unwanted female infants and deformed male infants was legal, morally accepted, and widely practiced by all social classes of the Greco-Roman world. For example, a study in more than 600 Delphi families revealed that only six had raised more than one daughter.

Consider this letter written by one Hilarion to his pregnant wife Alis, dating back to the year 1 B.C.E. It’s been noted by scholars because of its quite extraordinary contrast between his deep concern for his wife and his hoped-for-son, and his utter callousness towards a possible daughter.

Know that I am still in Alexandria. And do not worry if they all come back and I remain in Alexandria. I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered of a child [before I come home, if it is a boy keep it, if a girl discard it. You have sent me word, "Don't forget me." How can I forget you. I beg you not to worry (in Lewis 1985:54).

These practices contributed to the unbalanced ratio of men to women in the time of Christ. But additionally, the female mortality rate associated with fertility was significantly higher in Christ’s time than it is today. Women often did not survive childbirth. Abortion methods were barbaric and deadly, and were often forced upon the woman against her choice, causing a high percentage of death for women in this era due to abortion.

So we know from the data that women were fewer in number, but how were they viewed and treated in the Greco-Roman world? Our first clue comes in the practice of infanticide . . . how much was a little girl worth in Rome? Absolutely nothing. What about Greece?

Interestingly and importantly though, the status of adult women was not the same in all of Greece. For example, women of Sparta enjoyed status and power unknown in the rest of the classical world. They not only controlled their own property, they also controlled that of their male relatives when they were away with the army. It is estimated that women were the sole owners of a least 40 percent of all land and property in Sparta (Pomeroy 1975). The laws concerning divorce were the same for men and women. Women received as much education as men and Spartan women received a substantial amount of physical education and gymnastic training. Spartan women seldom married before age 20 and, unlike Athenian sisters who wore heavy, concealing gowns and seldom were seen by males outside their household, Spartan women wore short dresses and went where they pleased.

But was this wasn't true for all of Greece. Like Rome, in Athens women were also in short supply for the very same reasons of infanticide, abortion, and a high mortality rate associated with fertility. Additionally, though, the status of women in Athens was very low. Girls received little or no education. Typically, Athenians were married at puberty and often before. Under Athenian law, a woman was classified as a child, regardless of age, and therefore was the property of some man at all stages of her life. Males could divorce simply by ordering a wife out of the household. Moreover, if a woman were seduced or raped, her husband was legally compelled to divorce her. If a woman wanted a divorce she had to have her father or some other man bring her case before a judge. Finally, Athenian women could own property, but control of the property always was vested in the male to whom she "belonged."

So, women are devalued, dehumanized, and discarded in the time of Christ. Their word in the court of law was void, they had a much higher chance of being killed at birth, were uneducated, could not hold property, and had a much higher mortality rate than men.

It is absolutely necessary to understand the world in which Luke writes. If we don't, we will miss how glaringly obvious the prominence of women in his writing was. So with the Greco-Roman world as our context, let's now dive into Luke's motif of women in his writing.

Women in Luke

As I mentioned last week, there are more than 50 prominent women introduced in Luke and Acts. Luke will speak of women, whether individuals or as a group, 24 times in Luke and 20 times in Acts. Let's look at the bookends of the Gospel to begin our look at Luke's shocking prominence of women.

Remember, a woman's testimony is invalid in a court of law, they are given the legal status of a child, if they commit adultery or have sex before marriage they can be executed (but shockingly, in Rome the opposite is true for men--they can be as promiscuous as they like without consequence!), they can't hold property, they're likely to die in childbirth, and they are uneducated. And for Jews living in this time who have heard nothing from their God for 400 years and are living under the oppression of Rome, to whom is it that God reveals himself? Old men--Zechariah and Simeon, and many women. Mary, the young girl, is called highly favoured, Elizabeth in her old age becomes pregnant with John the Baptist, and Anna the very old widow prophecies that this Jesus is the Christ. Last week we spoke of prophecy, and both Mary and Elizabeth also prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. For Luke, the word of these women is sure and valid, so much so that he writes of it and chooses to memorialize Jesus' birth with their prophetic words. No other Gospel writer goes into such detail about Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna. Luke makes these women's prophecies and testimonies the trustworthy announcement of the coming Kingdom of God. Luke undergoes careful examination of eyewitness accounts to write the story of Jesus, and he sets about the task of writing an orderly account of the life of Jesus so that his reader, Theophilus, may know the certainty of the things he has been taught. And, Luke begins with the eyewitness testimony and prophetic word of *women*.

Let's bookend this with how Luke ends the Gospel. And let me just note that as we go through this, I will quickly give the reference in scripture to what we're looking at, and you'll have access to this sermon's text if you want to see them for yourself later.

So, let's get started. Who are the first people to see and announce the resurrected Christ? They are women. In Luke 24, the angels announce the risen Christ to women. The word of the Lord is delivered to women. Given the context of women in that day, all of a sudden, when Luke says that the disciples thought the women's testimony was nonsense (Luke 24:11), we begin to understand their prejudice. If we look at the Gospel account of Luke from an apologetic perspective, the authenticity of Luke's writing becomes apparent. If Luke wanted to look good and make his account a believable legend in those days, surely he would have written that prominent *men* were the ones to first see the resurrected Christ. But Luke chooses to tell the story accurately, as he records that the birth and resurrection of Christ were first announced to women.

Next, let's walk through some of the stories of these 50 women Luke recognizes and elevates.

Jesus was a carpenter who left his trade to travel as a rabbi, but more importantly, to usher in the new kingdom of God that was unlike any kingdom on earth. As he journeyed, taught, healed, and also partied, Luke tells us that it was prominent and wealthy women who provided for Jesus. Christ's benefactors and partners in ministry were women (Luke 8:3).

The first person healed of a physical ailment in the Gospel is an old woman, Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38). She's old, she's a fisherman's mother. What is her worth? This is the first person Jesus heals.

Raising someone from the dead is the ultimate miracle, though, especially for the Jews who remember the great prophet Elijah who raises a young boy, the son of a widow, from the dead (1 Kings 17). Who is the first person Jesus raises from the dead? He also raises a widow's son. That widow's only hope of survival was the success of her son who could look after her. Jesus shows that he is God by performing the ultimate miracle for a widow.

And who is the next person to be raised from the dead? It is the only child, a twelve year old girl, of a ruler of the synagogue, whose name is Jairus (Luke 8:40-56). This girl wouldn't be considered to be worth much, perhaps it would be too generous a statement to say that she is second best as a girl, but being an only child, she is Jarius' only legacy. But notice how Luke tells the story of her

resurrection. Jesus is on his way to heal her before she dies, but he gets distracted by a woman in the crowd who touches him for healing. Jesus notices the supernatural happening as he describes, "Power going out from him." He could have just kept that to himself and moved on to heal the girl, but Jesus pauses to make a point. Allowing himself to be interrupted in his mission to heal an unimportant 12 year old girl, Jesus elevates the plight of women by intentionally choosing to point out the quiet and anonymous healing of another woman that has just happened. The woman who has experienced a miraculous healing is wanting to fly under the radar, but Jesus points her out, asking the crowd, "Who touched me?" And what is this woman healed of? Luke, as the physician is careful to note more details about this woman than Mark and Matthew include. He says she has had a discharge of blood for twelve years and that she had spent all her money on doctors without being healed. We don't know for certain what kind of "flow of blood" issue this is, but most doctors think it is likely to be endometriosis rather than hemorrhoids. As a Jew, her flow of blood would have kept her from access to the synagogue, and from sexual relations if she was married--also giving grounds for divorce by a husband and in effect leaving her destitute from community, marital support, and a livelihood. Jesus recognizes the plight, not just of this woman, but of women in general who are often marginalized because of complicating factors to women's health.

So, we see a Jesus who elevates women by choosing to heal them of their infirmities, and in the case of this woman, an infirmity that, because she was a woman, would sideline her from society.

Jesus also gives worth to women through spiritual healing when a woman with a disabling spirit is healed on the Sabbath. Jesus intentionally breaks the law of the Pharisees by healing on the Sabbath, and by healing a woman (Luke 13:10).

Women also make it into examples in Jesus' teaching. Luke records the story of the woman with the lost coin (Luke 15:8).

And in the passion account of Luke, it is women who play a decisive role. Juxtaposed to the men who deny and flee from Christ in his crucifixion, women boldly follow Jesus on his journey to the cross, weeping as he carries his cross and staying by him while he dies (Luke 23:27). Women prepare Jesus for burial

(Luke 23:55), and after he is buried they anoint him with spices, showing exceptional care and concern for this man who has given dignity, meaning, worth, and value to their humanity (Luke 24:1). Moreover, it is the women who first see the resurrected Jesus and lead the charge in telling everyone that he has risen from the dead. Remember, women's voices would not hold in a court of law, and so the authenticity of Luke's writing from eye-witness accounts here is astounding (Luke 24).

The Gospel of Luke loudly proclaims that Jesus elevates women, going out of his way to be utterly unconventional and unconcerned with the norms of his day. He breaks cultural barriers as he lifts women, giving them equal dignity as that of men. If Jesus heals men, he heals women. If Jesus teaches men, he teaches women. If men follow Jesus, women also do. And this pattern seamlessly continues in Luke's second book, the book of Acts. So we've seen that Jesus elevates women, and now let's look at how the early church elevated women.

Women in Acts

Immediately in Acts, Luke writes that women are part of what is happening. He makes a point to say that the men were "together with the women" as they devoted themselves to prayer after Christ's ascension. This great divide between men and women is being closed as the church responds to the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:14).

On the day of Pentecost, when Peter gives his first sermon, he quotes the prophet Joel who says that, "in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. [...] even on my male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy." God is no divider of gender. The Spirit is not reserved for one sex.

When Saul begins the first persecution of the church, Luke records that he drags off men and women. Now this is interesting as we look forward to the first couple hundred years of persecution of the church. Sociologist Rodney Stark notes the records of Rome with people they executed. Contrary to popular belief, Rome was strategic in her capital punishment, reserving that crime for leaders of movements to make an example of them. And it is interesting to note that as

sociologists like Stark look at the execution records, the majority of Christian martyrs are women. Many of them are listed as bishops--the highest position of leadership in Christian polity, or as house church leaders--church planters. To Rome, these women obviously held a threat to the empire, and were executed in an attempt to squelch the growing church. We see this being hinted at with Paul who drags off men and women.

Luke notes the growth of the church in Acts 8:12 where he says that both men and women are baptized, and again in Acts 9 Luke notes that Paul is searching for men and women when he begins his persecution of the church.

Acts is full of women who play prominent roles in the church, such as Tabitha, Rhoda, Mary the mother of John, Timothy's mother and grandmother, women of Macedonia, Lydia, Priscilla, Drusilla, and Philip's daughters who prophecy. We don't have time to look at them all, but let's consider a couple.

First, Lydia. She is recorded as the first European convert and the leader of the church in Philippi. Now consider the fact that Europe became the central hub of Christianity for hundreds of years and how the Gospel spread to the rest of the world from Europe. It's only been recently that the shift of Christianity has moved towards the Global South . . . and it is not too far to argue that Lydia's conversion and leadership of the first European church had a massive impact on the global church's growth.

Second, Philip's daughters who prophecy. Here, the prophecy of Joel that Peter declared as fulfilled is being lived out. And remember what we learned last week about a prophet, as someone who calls people back to God? Well, the implications of Philip's daughters holding a role of proclaiming God's salvation has massive implications when we think of topics like the validity of women preaching and teaching--in effect prophesying--today.

Third, the couple Priscilla and Aquilla. You may already know this, but it was common practice in Luke's day to write lists or names down in order of importance. In almost every instance, Priscilla is listed first, ahead of her husband, suggesting that this dynamic couple functioned with unprecedented equality and that Priscilla took a leadership role in their house church.

Just as Jesus has elevated women, so too the early church practices this pattern of women playing a leading and significant role in the growth and depth of the early church.

Results in early church

So, we have seen how Jesus elevated women, how the early church elevated women, and how Luke took great care to interview many women as eye-witnesses to all that Jesus began to do and teach. But what was the result in the early church?

Let's go back to the cultural norms of the day that we talked about at the beginning, regarding infanticide and abortion. First, the early church began adopting these little girls, literally picking them out of the gutters, and providing help and protection for women who were pregnant. The result was a massive increase of women in the church. Second, because women were given much greater standing and dignity in the church than in society at large, the Gospel became incredibly attractive to women, resulting in an unprecedented amount of female conversions to Christianity. And for Greek women who enjoyed societal standing and other cultures that had a matriarchal construct, these women also converted en masse to Christianity, often leading to secondary conversions of their husbands. These two reasons are how sociologists account for the unprecedented growth of Christianity in its first 300 years.

Today and application

Where does this leave us today? I hope that today's sermon has highlighted to us the absolute necessity of cultural context. Without knowing the devaluing of women in Jesus' day, we can miss the shocking reality of how pro-women Luke is. We read stories of men and women being baptized, of the Spirit being poured out on men and women, of women holding equal leadership roles in the early church. The view of women in Scripture radically elevates them from subhuman status to being equal with men. If we read Scripture from the 21st century's perspective, we can simply gloss over this reality, or even worse read into culturally sensitive passages about women in other parts of scripture, particularly that of Paul. This is too big of an issue to miss, and so I hope that what we've learned today, at a minimum, encourages us to read the New Testament through first-century eyes.

The church is always in danger of imitating culture rather than creating culture. But, the early church created culture and in effect turned the world upside down by the way they imitated Christ in elevating women. Sadly, within the first few hundred years of the church, women's voices began to be silenced, with the traditional argument going back, not to Christ's view of women, but the fall's view of women, where women become second-class citizens, subservient to males. I hope this encourages us to examine our own cultural norms and ask how we can, not just imitate culture or retreat from culture or fight against culture, but create a culture that turns the world upside down, just as the early church did.

This sermon is intentionally not a sermon on why women should be in church leadership today, because it's intent is simply to look at the evidence in Luke for elevating women. But I hope it sets a precedent for us of how to read scripture and examine cultural norms that play out in the rest of the new testament writings.

And so, how much is a little girl worth? How much is a woman worth? I believe the writer Luke demonstrates for us profoundly and eloquently, that in the eyes of Jesus, a little girl is worth everything.

Benediction

Children of God

Called to a Jesus who dignifies, enables, and frees you

Remember to passionately and faithfully follow this Jesus in your world today.

...[may God] make you worthy of his calling, and [by] his power [may he] bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith [...] so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:11, 12 NIV)