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The Lectionary: Toward a More Balanced Selection of Texts

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The Consultation on Common Texts designed a lectionary series for a three year cycle which covers 95 per cent of the New Testament. The series is currently accepted by Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics and Lutherans. These denominations share a Christian identity, a common story. Yet, what story do we tell by the selection of texts made in the lectionary?

Recently, Marjorie Procter-Smith noted that, in the selection of texts for the lectionary, several hermeneutical principles are operating.¹ Her view is that there is a principle of hermeneutics operating in the selection of texts which will be read on Sundays: some texts are more important than others and therefore need to be brought to the forefront while less essential texts are relegated to weekdays.

In this study we shall see that an overwhelming number of stories with men as central characters have been selected for reading on Sundays. Many stories of women are omitted; those stories which are included do not deal with women in their own right. Do we mean to communicate to the worshippers that the Christian story is a story mainly for men and about men? Do we want to emphasize that stories about women are less important?

Our identities are formed by the stories we tell of our history. In the case of the church, its root source stories are provided by the New Testament texts. When worshippers hear stories only about their forefathers Peter, James, John, and Paul, they lose out on half of their roots, their history. When the congregation also hears stories about their foremothers, Mary, Elizabeth, Martha, and the many unnamed women, they gain a sense of their own history and become convinced that

they too might become part of the gospel story: the Divine might be found embedded in their lives. In addition, when over a series of weeks the worshippers hear a wide variety of faith experiences, they understand that the Divine is found not only in their own subjective experience, but in the lives of others who have a different encounter with the Divine. The hearing of someone else's story challenges us to grow beyond our particular view.

Twenty centuries ago the gospel writers, products of a patriarchal culture, included their knowledge of the experience of women (albeit from a male perspective) in the gospel for all of humanity. To neglect to incorporate into the lectionary series as many stories of women in the gospels as are available is a significant loss to the Christian community.² The neglect communicates, perhaps inadvertently, that these stories are unimportant. More seriously, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has noted, "the enslavement of a people becomes total when their history is destroyed and solidarity with the dead is made impossible."³ When only a select part of the Christian story is read at worship, there is a loss of solidarity with the dead, and hence a diminishing of who we are.

It is *not* the purpose of this study to discuss the difficulties of what to do with texts that were written from a male viewpoint.⁴ Rather, I intend to examine the selection of texts for Sundays and major festivals by comparing the proportion of scripture with women as central characters to that with men. This study, as we shall see, reveals an imbalance and suggests some implications of that imbalance.

The lectionary readings were divided into the readings for Sundays, for the principal festivals, and for the lesser festivals. In addition, the portions of the gospels which are not in the lectionary were collected.

In each category I counted the number of pericopes which had men as significant characters and the number which had women as significant characters. Where Jesus appeared in pericopes with women, the pericope was counted among the number with women as important characters. In cases where Jesus was speaking in general, the pericope is counted as one with male characters as central. As we shall see, the proportion of texts, women to men, is very low. Had the passages with

Jesus and women been counted in both categories, the proportion of texts, women to men, would be even lower. This fact underlines the gender bias of the writers of the gospels.

The number of pericopes, women to men, was noted according to series A, B, and C. The number of pericopes, women to men, was also noted according to each gospel writer.

The pericopes which have women as main characters were investigated as to the type of portrayal of women which the pericope reveals. The types were divided into women as central exemplary figures, women as unsavory individuals, women in general, women as teaching material, women within Jesus' family who react negatively to him, women as "matter out of place", and women cited in passages of scripture from the Hebrew Bible.

How were the categories of women defined? Passages in which Jesus focuses his attention upon the woman in her own right were placed in the category of "women as central positive examples". An example of this type of pericope is the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-39). Because some people may be puzzled as to why I chose this short story of a nameless woman as a central exemplary figure, a short explanation is in order.

In the gospel of Mark, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law was Jesus' first healing which symbolically pointed to him as the bearer of salvation. In this story we learn that her response to the healing (salvation) was to "serve". Her response is the central theme in the gospel of Mark as is made clear in Mark 10:45: the Son of Humanity came not to be served but to serve. Thus, the response of Simon Peter's mother-in-law is paradigmatic for Christian discipleship and therefore she is a central exemplary figure.

The category of "women as unsavory characters" includes women who cause destructive events to happen to others (e.g., Herodias, Luke 3:19-20).

The category "women in general" includes their mention in genealogies and crowds (Matthew 1:1-17).

"Women used in teaching material" includes those instances in which Jesus' focus upon a woman is to teach others a lesson or a truth. An example of this is the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:-8a). Such stories are often the stimulus for a saying of Jesus (v. 7-8a).

The category "women in Jesus' family who react negatively to him" includes all accounts of the presence of his mother and sisters who are puzzled by his behaviour (e.g., Mark 3:20-35) and respond negatively.

"Women as 'matter out of place'" includes those instances where a woman's status is in question. One such example is the question in Luke about divorce (Luke 16:14-18). We must remember that in the patriarchal society of the first century a woman was either under the protectorship of either father or husband.⁵ To divorce a wife placed her in an ambiguous status because she then was neither the property of husband nor father. Thus, for a time, she is a "woman out of place" and therefore her situation is of concern to the religious authorities.

In the section which follows, I make some observations and suggestions. All observations are based upon the lectionary excluding the lesser festivals (which are usually not read on Sundays). Had we included them, the percentages would only be altered slightly, sometimes raising the percentages of women one point and sometimes lowering them, thus making their inclusion too insignificant for the present study.

In each section (lectionary as a whole, year by year, and gospel by gospel) I shall begin with pericopes which are *not* in the lectionary and note the percentage of texts with women as central characters and compare them to texts which have men as key figures. The data of pericopes *not* in the lectionary will stand at the head of my observations in order to facilitate reference to them.

I. The proportion of women to men in the pericopes *not* in the lectionary is 33%. In the lectionary as a whole, the proportion is 19%. It seems reasonable to include those texts which are not currently in the lectionary to try to even the balance of texts.

By church year, the percentages of the pericopes in the lectionary which are about women are:

Year A: 25%

Year B: 21%

Year C: 16%

It is obvious that year C is particularly deficient in pericopes with women as central characters. This deficiency could be

lowered by using texts which are not now in the lectionary; I shall refer to them below.

II. The proportion of women to men from the gospels

1) *not* included in the lectionary:

Matthew: 43%

Mark: 29%

Luke: 39%

John: 18%

2) included in the lectionary:

Matthew: 20%

Mark: 18%

Luke: 25%

John: 13%

All of the gospels have a number of pericopes which have not been used in the lectionary. The gospel of John is especially deficient.

III. Of the women in the lectionary pericopes, a large percentage is made up of stories of women as exemplary individuals and women as teaching material.

1) The percentage by categories of those women who are *not* in the lectionary:

Worthy examples: 39%

Teaching examples: 30%

Matter out of place: 8%

General category: 4%

Family members who react negatively to Jesus: 9%

Unsavoury women: 7%

Women as part of scripture: 4%

2) By church year, the percentage of those women who are worthy examples is as follows:

Year A: 71%

Year B: 86%

Year C: 82%

3) By church year, the percentage of those women who are used

as teaching material is as follows:

Year A: 20%

Year B: 0%

Year C: 18%

One can see that the stories of women in the lectionary can be increased rather easily. Some points need to be made:

a) There are a number of examples of women as central characters and teaching examples which can be accessed.

b) The examples of women as “matter out of place” may be helpful if a critical analysis of women’s status in the ancient world is incorporated so that the texts do not reinforce a patriarchal worldview.

c) The selections of unsavory women might well be included so as to balance the stories of exemplary women. It is dangerous to allow the sole portrayal of women to be that of women on pedestals because then the shadow side casts them into the gutter. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the complexity of Judas’ motives was portrayed more than is usual. Perhaps the same needs to be done in the case of Herodias, not to erase the evil she did but to observe her as more than a stick puppet playing a part.

d) The percentage of women in the lectionary in total who are used as worthy examples is 79%, that of teaching examples is 14%. The disparity of percentages between women as worthy examples and women as teaching examples points up the fact that when women are selected for the lectionary, they are superior women and not ordinary women. Do we want to emphasize that Christ only associated with superior women? One could easily increase the stories of women as teaching examples or as family members who react to Jesus (he *did* have sisters!).

e) Although some texts *not* in the lectionary (Luke 4:33–44) are parallel traditions of texts which are in the lectionary (Mark 1:29–39), others are not. The Samaritan woman in the gospel of John (4:27–45), the anointing at Bethany (John 12:1–11), the woman accused of adultery (John 8:1–11), the pregnancy

of Elizabeth (Luke 1:57-80), and the story of the bent woman (Luke 13:10-21) are cases in point. The Samaritan woman is an example of a woman who discussed theological issues with Jesus. In the case of the anointing at Bethany, the story is significantly different from the stories in the other gospels (cf. Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and Luke 7:36-50). To include only one of the anointing stories distorts the evidence that such actions occurred more than once. The story of Jesus' defense of the woman accused of adultery has been particularly helpful to women who have suffered abuse.⁶

The story of the pregnancy of Elizabeth is absent from the lectionary as is the rejoicing of Elizabeth's neighbours in the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57-80). This means that the congregation does not hear these important stories. The story of Mary's pregnancy is cut short at v. 30. That the Magnificat, the prophetic song, is an optional reading (see year C, the fourth Sunday in Advent) is an impoverishment of the Christian story! These celebrations of the presence of God in the events of the lives of women need to be told and retold.

It is most unfortunate that the story of the bent woman in Luke 13:10-21 is also omitted from the lectionary. The symbolic action in this story is a beautiful account of God's desire for the self-affirmation of women in general and therefore the narrative is vital for women to hear. It can even be Word of God to seek change in an abusive relationship⁷ because it is clear from the story that God desires the well-being of women who are bent with oppression.

f) In year C, the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb is submerged in the account of Peter and the other disciple who ran to the tomb (John 20:1-9). Still worse, verse 10 (that the disciples then went back to their homes) is completely omitted and, sadly, the rest of the story, namely, that Jesus spoke Mary's name and talked with her and equally important, her subsequent preaching to the disciples is not told; as a result, it is not remembered as part of the story of the community of the faithful. Instead, it is relegated to a lesser festival which is hardly ever celebrated. This omission from our church year is a travesty of the gospel as recorded for us.

g) When one is counting pericopes from the New Testament

with women as central characters and comparing them with those having men as central characters, there are several unavoidable difficulties. The texts deal with the life and ministry of the man, Jesus. As such, there is no way that the texts can be completely balanced in terms of gender. The effect upon men and women of having God's incarnation in male flesh depends upon whether the emphasis is placed upon the "maleness" or the "flesh". Many people will deny that it is Jesus' maleness which is being defended. However, one need only suggest that Jesus' body upon the cross be represented as a female body for the resistance to appear.

Yet suppose it is emphasized that God's incarnation in Jesus expresses God's *humanness*. That leaves the possibility for all worshippers to identify with the humanness of Jesus. At the same time it pushes for a balanced experience of the listeners. We will never be able to achieve perfect balance with biblical texts, but we can begin to close the gap.

h) There are several passages from the category of women as teaching material which do *not* appear in the lectionary which enhance our knowledge of Jesus' relationship to women as well as of the context in which Jesus lived. One such passage is Matthew 11:12-24 with its parallel in Luke 7:18-35. Wisdom is personified as a woman in a passage which may well be very early. The portrayal of Jesus as glutton and drunkard is not likely to have been created by the early church nor is it standard within Jewish tradition. Therefore the statement may go back to Jesus. Jesus' association with the feminine principle of wisdom is a fruitful ground for inquiry which we will not explore here.

Several passages reflect eschatological themes (Luke 21:20-24, Mark 13:14-23 with its parallel in Matthew 24:15-36). These eschatological passages show concern for women and children. During the recent conflict in the Persian Gulf it seemed to me appropriate to hear these texts again.

While it is likely that Matthew 23:13-39 has been omitted from the lectionary because of its vitriolic anti-Pharisaic attitude, the sentence about Jesus gathering the Judaic children (his brothers and sisters) under his wings as a hen gathers her chicks (v. 37) has also gone by the wayside. However, there

is no need to excise any of these verses. The pericope can be dealt with in a responsible manner.

The section against the Pharisees requires that Christians face up to their anti-semitic shadows. It requires an explanation of the type of rhetoric exhibited by Matthew. It belongs with other passages of the day, like slander and the vituperation of opponents⁸. After all, the statement was made by a Jewish Jesus to his own tradition: one insider critiquing another and not the rhetoric of one religion against another. As such, Jesus' statement about being like a mother hen to his own people could function as a balance to the harsh statements before and after. The pericope when used in a church service needs a commentary to explain the type of rhetoric. In addition, surely one can come up with a dynamic equivalent to place the text within a Christian context. For example, one might point to the rhetoric used among contemporary Christians in, say, the abortion debate. I once heard each side of the abortion issue label the other side as Nazi. Labels are rhetoric and not accurate description.

The parable in Matthew 13:31–43 with its parallel in Luke 13:10–21 is significant because it envisages God as a woman baking bread and placing yeast in the dough. It is a wonderful image of God and serves as a corrective to exclusively masculine images available in the current lectionary.

John 16:16–33 is a beautiful passage of Jesus' concern for his followers. He recognizes that they will mourn for him when he is gone, but he also knows that they will rejoice at his return. To underline his point, Jesus uses an image of a woman who gives birth, pointing out first her travail and then her subsequent joy. The presence of such an image in the text and the opportunity to hear it normalize and sacralize the life experiences of many women, and it broadens the images available to men.

While the preceding passage values women's experience of childbirth, Luke 11:24–28 reminds us that Jesus' view of "blessedness" for women was not circumscribed in the role of mother. It must incorporate a life of obedience which may lead in a different direction from motherhood.

h) It is interesting to note that of all the pericopes dealing with

women, a high percentage are described as women who are worthy examples. (I did not count comparable examples of men; might they be fewer?) In any case, the salvation story is one in which rather ordinary men and a few significant women participate. Of course lots of ordinary women also participated, but their names and activities are not recorded.⁹ They remain invisible to us.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza among others has noted that reality lies not behind the text but in front of it. Language is a structuring process.¹⁰ Discourse fictionalises the readers in that they are cast into a role inscribed in the text.¹¹ For us to select fewer readings about women than are available, and for us to emphasize the exemplary figures at the expense of the ordinary characters (like the neighbours who rejoiced at John's birth) suggests that such events have little to do with the reign of God or that their presence in the text is unimportant or embarrassing and therefore needs to be subverted.

The reading of the text in worship functions as an occasion for the community to hear who we are and whose we are. It is therefore important for our congregations to hear stories about both men and women. Stories about women in the gospels are important for women because they need to have role models of the same gender in order to imagine their own place among the faithful. They are also important for men because women are their partners in the Christian church and the women in the gospels are men's foremothers. Consequently, an inclusion of more stories about women will lead to enriching of men's roots and history too. Further, from these stories we add to our spiritual repertoire additional models of faithfulness.

Within the church today, public office and leadership roles are held by both women and men. As such, they listen to scripture for active spiritual direction and we must acknowledge that a paucity of women's stories has and will continue to affect women's perceptions of themselves as Christians and how others perceive the significance of women's roles. Are they to be perceived as central to the faithful or ancillary? Are women to be perceived as agents for change and growth in the church or only in prescribed roles such as carrying out the decisions of others who are at the centre of decision-making?

In our lectionary, we need to redress the imbalance of texts, using both genders as central characters. Although this inclusion will not solve all the problems of the lectionary, it will let

worshippers know that in many and various ways women were a significant part of the salvation story, and that sometimes they were central exemplary figures. Since texts not only reflect reality, but also create it, we need always to ask ourselves, "What reality are we creating in our selection of texts?"

A Revised Common Lectionary is scheduled to appear in late 1992 through Abingdon Press. I am told that the people on the committee were attentive to including more texts about women. That will be good news indeed!

Notes

- 1 Marjorie Proctor-Smith, "Images of Women in the Lectionary," *Concilium*, 182 (1985) 51-62.
- 2 Peter Wyatt has voiced the importance that the stories of women's experience in the New Testament has had for his understanding of Christ. See "Exclusion Angers Christ," *The Observer* (September 1986) 26-27.
- 3 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).
- 4 Carol J. Schlueter, "The Bible and Inclusive Language," *Consensus*, 14/2 (1988) 25-34.
- 5 Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again At Sinai* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 4f; see also Judith Wegner, *Chattel or Person?: The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- 6 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985) 96-107, esp. 101.
- 7 For the importance of this story, see Bärbel von Wartenburg-Potter, *We Will Not Hang Our Harps on the Willows*, trans. Fred Kaan (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1987) 79-87.
- 8 Carol J. Schlueter, Ph.D. dissertation on "Polemical Hyperbole," McMaster University (forthcoming).
- 9 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Text and Reality—Reality as Text: The Problem of a Feminist Historical and Social Reconstruction Based on Texts," *Studia Theologica* 43 (1989) 19-34. "Feminist literary studies of the Bible—be they formalist, structuralist, or narratological—in turn carefully delineate how the androcentric text constructs the politics of gender and feminine representation. But they insist that we are no longer able to reconstruct the historical reality of women 'beneath' the text." Fiorenza again: "Yet our experience tells us that women have been historical subjects and have shaped culture and religion although androcentric records do not mention our existence and work" (22).
- 10 Fiorenza, "Text and Reality," 21.
- 11 *Ibid.* 21-22.