

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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The other day I was listening to an hour-long interview of former President Barack Obama. He was, I think, promoting a new book. President Obama was his usual charming self, and I enjoyed listening to him talk about his childhood in Kansas, Indonesia, and Hawaii. And it was particularly interesting to hear him talk about some of the moments in the 2008 campaign with the benefit of introspection and hindsight.

What struck me most, though, was how often Obama went out of his way to give credit and to thank the teams that helped win him the highest office in the land. He spoke at length about young staffers, fresh out of college, who worked long hours and built relationships in all sorts of different communities. In particular, he told a story of a campaign staffer in Iowa who was so good at her job that he is certain the campaign would not have been nearly as successful without her. He described her as smart and competent well beyond her 25 years and made sure to thank her by name. This struck me as deeply gracious and right. And it made me hope that, whatever successes I may have had in this life, I am quick to thank the different villages that worked together to make them possible.

This brings me to something I have been noticing a lot lately. And if you come to Wednesday evening services, you'll forgive me for repeating something that I've said there: our Bible stories seem to leave some people out.

Imagine an enormous crowd of people. Children, women, men, families and single people all gathered to hear the words of this itinerant rabbi, Jesus. They have come to hear that the poor are beloved and that the reign of God will come in simple things like water and wine and children. And that there is a different way that a person can live — a life lived in contradistinction to the Roman Empire.

I have been to big picnics my entire life. And, not to sound too terribly sexist, but when I look out in big crowds, I usually see women doing the lion's share of childcare, picnic packing, diaper wrangling, and general family preparedness. This isn't always the case, of course. But I think it's safe to say that there is a trend that in most of time, for most places, women have been the primary tenders to the immediate physical needs of the family.

And so, in the story of the loaves and the fishes which we heard this morning, I have to wonder where the women are? They're not mentioned. Sometimes the crowd gets a reference, but the women have no voice in the story.

This happens a lot in our scriptures. Women won't get a name or won't get mentioned. Or, their accomplishments will only get a few lines. And I think that over the course of time, this omission cannot help but affect how we start to think about male followers of Jesus vs. female followers of Jesus — not to mention anyone who doesn't fall into that binary.

And lately, this has been making me a little angry. I look at our stained glass, and I don't see the stories of faithful women mentioned. I look at the list of rectors of this church, and I see one female out of 11. I look at our prayer book, and I see language for God is that is both archaic and heavily male. Mary Daly, the great theologian from Union Seminary, famously wrote that "if God is male, then male is God." And so, I see a pretty straight line from women's omissions in our sacred texts to second class status of women for most of time in most cultures.

We are the church, and this is the time to address this, I am convinced. I believe that we have an ethical responsibility to reclaim and amplify the voices of women from our sacred texts, and I also believe that this project will only increase our understanding of God's grace.

So, back to the loaves and fishes. Every year when this story comes around, I tell the congregation that it is emblematic of the way that God's economy works. Rather than treat this bread and these fish as a commodity, God instead treats them as a gift, and in doing so, they are an endless miracle instead of a finite item. And I think that interpretation is still a solid one. But, on this reading, noticing who is not mentioned in the story, I want to use the story to critique the story. If the story of the bread and the fishes is about the abundance of God and the way that everyone is fed, then I think it is incumbent upon us to read the story by its own rules.

So I want you to use your imagination to think about the women who were sitting at the feet of Jesus and learning from them. I want you to think about the ways that children are casually draped on their laps and snuggling next to them. I want you to see women pregnant while listening to Jesus and women nursing while listening to Jesus. I want you to see little girls with their eyes aflame with the possibilities of God's new reign. And, this almost goes without saying, I want you to think about all the women who would be helping divide the bread and the fish and making sure that everyone is fed. Because if you have ever watched church women in a kitchen, you know that women know a thing or two about feeding the people of God.

So, while I was so impressed with our former president and the ways he pointed out the often disregarded members of his campaign, I was equally disappointed in the ways that the contributions of women are so often ignored in our scriptures.

I take comfort in the fact that Jesus has never forgotten the roles of women, it's just that the church sometimes has. So, remember our spiritual ancestors — Sara and Rachel and Esther and Judith and Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene and Lydia. They have been being faithful to God since the beginning of time, and I think it's time for the church to return their voices for the benefit of the next generation.

A sermon is supposed to contain good news, and I'm afraid that this has come across more like a rant about something important that was omitted in the text. And perhaps it has a bit. But I think the good news is that Jesus doesn't wait for us to be perfect before we are fed abundantly at God's table. Instead, we are loved even when we are slow to see the sin right before our eyes. Glory be to God, our Heavenly Mother and thanksgiving to all the Holy Women who have taught us about divine love. Amen.