

WOMEN'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

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Expanded Edition*

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GOSPEL OF JOHN

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INTRODUCTION

John's Canonical Voice

The basic plot structure of all four canonical Gospels is remarkably similar: all tell the story of a prophetic teacher and healer whose challenge of the status quo of religious and political systems led to his trial and public execution. All contain the promise of God's victory over death in the resurrection. All four also share many particular narrative details, for example, the giving of sight to the blind, restoring the ability to walk to those who are paralyzed, a miracle of bread and fish. All four contain lengthy accounts of the trial and death of Jesus.

The story and details that are shared by all four canonical Gospels form an important starting point for any introduction to the Gospel of John, because the differences between John and the other Gospels are often exaggerated, with little attention to what all canonical Gospels have in common. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are grouped together under the title the Synoptic Gospels (literally, "the Gospels that see together"), further suggesting that these three Gospels speak with a common voice and that John is the only Gospel with a distinctive voice. The lectionaries in current use in the church reinforce this view of the interrelationship of the canonical Gospels, because they follow a three-year cycle, with one year devoted to each of the Synoptic Gospels.

The Synoptic Gospels do agree with one another in ways that John does not share. For example, in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' public ministry begins in Galilee, and Jesus moves out of Galilee into Judea only once, in the journey

to Jerusalem that culminates in his death. In John, Jesus' ministry alternates between Galilee and Jerusalem. He makes three trips to Jerusalem (2:13; 5:1; 7:10) in contrast to the one trip of the Synoptic Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' public ministry lasts one year, whereas John narrates a three-year public ministry. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus often speaks in parables; in John he rarely does. Yet to identify the Synoptic Gospels as the single norm against which John should be measured and interpreted does a disservice to John in particular, but more importantly, also distorts our understanding of the New Testament Gospel literature more generally. There is no single New Testament story of Jesus, and John's story of Jesus cannot be understood fully when it is read primarily as "other" or "different."

Each canonical Gospel is engaged in interpreting the meaning of the Jesus story for the faith needs of a particular community. Each Gospel selects details from the life and ministry of Jesus—none of them is encyclopedic in scope—to highlight a particular understanding of the ways in which Jesus revealed God to the world and the ways a community can shape its life and faith around that revelation. The church's faith is fuller when the particularities of each Gospel story are recognized and celebrated for their distinctive contribution to the story of God in Jesus.

Recognition of the range and distinctiveness of NT Gospel portraits of Jesus is an important starting point and building block of feminist-attuned readings of these texts. That the NT Gospels contain multiple stories and images of

Jesus suggests that from early on, the NT writers recognized the depth and richness in presenting a variety of theological and narrative perspectives. To name and claim voices and emphases in the Gospel of John (or any NT text) that may differ from the dominant cultural or church narrative about Jesus and the Christian faith continues this theological practice.

Historical and Social Setting

The author of the Gospel of John, like the authors of the other Gospels, is anonymous. The name "John" was attached to this Gospel by the church, and its author was identified as the apostle John. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the Gospel was actually written by this apostle. The Gospel names "the beloved disciple" as the guarantor of its tradition (19:35; 21:20–24) but does not give this disciple a name. That the guarantor of this tradition is identified by his relationship to Jesus ("beloved") and not by his name reinforces one of the central emphases of this Gospel: the centrality of relationship with Jesus. Neither does the Gospel of John provide a clear indication of its place of composition; it is written in Greek, which was spoken throughout the Mediterranean world.

In the late twentieth century, it was conventional for scholars to speak of a definitive rupture between the synagogue and the Jewish Christians for whom the Gospel of John was written, and to date that break (and hence the composition of the Gospel) to the late 80s or 90s. John 9 was seen as the signal passage that illustrated this break between the synagogue and those Jews who claimed Jesus as the Messiah. More recent scholarship has begun to take a more nuanced approach to this question, however.

There is no doubt that tension between the Jewish religious establishment and Jesus and his followers permeates the Gospel of John. Yet the exact nature of that tension, and what John means by the term "the Jews," is difficult to reproduce. This is not to soft-pedal the rhetoric of the Gospel of John; John 8, in particular, contains vitriolic language that parallels in intensity the anti-Pharisee language of Matthew 23. Yet solutions to this tension that point knowingly to the rupture with the synagogue often inadvertently create new problems, because the responsibility for the tension is shifted to the

Jewish religious authorities who forced the Jewish Christians out of the synagogue.

The social context of the first-century Mediterranean world was much more complex than a simple Jew/Christian polarity. Everyone in ancient Palestine was first and foremost a subject of the Roman Empire, and all religious, economic, and social life took place under the reality of imperial domination. For all Jews, both those who understood Jesus to be the fresh and definitive revelation of God in the world and those who did not, life was fraught with tension. Among canonical NT books, this tension is most on display in Revelation, where one of the author's central theological goals is to enable the readers to see the Roman Empire for what it is—a threat to God's reign in the world—and to encourage them to resist accommodating their lives to the empire's values.

The Gospel of John was written in the same social setting, and the religious interactions in the book need to be read in that light. Much like the audience for Revelation, the community that read the Gospel of John was faced with a complex set of social choices: to stay in the synagogue as a member of a religious group officially recognized by the Roman Empire and thereby avoid the empire's fresh scrutiny; to stay in the synagogue and also worship with Jewish Christians privately, outside of imperial view and safe from imperial sanction; to break with the synagogue, worship openly, and take the imperial consequences. For John, the third option was the only real choice, and he casts the choice throughout the Gospel in very stark terms. Like the author of Revelation, John has little patience with those who take what he perceives to be the safe course. He calls his readers to do exactly what Jesus did—live one's faith and love of God publicly, even if the cost for that is execution at the hands of Rome.

The values of resistance and witness that shape John's Gospel are consistent with a feminist critique of power; John challenged his readers not to take the easy way and accommodate to existing social structures. Yet John's rhetoric about "the Jews" and the demands of faithful witness has a tragic history of misappropriation by later Christian communities. John's rhetoric has been turned into an instrument of power and oppression rather than understood as an instrument of resistance. A feminist reading of John's language about "the Jews" enables a multifocused reading of this issue: one that

is attentive to the voice of resistance in John's worldview, but one that recognizes that, even in John's original context, this language of resistance was not value-neutral and that whatever its original purpose, the consequences of this rhetoric of resistance continue to have ethical implications for all Christians.

Structure and Contents

The Gospel of John opens with an eighteen-verse prologue that signals to the reader what lies ahead. One helpful image for these opening verses is the overture to a musical or opera. The overture contains all the musical themes of the work that follows, but it is only as the opera or musical unfolds that the audience can recognize all the themes. The theme of the incarnation is clustered in the conclusion of the prologue, in verses 14, 16, and 18, so that—to continue to the musical metaphor—the crescendo of the incarnation theme propels the reader forward into the Gospel's story of Jesus.

For the Gospel of John, the center of the Jesus story is the incarnation: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Gospel's focus on incarnation and embodiment makes John an important resource for feminist theological

conversations on embodiment, because in John, salvation is found in and through the flesh, not apart from the flesh.

John 1 ends with a promise that Jesus' disciples will "see greater things than these" (1:51), and the Gospel story can be read as the narrative fulfillment of that promise. The Gospel divides into two large sections: chapters 2–12, Jesus' ministry, and chapters 13–21, Jesus' last days (arrest, trial, death, and resurrection). The central focus of both parts of the Gospel is always on how Jesus reveals God through Jesus' words and his actions.

Women characters play significant roles in the Gospel of John in ways unparalleled in the other canonical Gospels. The opening miracle in Jesus' ministry occurs at a woman's initiative (2:1–11). Women are Jesus' main conversation partners in three pivotal stories that reveal Jesus' identity and vocation and the nature of faithful discipleship (4:4–42; 7:53–8:11; 11:1–44). Jesus' death is watched over by the women from its preparation (12:1–8) through crucifixion (19:25–27) and resurrection (20:1–18). Men do not have a monopoly on witness and discipleship in John; rather, the Gospel of John narrates a faith world that would not exist without women's participation.

COMMENT

The Incarnation (John 1)

The classic statement of 1:14 (my trans.), "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," establishes the incarnation theme. It is further amplified by 1:16, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace," and 1:18, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known."

These verses are the necessary frame for understanding John's story of the revelation of God in Jesus. God is made known in the enfleshed life of the Word in the world, and that life is one of fullness and grace. This contrasts sharply with themes of sacrifice and emptying, common in other NT writings and later Christian traditions. John 1:14 could not be farther removed from the kenotic perspective

of Philippians 2:6–7, for example. For Paul, the incarnation is a moment of emptying, of "giving up" that reaches its nadir in the death on the cross (Phil. 2:8). The low point of the death is then balanced by the high point of exaltation (Phil. 2:9). This perspective dominates most conversations, especially Protestant conversations, about the life and death of Jesus. But for John, the incarnation is not an emptying; rather, as 1:14 and 16 make abundantly clear, the incarnation is a moment of fullness. Flesh is where the action is—where the Word encounters and engages the world.

The prologue also introduces the language of father and son, language that underscores the importance of embodiment for John. John 1:18 speaks of Jesus as *monogenēs* (regularly translated as "the only begotten"). *Monogenēs* is an adjective formed by adding "mono" (single) to the verb *gennēthenai*, which importantly can mean both "begotten" and "born or birthed." The

English reader of *gennēthenai* is forced to choose between a translation that favors the male procreative role (begotten—sired, to use an old-fashioned phrase), or the female role (birthed). Most translations favor the “begotten” side of that translation choice, yet it is a more accurate reading to imagine both aspects of *gennēthenai* at play simultaneously. The addition of the prefix “mono” names the distinctive relationship of the incarnate Word to God: the Son is the only begotten/birthed one of the Father. The use of this adjective with multiple meanings enables John to evoke in one word the full range of human birth and generation in describing the incarnation. That the Son is both “sired” by the Father and “birthed” by the Father suggests that conventional understandings of gender are being redefined. The vocabulary may name conventionally male roles, but the enactment of those roles by God and Jesus transform gender.

Jesus' Ministry (John 2–12)

The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11)

John 2:1–11 is the opening event in Jesus' ministry. In 1:35–51, Jesus gathers his first disciples, and in 2:1–11 he attends a wedding with them (2:2). Jesus' mother is also in attendance (2:1). This is the first mention of Jesus' mother in John. Verse 2 indicates that Jesus “was invited” to the wedding. He is not the host of the wedding feast but a guest like everyone else.

Jesus' mother is the catalyst for the miracle in this story. When the wine at the wedding feast runs out, Jesus' mother informs him of this lack. When Jesus' mother speaks to him in 2:3, she asks nothing explicit of him, but Jesus' response in verse 4 makes clear that her words contain an implied request. Jesus' words to his mother in 2:4 seem harsh to the modern ear: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” His words are not an act of rudeness to his mother, however, but are an important assertion of Jesus' freedom from all human control. Verse 4 insists that Jesus' actions will not be dictated by anyone else's time or will. His mother's response indicates that she understands this. She tells the servants with utter confidence that Jesus will do something. His mother enacts discipleship: she trusts that Jesus will act and allows him to act in freedom.

The miracle that Jesus performs is appropriate to the personal setting of the wedding. Turning water into wine is an act of turning scarcity

into abundance, of repaying the initial hospitality offered him. Jesus' first miracle in John takes place in the presence of friends and family, not in the presence of powers and authorities. This opening to Jesus' ministry shows that the miraculous life-giving power of God is at work even (and perhaps, especially) in the intimate daily places of human lives. It also is a miracle of pure abundance and grace—nothing life-threatening was at stake here, as will be the case in many of Jesus' healing miracles. This miracle illustrates the celebration of the prologue, “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

New Birth (John 3)

The *monogenēs* of the prologue occurs again in the Gospel at 3:3–8, in the conclusion to Jesus' teachings to Nicodemus about new birth. The exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus centers around the meaning of birth and embodiment, expressed with two words with double meanings, *gennēthenai* and *anōthen* (which can equally be translated “anew” or “from above”). The most frequent translation choice for *anōthen*, “anew” or “again,” privileges its temporal dimension and renders invisible its spatial or physical dimensions.

Nicodemus has difficulty understanding the language of *anōthen*, in part because he cannot hold the physical and the spiritual together (“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”). Jesus tries to clarify Nicodemus's misunderstanding by restating the kind of birth he envisions with the phrase “born of water and Spirit.” This phrase highlights the new life of which Jesus speaks, because “water” evokes the waters of physical birth, and “spirit” points to a new birth from God. The physical birth and the spiritual rebirth go hand in hand here. They are not distinct options, because flesh and spirit belong together in the new birth Jesus envisions. One is not reborn to a new life apart from the physical body; one is reborn to a new life within the physical body.

What Jesus offers Nicodemus is what Jesus himself embodies in the incarnation: God-made-present in the flesh. The promise of new life that Jesus extends here is a promise that will be experienced in the body of the believer and made possible by the body of Jesus. Jesus engages believers with his body—the living water that flows from his belly (or, as it can also be translated, his womb, 7:37–39), his body

bread, his blood wine (6:53). Jesus' body is the temple (2:21). Jesus' body is the place where God dwells, the place where God's presence can be found in the world (cf. also 1:51). Jesus' miracles are enacted in the realm of the body and its physical functions—a superabundance of wine, bread, and fish, healings, the raising of a man from the dead. The feminist theme of embodiment is central to this Gospel.

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (John 4:4–42)

Prior to this story of Jesus' visit to Samaria, Jesus' activity has centered on the people and places of official Judaism (e.g., 2:13–25; 3:1–21). When Jesus travels to Samaria (4:4), he moves away from official Judaism. At the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies (see 4:9). The source of the enmity between them was a dispute about the correct location of the cultic place of worship, a problem the Samaritan woman herself puts before Jesus (4:20). Although the break between Jews and Samaritans is first narrated in 2 Kings 17, the most intense rivalry began about 300 BCE. The Samaritans built and worshiped at a shrine on Mount Gerizim, a shrine that competed with the temple in Jerusalem. This shrine eventually was destroyed by Jewish troops in 128 BCE.

When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, he meets someone who provides a striking contrast to all that has preceded. When Jesus speaks with Nicodemus in John 3, he speaks with a male member of the Jewish religious establishment. In John 4 he speaks with a female member of an enemy people. Nicodemus has a name, but the woman is unnamed. She is known only by what she is: a foreign woman.

The woman herself notes the scandal of their conversation. She responds to Jesus' request for water with the words, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (4:9). The woman knows that a Jewish man should not talk with a Samaritan woman. Moreover, a Jew should not consider drinking water from a Samaritan vessel (4:9). The scandal is noted also by Jesus' disciples when they arrive at the well (4:27). They are amazed that Jesus speaks with this woman.

The disciples want to ask Jesus why he is speaking with her, but their question remains unvoiced. Their protests reflect traditional

cultural and social conventions and expectations, and their protests show their distance from Jesus and his work in the world. Jesus breaks open boundaries in his conversation with the Samaritan woman: the boundary between male and female, the boundary between "chosen people" and "rejected people." Jesus' journey to Samaria and his conversation with the woman demonstrate that the grace of God that he offers is available to all. This conversation challenges the status quo by offering the water of life (4:13–14) to a Samaritan woman.

Perhaps it is not surprising that commentators on this text have more readily accepted the offer of the gospel to the Samaritans, a despised people, than they have accepted the offer of the gospel to the woman, a despised sex. This resistance to Jesus' boundary breaking in his conversation with the woman takes two main forms. First, many commentators raise questions about the woman's moral character. Second, many commentators express doubts about the woman's intellectual or theological ability to engage Jesus in serious conversation. Both strategies attempt to delegitimize the woman as a conversation partner for Jesus and hence as a recipient of the gospel.

The popular portrait of the woman in John 4 as a woman of dubious morals, guilty of aberrant sexual behavior, derives from a misreading of John 4:16–18. In these verses, the Samaritan woman tells Jesus she has no husband (4:17). Jesus responds to the woman's words by telling her the story of her life (4:18). The text does not say, as most interpreters automatically assume, that the woman has been divorced five times but that she has had five husbands. There are many possible reasons for the woman's marital history, and one should be leery of the dominant explanation of moral laxity. Perhaps the woman, like Tamar in Genesis 38, is trapped in the custom of levirate marriage and the last male in the family line has refused to marry her. Significantly, the reasons for the woman's marital history intrigue commentators but do not seem to concern Jesus. Nor does Jesus pass moral judgment on the woman because of her marital history and status. All such judgments are imported into the text by interpreters. When interpreters speak of the woman as "a five-time loser" or a "tramp" (as has been the case in scholarship about this story), they are reflecting their own prejudices against women, not the views of the text.

When one sets aside the prejudicial misreading of John 4:16–18 and reads the story on its own terms, one sees that the conversation about the woman's husbands serves two purposes. First, it illustrates Jesus' ability to see and know all things. This is an important theme in John (e.g., 1:48–50; 2:24). Second, it is a moment of revelation for the woman, a moment when she is able to see Jesus with new eyes. She responds to Jesus' announcement of her marital status with the words, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet" (4:19). This exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman about her husbands does not delegitimize the woman because of her supposed immorality but instead shows the woman's growing faith.

The woman's recognition of Jesus as a prophet leads her to ask him the most pressing theological question that stands between Jews and Samaritans (4:20): Where is the proper place to worship God? Yet many commentators have dismissed the woman's words to Jesus as a psychological ploy, as a classical act of evasion to change the subject from the embarrassing truth about her morals. Commentators doubt whether this woman would have been able to understand the substance of Jesus' words to her. Once again we see presuppositions about women (women's intellect and interests) skewing a faithful reading of the text. The text presents the woman as a character who is unafraid to stay in conversation with Jesus, who recognizes that a prophet is the perfect person of whom to ask her question. The woman is the first character in the Gospel to engage in sustained theological conversation with Jesus. At the end of the conversation about worship (4:20–26), the woman's faith grows again, as she begins to think about the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah (4:29).

The outcome of the story of John 4:4–42 itself offers a persuasive counterbalance to any attempts to diminish the woman's identity and role. When Jesus' disciples return from the city (4:27), the woman leaves Jesus and goes into the city to testify to her townspeople about Jesus (4:29). On the basis of the woman's testimony (4:30, 39), many of the Samaritan villagers believe in Jesus and go to meet Jesus for themselves. To witness to Jesus—to see Jesus and tell others about that experience—is one of the primary marks of discipleship in John. John the Baptist witnessed to Jesus and led some of his own disciples to Jesus (1:29–37). Jesus' first

disciples witnessed to him, and the number of his followers grew (1:40–49). Now the Samaritan woman witnesses to Jesus, and through her words many come to faith. When the Samaritan villagers hear and see Jesus for themselves, the woman's witness is superseded (4:42). That is the appropriate pattern of discipleship and faith. The witness that leads to Jesus is replaced by one's own experience of Jesus. The Samaritan woman is a witness and disciple like John the Baptist, Andrew, and Philip.

A Textual Interlude: Scribes, Pharisees, and Women (John 7:53–8:11)

The story traditionally known as "the Woman Taken in Adultery" has a complicated textual history. The passage is missing from the earliest Greek manuscripts of John. When the passage is found in manuscripts, it appears in several locations. This location after 7:52 is the best-attested, but some manuscripts place the passage after John 7:36, or at the end of the Gospel of John. The complicated textual history influences the way the passage is printed in most English translations (note the brackets that surround John 7:53–8:11 in the NRSV) and has occasioned much scholarly debate. The scholarly consensus holds that the story is an authentic piece of Jesus tradition, but opinion is divided on whether or not the story belonged originally to the tradition of the Gospel of John.

When reading John 7:53–8:11, the interpreter finds a situation unique to the New Testament—a well-known Jesus story that is told and retold in the life of the church, but whose textual and canonical status is up for debate. This presents a challenge to the interpreter: while one can comment on the contents and theology of this particular passage, one cannot really move from there to talk about how this passage fits in the larger scheme of John. John 7:53–8:11 is a story without a time or place, a story to be read on its own terms without sustained reference to its larger literary context.

Just as popular interpretation reads John 4:16–18 as a judgment against the Samaritan woman, popular interpretation of 7:53–8:11 reads this text as a judgment against the woman. In the most prevalent reading of this text, which can be traced back to Augustine, Jesus is the embodiment of grace and the woman is the embodiment of sin. A careful reading of the story, however, shows that this narrow polarity between Jesus and the woman distorts the text.

The story consists of three scenes. The action of the story begins when the scribes and Pharisees bring the woman who has been caught in adultery to Jesus and ask him to judge her case (8:3-5). The second scene of the story begins in 8:6b when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground with his finger. He writes on the ground to indicate his unwillingness to spring the trap that has been set for him. The scribes and Pharisees continue to press him for an answer; so in 8:7 Jesus stands and addresses them directly. The last scene of the story begins in 8:8, when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground again. The crowd departs while Jesus writes on the ground (8:9). In 8:10 Jesus stands up again and speaks to the woman twice. When he finishes speaking to her, she is free to go, just as the rest of the crowd did.

What is striking about this story is that Jesus treats the woman as the social and human equal of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus speaks to both sets of characters about sin. His words to the scribes and Pharisees, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7), envision the past, the way the crowd has lived until this moment. His words to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (8:11), envision the future, the way the woman could live from now on. Jesus invites both the scribes and Pharisees and the woman to begin life anew in the present moment. They are invited to give up old ways and enter a new way of life.

When the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman who had been caught in adultery to Jesus, they dehumanized her, turning her into an object for debate and discussion. Interpretations of John 7:53-8:11 that focus exclusively on the woman, and on her sexual behavior as sin, continue to dehumanize and objectify her. The text does not isolate the woman's sin, nor does Jesus single out the woman as "sinner." Rather, the text identifies all the characters as in need of and receiving an invitation to new life. Jesus' offer of grace and mercy to sinners is extended equally to scribes, Pharisees, and women.

Mary, Martha, and Jesus (John 11:1-44)

The miracle of the raising of Lazarus is the climax of John 11:1-44, but it is not its center. Of the forty-four verses that constitute this story, only seven of them take place at Lazarus's tomb (11:38-44). The story centers on the

conversations in which Jesus participates as he travels to Lazarus's tomb. These conversations highlight that the raising of Lazarus is the demonstration of God's power for life. Jesus' main conversation partners as he travels to Lazarus's tomb are Mary and Martha, Lazarus's sisters.

The opening verses of this story contain many references to the family of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Lazarus and his illness are mentioned first in 11:1, but the town in which Lazarus lives, Bethany, is identified as "the village of Mary and her sister Martha" (11:1). The sisters are better known than their brother. Verse 2 tells us why Mary is so well known. She is the one "who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair." Since the anointing does not take place until the next chapter (12:1-8), this reference testifies to the powerful place Mary occupied in the tradition of the early church. One could not speak of this Mary without remembering the story of the anointing (cf. Mark 14:9).

Mary and Martha's initiative sets this story in motion (11:3). Their message about Lazarus's illness resembles the words of Jesus' mother in 2:3 about the wine shortage. In both cases the women do not explicitly request anything of Jesus; they simply present Jesus with the facts. Yet in both cases the reader senses that these women address Jesus with the confidence that he will know what to do. The motivation for Mary and Martha's address to Jesus, and perhaps the source of their confidence in him as well, is their knowledge of his love for Lazarus. Like the story of Jesus and his mother in chapter 2, this is a story about intimates.

John 11:5 shows that Mary and Martha are correct: Jesus loves the whole family. Yet Jesus' actions in response to that love are puzzling. Instead of rushing to the assistance of this beloved family, Jesus stays away longer (11:6). Jesus is not insensitive to the family's needs, but he understands that this family drama belongs to a larger story. Lazarus's illness is part of the story of the glory of God (11:4). This illness is not an isolated event but is part of Jesus' ministry and mission (11:15). When Jesus finally heads for this family in Bethany, he does so knowing that his return to Judea carries with it the possibility of his own death (11:8). Jesus' own future and the future of this family are inextricably linked.

When Jesus arrives at Bethany, Lazarus has been buried for four days (11:17). Men and

women from the Jewish community have come to mourn with the two sisters (11:19). When word of Jesus' approach reaches this grieving family and community, Martha goes first to meet him, while Mary stays at home (11:20). This detail is reminiscent of the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42. Luke and John both may be preserving memories of the same family.

The conversation between Martha and Jesus is the theological heart of this story. Martha's opening words to Jesus express both complaint and confidence: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (11:21–22). Martha's bold and robust faith empowers her to speak forthrightly to Jesus. Even in the face of her brother's death, she still trusts Jesus to make God's gifts available.

Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again (11:23). Martha understands those words as a statement of the Jewish belief in the resurrection at the last day (11:24); however, this is not the resurrection of which Jesus speaks. In 11:25 Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." The victory over death that resurrection represents is available in the present moment in the person of Jesus, not only in some distant future. Through faith in Jesus, death loses its power and life gains new power (11:26a). Jesus challenges and transforms Martha's (and the reader's) traditional understandings of life and death. Jesus places this promise of new life before Martha and asks her, "Do you believe this?" (11:26b).

Martha responds to Jesus' question with a confession of faith (11:27). Her confession, spoken in conventional language, rings more of the old than it does of the radical new life offered by Jesus. Martha embodies the central question of this Gospel: Will the faithful continue to contain Jesus within their own predetermined categories, however well intended those categories may be, or will believers allow Jesus to shatter those categories and offer them the radical fullness of his grace?

Martha returns home and summons Mary to Jesus (11:28). Mary speaks to Jesus with the same forthrightness that Martha did (11:32) and also places her grief before Jesus. She and the Jews who have followed her continue their weeping in Jesus' presence. Their weeping touches Jesus (11:33), and he is finally ready to go to Lazarus's tomb (11:34), where Jesus himself weeps (11:35). Jesus' tears may be a sign of

his love for this family, as some in the crowd suppose (11:36), but that is not all they signify. Jesus weeps also because of the destructive power of death that is still at work in the world. Once again one sees the intersection of the intimate and the cosmic: the pain of this family reminds Jesus of the pain of the world.

At Lazarus's tomb Jesus orders the stone to be taken away (11:39). Martha tries to stop him, reminding him of how putrid the four-day-old corpse will smell. Jesus reminds Martha of what he said earlier, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (11:40). Jesus' words hold sway, the stone is rolled away, and Jesus calls Lazarus from death back into life (11:41, 43–44).

Jesus' conversations with Mary and Martha transform this story from a miracle story about the raising of Lazarus into a story about the fullness of new life that is possible to all who believe in Jesus. For John, the initiative of these women in sending for Jesus, their bold and robust faith, the grief and pain that they bring to Jesus, their willingness to engage Jesus in conversation about life, death, and faith, and their unfaltering love for Jesus are marks of discipleship.

The Anointing of Jesus (John 12:1–8)

The family of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus returns to prominence in the story of the anointing in 12:1–8. In the interval between the raising of Lazarus and this story, the chief priests and the Pharisees have determined that Jesus must be killed (11:53). The upcoming feast of Passover seems a good time to capture him, because as an observant Jewish male, Jesus will probably come up to Jerusalem for the feast (11:55–57). All three family members are mentioned explicitly in this story. Martha, like the Martha in Luke 10:40, serves the meal. Lazarus dines at table with Jesus (12:2). Mary, who is mentioned last (12:3), has the central role in the story.

Mary's anointing of Jesus is narrated in one long sentence in Greek (although the NRSV punctuates it as two sentences): "Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (12:3). The anointing is an act of pure extravagance, underscored by the comment that the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. Mary has anointed Jesus so lavishly that all present can participate in it.

This is the second time a scent has been connected with this family. In 11:39 Martha worried about the odor of Lazarus's rotting corpse. Here, however, the odor is the marvelous fragrance of nard. The odor of death has been replaced by the odor emanating from Mary's extravagant love.

Judas protests the anointing (12:5-6), but his protest does not diminish Mary's act. Rather, it reaffirms the extravagance of her gesture: she has spent almost a year's wages for Jesus. Judas tries to establish a situation of either/or love: either you love Jesus, or you love the poor. Jesus refutes Judas by affirming the kind of both/and love Mary has shown: one can love both Jesus and the poor (12:7-8).

This story of the anointing anticipates three crucial parts of the remainder of the Gospel of John. First, as Jesus' words to Judas suggest, the anointing anticipates Jesus' death and burial. Jesus will be anointed again when he is laid in the tomb (19:38-42). At his death, however, Jesus will be anointed in secret by men who are afraid to make public their faith (19:38-39). In this story, Mary unashamedly anoints Jesus in front of all who dined with him. Mary's declaration for Jesus is not deferred until after his death but is offered to Jesus while he lives.

Second, this anointing, in which Mary anoints Jesus' feet rather than his head (cf. Mark 14:3; Matt. 26:7), anticipates the footwashing in John 13:1-20. There are two dimensions to the footwashing: it models service and discipleship (13:12-16), but service and discipleship are possible because to participate in the footwashing is to participate in the expression of Jesus' love that leads to his death (13:3-11). Mary's anointing of Jesus anticipates both of these dimensions. It is an act of service, but it also participates in the events of Jesus' death. Mary does for Jesus now what Jesus will do for his disciples later.

Third, Mary's anointing of Jesus anticipates the love commandment that Jesus will give his disciples: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34-35). The depth of Mary's love for Jesus is signaled by the extravagance of her gift. Mary is the first person in the Gospel to live out Jesus' love commandment.

In chapter 11 Martha modeled the robust faith that makes it possible to embrace Jesus' gift of new life. In this story Mary also models

discipleship: to serve, to love one another, to share in Jesus' death.

Jesus' Last Days (John 13-21)

The Farewell Discourse (John 13:1-17:24)

Chapters 13-17 are known as the Farewell Discourse, because here Jesus speaks to his disciples just prior to his arrest, trial, and death. Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure from them and for their life in his absence. What Jesus envisions as the future for his disciples is the present reality for the reader of the Gospel, because the contemporary church lives without the physical presence of Jesus and is sustained by Jesus' words. Jesus' words in chapters 13-17 offer a vision of the new life that is possible for all who follow him. At the heart of this vision is the community's love for one another: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." This vision of love receives its most explicit statement in 13:34-35; 15:12; and 15:17, but the language of love runs throughout the Farewell Discourse (e.g., 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:8-9).

When the commandment to love one another is compared with the abundance and variety of ethical teaching in Matthew and Luke, the ethics of John are often found wanting. For example, in Matthew and Luke Jesus commands that one love one's enemies, but in John, Jesus commands only one thing: "Love one another as I have loved you." To find the ethical demand of this commandment too easy and somehow inferior, however, is to be deceived by the simplicity of its wording and the sharpness of its focus. It is also to dismiss the language of love and mutuality as not being serious ethical categories.

The commandment to love one another is essentially sectarian; its primary focus is on the life of the Christian community. That focus does not provide grounds for dismissing the ethical seriousness of the commandment. Indeed, the history of the church and of individual communities of faith suggests that to love one another may be the most difficult thing Jesus could have asked. There are many circumstances in which it is easier to love one's enemies than it is to love those with whom one lives, works, and worships day after day.

The language of love is a different ethical language from the language of discipleship

found in the Synoptic Gospels. It is language of fullness rather than language of emptying. One will give one's life for one's friends as an act of love (15:13), not as an act of self-denial and sacrifice, as it is understood in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Mark 8:34). In John, one gives out of the abundance of one's love, not out of the denial of one's self.

The Johannine language of the fullness and abundance of love is very important for women, because a one-sided emphasis on emptying and self-denial has led many women (and some men) to subscribe to an ethos of perpetual self-sacrifice and the meaninglessness of self. The Gospel of John provides a much-needed balance to this ethos. Fullness and the sharing of love characterize discipleship and faith. The Christian community is known by how much its members love one another, not by how much they deny themselves. The ultimate sign of this love remains the willingness to give one's life in love, but this gift, like Jesus' gift, will be given in fullness of grace, not in self-denial.

The Gospel of John makes clear that the Christians' love for one another derives from and is modeled on Jesus' love for his followers. Jesus loves his followers by making God's word (17:14), embodying God's love (17:23), calling many and varied sheep into his fold (10:16), calling his followers "friend," not servant (15:14-15), and laying down his life for his friends (10:17-18). All of these ways, not exclusively the last, model how the community of Jesus' followers is to love one another.

In the Farewell Discourse Jesus also paints a picture of the Christian community with his metaphor of the vine and its branches (15:1-11). The metaphor is quite vivid: Jesus is the vine, those who love Jesus are the branches, and God is the vine grower who tends the vine, pruning and trimming branches so that they bear fruit.

Two aspects of this metaphor are striking. First, the vine metaphor characterizes the Christian community as a community of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling. This mutuality is conveyed by the use of the verb "abide" which occurs ten times in 15:1-11. To "abide" means to "remain" and suggests constancy of presence. The term "abide" describes Jesus' relationship to God (15:10), Jesus' relationship to the community (15:4, 9), and the community's relationship to Jesus (15:1, 7). In

their mutuality, Jesus and God anticipate the possibilities of life for the community.

Individuals in the community will prosper only insofar as they recognize themselves as members of an organic unit. No individual is a free agent; rather, he or she is one branch of an encircling and intertwining vine whose fullness depends on abiding with Jesus: "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (15:4-5).

The life envisioned in this metaphor stands in striking contrast to contemporary Western models of individualism, privatism, and success based on individual accomplishment. This metaphor assumes social interrelationship and accountability. In the vine metaphor, an individual is fruitful only as he or she abides with others in Jesus' love. The mutuality envisioned by the vine metaphor is a sign of the presence and work of God: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (15:9).

Second, the metaphor of the vine provides a radical, nonhierarchical, perhaps even anti-hierarchical image for the composition and constitution of the church. One branch is indistinguishable from another; no branch has pride of place. All branches are rooted together in the one vine, and only as a result of their common root can they bear fruit. The task of assessing fruitfulness falls to God alone (15:2), not to any of the branches. As the vine grower, God works to prune and shape the vine so that it produces the maximum fruit. God decides what is dead wood and determines where and when to prune back a dead stick to find green wood and the promise of new life. Since God and God alone is the vine grower, all branches are equal before God. The future of the vine, of the church, is entrusted to God, not to any of the branches. There is no bishop branch, elder branch, or church bureaucratic branch with special status in this vine. One cannot distinguish between clergy and laity in this vine.

Jesus is the vine of the church, out of, into, and around which all the branches grow. The vine metaphor is a powerful image of the church: the center vine out of which the branches grow is identifiable, but the mass of intertwining branches is indistinguishable. One cannot tell which branch sprouted first, which

signals the po-

branch is longest, where one branch stops and another branch begins. Hierarchy among members is impossible in the vine of the church, because all members grow out of the same vine and are tended equally by the one vine grower.

Jesus' Mother and the Beloved Disciple (19:25-27)

John 19:25-27 narrates the scene at the foot of Jesus' cross. All four Gospel accounts of Jesus' death agree that women keep vigil at Jesus' death. Jesus predicted that all the followers would abandon him at his death, scattering to their own homes (16:32), but the women stand firm. In the face of death and the fear of reprisals, the women do not run away. They gather for the death watch (19:25). The tradition does not speculate on the reasons for the women's faithfulness; it simply reports it as fact.

In the Synoptic Gospels the women watch Jesus' death from afar, but in John they stand near the cross, so near that Jesus is able to speak to his mother. Verses 26-27 focus on Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple, who stands with her. This disciple is unnamed in the Gospel and is identified solely on the basis of Jesus' love for him. Like Mary in chapter 12, the disciple returns Jesus' love by being present to Jesus in his need.

Jesus speaks parallel sentences to his mother and the beloved disciple. To his mother he says, "Woman, here is your son" (19:26); to the disciple, "Here is your mother" (19:27). The precise symmetry of Jesus' words reinforces the symbolism of this exchange. Both Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple function as symbolic figures. As Jesus' birth mother, she is a reminder of the incarnation. She also was the witness to Jesus' first miracle (2:1-11), and so here at the cross Jesus' mother is a connection to Jesus' earthly ministry. The beloved disciple represents the community of disciples whose love and works will extend beyond the limits of the Gospel story proper. In this moment at the foot of Jesus' cross, the past (Jesus' mother) and the future (the beloved disciple) meet. At his death, Jesus ensures continuity between the past and the future.

At the heart of Jesus' ministry is the creation of a new family of God. The creation of this family is symbolized here when the beloved disciple takes Jesus' mother to his own home (19:27). Jesus was rejected by "his own" (1:11), but the beloved disciple's reception of Jesus' mother signals the possibility of a future marked by

acceptance, not rejection. The new family that is born at the foot of the cross is marked by love and faith.

In many of the stories from John, the gospel is expressed in language of intimacy and family. Jesus' mother, the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and the beloved disciple are all bound to Jesus with the intimate bonds of love. The Gospel of John is frequently criticized for making Jesus seem distant and removed from the everyday realities and struggles of human life. Many of the stories in this Gospel, however, especially those whose principal character is a woman, call such criticisms into question. In these stories Jesus is shown in intimate, loving relationship with family and friends.

Mary Magdalene and the Risen Jesus (20:1-18)

All four Gospels agree on one vital detail about Easter morning: in the early morning hours, when it was still dark, women went to Jesus' tomb. The specifics of that early morning visit vary from Gospel to Gospel (how many women were at the tomb, who greeted them at the tomb, how they responded to what they saw and heard), but the presence of the women is a constant. As with the women's vigil at Jesus' crucifixion, the tradition does not speculate about this further display of faithfulness by the women. It simply accepts it as an essential part of the story of the resurrection.

The story of Mary Magdalene in chapter 20 is the most detailed of the four stories about women at Jesus' tomb. It divides into two scenes: 20:1-10 (Mary at the empty tomb) and 20:11-18 (Mary and the risen Jesus).

Verses 1-10 establish Mary Magdalene as the first witness of the empty tomb. When she arrives at the tomb, she sees that the stone has been rolled away (20:1). She runs and reports the news to Peter and the beloved disciple (20:2). She offers what appears to be the only logical explanation of the data: someone has taken Jesus' body out of the tomb, and it cannot be found. Mary's confusion reflects the world-shattering dimension of the empty tomb. Until the community encounters the risen Jesus, there are no categories through which to understand the empty tomb. The world cannot make sense of an empty tomb with any theory except grave robbing.

On the basis of Mary's words, Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb (20:3-4).

Both men enter the tomb (20:5-8), but only the response of the beloved disciple is recorded. Verse 8 says that he "saw and believed." His faith is only incipient faith, however, because the story goes on to say that they did not yet know about the resurrection (20:9). The male disciples, like Mary, could find no words out of their prior experiences to describe the empty tomb. Yet Mary bore witness to the tomb even in her confusion; Peter and the beloved disciple kept silent.

The second scene (20:11-18) begins with Mary alone again at the tomb, weeping. She, like Peter and the beloved disciple before her, now looks into the tomb. She is greeted by two angels. The angels address her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" (20:13). (This greeting, "woman," is the same word with which Jesus addressed his mother in 2:4 and 19:26 and with which the risen Jesus will address Mary in 20:15.) Mary's answer to the angels resembles her initial announcement to Peter and the beloved disciple (20:2), but with one important difference. In 20:13 her words are more personal. She speaks of "my Lord" (not "the Lord"); she says, "I do not know" (not her earlier, "we do not know"). Her words to the angels are spoken out of her personal grief, not simply out of her confusion.

After Mary answers the angels, she turns around (to face the garden) and sees Jesus, "but she did not know that it was Jesus" (20:14). The conversation that takes place between Jesus and Mary at the tomb is one of the most poignant and artfully drawn scenes in all of Scripture. The reader knows what Mary does not know—that the man she assumes to be the gardener is really Jesus (20:15). The power of the scene comes from the reader's anticipation of Mary's moment of recognition.

Jesus speaks to Mary, repeating the angels' question about her weeping and asking an additional question, "Whom are you looking for?" (20:15). These questions are the first words spoken by the risen Jesus. His question, "Whom are you looking for?" mirrors the first words he spoke in his ministry. When the followers of John the Baptist approached Jesus, he asked them, "What are you looking for?" (1:38). This question is an invitation that introduces one of the marks of discipleship in John: to look for Jesus. The repetition of that question in chapter 20 establishes continuity between Mary and the first disciples of Jesus.

Jesus' questions to Mary do not penetrate her grief and confusion. Her world is determined by the seemingly harsh reality of the empty tomb, and so she begs the "gardener" for assistance: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (20:15). Because Mary still has no categories with which to grasp the significance of the empty tomb, she assumes that the solution to the mystery of the missing body lies within her control. If the gardener would tell her what she needs to know, she would take care of the situation.

The word the "gardener" speaks changes Mary's world forever. The risen Jesus calls Mary by name, and when she hears her name spoken in his voice, she turns around again. But this time she sees Jesus, her teacher, not the gardener (20:16). Once again the intimate and the cosmic conjoin: through the intimacy of Mary's name, the reality of the resurrection is revealed.

When Mary hears the voice of the risen Jesus, she sees the garden and the gardener differently. She no longer understands the empty tomb as a manifestation of death, but as testimony to the power and possibilities of life. In the parable of the Shepherd in John 10, Jesus said, "[The shepherd] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. . . . The sheep follow him because they know his voice" (10:3-4). Jesus called Lazarus by name to summon him from the tomb (11:43), and now his voice summons Mary to new life.

Mary may have attempted to embrace Jesus after she recognized him, because he says to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father" (20:17a). Jesus' words may strike some readers as unnecessarily harsh, as a cruel rebuke to Mary's expression of joyous recognition. To read these words as cold and harsh is to misread them, however, and to overlook their import.

Jesus' command, "Do not hold on to me," is the first postresurrection teaching. When he speaks these words, Jesus teaches Mary that he cannot and will not be held and controlled. If Mary had stopped Jesus from ascending to God, holding him with her in the garden, the Easter story would be incomplete. This is an awkward narrative moment, as John tries to put into linear form something that actually transforms conventional categories of time and place. For John, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension is one continuous act, and so here it is as if he

hits the narrative pause button, to give Mary and the reader a glimpse of something that is still in progress. Jesus' prohibition is followed by a positive exhortation, "But go to my brothers [and sisters] and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (20:17). Mary is exhorted to spread the news of the resurrection and ascension and of the new life with God and one another that is now available to all. Those who follow Jesus have become members of the family of God and Jesus.

Mary heeds Jesus' words and goes to the disciples with the announcement, "I have seen the Lord" (20:18). Her announcement of the presence of the risen Jesus is the core of the Easter gospel. Her confusion and sadness at the empty tomb have been transformed by her encounter with Jesus into the witness of Easter. Mary is the first Easter witness: she is the first to see the risen Jesus, and she is the first to tell others what she has seen. She is the first disciple of the risen Jesus.

Hermeneutical Postscript: Father Language for God and the Gospel of John

The question of the appropriate language to use for God is a vital one for many women in the church. Throughout the history of the church, the church has almost exclusively used male pronouns and images for God, overlooking both the rich variety of names and images for God in the biblical and historical material and the political and theological assumptions that undergird this language. The exclusive use of male language for God is not a neutral or objective act, simply reflecting the "reality of God" (as proponents of such usage would argue). Rather, all decisions about the language with which people speak about God involve political and theological choices, because language shapes how people understand their relationship to one another and to God. Many women feel excluded from a faith community that allows no visible place for women in its public language. While there are ongoing attempts to use more inclusive language for God, such attempts continue to be met with resistance, and there is no clear theological or ecclesial momentum to understand the theology behind the language that communities use to speak about God.

Father language for God is particularly difficult for many women because of the burden

of patriarchy it frequently carries. "Father" has become a synonym for God in much of the church, but to use father language that way simultaneously reduces the power of father language and diminishes the richness of other parts of the Christian tradition. When "Father" becomes a synonym for God, one loses the specificity of that language in the stories and books of the Bible in which it first appears. A vibrant image of God is replaced by a theological absolute.

God is called Father more times in John than in any other book in the New Testament (more than one hundred times), and to eliminate that term in the interests of inclusive language would destroy the particularity of the Johannine vision. Just as it is false to the richness of the Christian tradition to use father language as generic language for God, it is equally false to the tradition to speak about God in general terms that flatten the vitality and depth of biblical metaphor and language. God is Father in John, and the church's job is to move beyond the assumption that "Father" is simply a synonym for God and discover what father language in John contributes to a fuller understanding of God and the Christian life.

Father language in John is essentially relational: God is Father because Jesus is God's Son. This language, then, is not primarily the language of patriarchy but is instead the language of incarnation, relationship, and family. From the very beginning of the Gospel, the explicit purpose of Jesus' ministry has been to create a new family of God: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (1:12-13). The promise in these verses is that a new family will be born, a family that is determined by faith, not by flesh-and-blood relationships. People who have no families, who come from destructive families, or who are alienated from their birth families can belong to a new family by virtue of becoming children of God. This promise of a new family receives its most poignant expression in Jesus' words in John 14:18: "I will not leave you orphaned." All who believe are offered a family and a home (see also 14:1-3).

The language of birth and family continues throughout the Gospel: for example, 3:3-10; 8:31-47; 14:1-3, 18-24; 16:20-24; 19:25-27; 20:17. Moreover, as has already been noted,

many of the pivotal events in Jesus' ministry occur in the presence of those whom he loves. Jesus' announcement to Mary of the good news of Easter is couched in the language of family: "But go to my brothers [and sisters] and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (20:17). At Jesus' ascension, the creation of the new family is fully under way: Jesus' followers are now called his brothers and sisters, children of God.

As the earlier discussion of "only begotten" suggested, for Jesus to speak of God as Father in John does not evoke conventional gender categories. John speaks of God as Father neither to reinforce patriarchy (recall also the nonhierarchical image of the vine in 15:1-11) nor to reinforce the primacy of the male gender. Importantly, "Father" is not the only name for God in John. Jesus refers to God as "the one who sent me" with even greater frequency than he refers to God as Father. One name for God highlights Jesus' share in God's identity (Father/Son), and the other name highlights Jesus' share in God's work (the one who sends/the sent one). The church's almost exclusive focus on maleness as the point of father language, and on Father as an essentialist and normative

category with no specific theological content, actually distorts the theological possibilities of that language to name relationship with God. Jesus calls God Father in John in order to evoke a new world in which intimate, loving relations with God and one another are possible.

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