

Be a Holy Nag for Jesus  
Ecumenical Advocacy Days  
Sermon  
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How wonderful to be part of this today in this way. Here together we are able to accomplish something we *can't* accomplish without each other. Here, *together*, we go where we can't alone. Here *together* we witness to the undeniable Oneness and broad diversity of the Body of Christ. And I say, "Thank you, Jesus." In this coming together, we witness to the reality that there is enough *grace* to go around-- across denominational lines, across racial lines; across geographic boundaries, across gender lines, there is enough grace to go around. It's appropriate that we begin with this declaration, a declaration that is made simply by our coming together in Christ. It is this abundance of grace that allows us to pull down the walls that divide in order to claim an inclusive community.

Some of you know the story Mukhtaran Bibi. She was raised in southern Pakistan, where she was a victim of a gang rape at the hands of her so called leaders. It was considered a form of punishment for her brother's wrongly charged crime against him. It was a decision of the local leadership, the tribal council if you will. This is a system built by the males of the class above of hers in her community. In the book *Half the Sky*, the authors tell some of the hideous story. Immediately after the council pronounced the condemnation, "Four men dragged her, screaming and pleading into an empty stable next to the meeting area, and as a crowd waited outside, they stripped her and raped her on the dirt floor, one after the other... after administering the sentence, the rapists pushed Mukhtar out of the stable and forced her to stagger home, almost, naked before a jeering crowd. Once home, she prepared to do what Pakistani peasant woman had been taught to do in such circumstances: to kill herself. Suicide was the expected way for a woman to cleanse herself and her family of the shame....But Mukhtar's mother and her father kept watch over her and prevented that option and a local Muslim leader ...spoke up and denounced the rape as an outrage against Islam."<sup>1</sup>

Soon the young woman she began to speak up herself, and pursue the case, which was picked up by media around the world, which created pressure on the Pakistani government and the police to address the rape. As she and her family waged that conflict, donations and gifts began to roll in. She used them, not for her self, not to flee this very dangerous place, but she started the *Mukhtar Mai Women's Welfare Organization* to help support and educate Pakistani women and girls. Right in the midst of her own struggle she said that she would

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<sup>1</sup> "Half the Sky – Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide", Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2009, p. 70-71

not abandon the next generation of girls. The authors say this about her, she “didn’t speak with sophistication or learning, but she was relentless and effective.” And later they say, she “changed the paradigm in rural Pakistan”<sup>2</sup> to one that demand that women be included in the rights, privileges, protections, and resources of the community. In her relentless pursuit she changed the paradigm. I want to invite us today into our calls to be relentless changers of the paradigm.

Today’s passage about the Canaanite women offers another encouraging story of a paradigm changer. This story in Mathew is in between the feeding of the four thousand and the feeding of the five thousand. Those stories and so many other Gospel stories tell of the magnificence of God's generosity and inclusion. But right here in the middle of stories of abundance Jesus says there isn’t enough for you. “Let the children be fed first, it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she asserts, “...even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” My, my, my, she said that to him, right there in front of God and everybody? This woman like so many, this woman who is nobody, this foreigner, this one, had the audacity to ask, one might even say to expect, God’s healing action in her life. I have always found this a stinging rejoinder and I wonder if Jesus doesn’t also. Can’t you hear him say a sort of, “ouch” in response to her? I also see him thinking about this intently. In fact, many scholars have interpreted this passage to be one in which Jesus experiences a breaking open in his understanding of his ministry. Other scholars say this is an opportunity for Jesus to teach his *disciples*. Either way it opens up paradigm.

In the midst of Jesus’ message and ministry of abundance, comes the haunting question, “Aren’t I included?” Isn’t there enough to go around? We see Jesus pause; this is no small decision if he - or his disciples, have understood his ministry as one of abundance only with his own people, his own nation, this woman is asking for a paradigm change. She is asking that the paradigm be expanded. The disciples say, “Send her way”. But Jesus doesn’t. She... is relentlessness,”Even the dogs... and he then agrees and gives her what she asks. And the paradigm has changed; the ministry is marked by abundance and inclusion. She is one of my heroes. I call her a Holy Nag.

The meal ministries stories all speak of an abundance that does not exclude; they show this radical inclusion. Consider the feeding of the four thousand and the five thousand. There is enough to go around. Consider the wedding at Cana. It is argued that story is one of radical hospitality and equality. Mary nags Jesus, “Come on do something about this.” He responds, “What is this to me?” She just tells the servants to do whatever he says - the result - an abundance beyond anything that could be imagined!

They want to stone her for her sexual behavior and instead of condemning her, singling her out, Jesus says.” If you are without sin yourself, you can cast the first stone.” And they all walk away. There is enough sin to go around and there is enough grace to go around.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.75

He walked out on his family, spent his inheritance, and headed back to the father intending to ask only to work as one of his father's servants. But when he got to the driveway there was his father, arms wide open to welcome him back. And then the father threw a huge feast celebrating the abundance of renewed relationship. While the older brother, in the corner, bristled at the extravagance. We are called not to live in the paradigm of the older brother but to live in the world of the Father.

America is in a crisis. It's a crisis which has taken root in a paradigm of scarcity, even as we live in the midst of abundance. We are becoming country that screams, "There's not enough, there's not enough". This, of course, begs the question, "How much is enough?" One elderly man out in MN gave me the answer. He had retired from farming but still wore his favorite bib overalls when he came in to volunteer at the bookshelf. He and his family were getting by, not rich by anyone's standards but getting by. When I asked, "How do you know when you have enough?" He had a very clear and forthright answer, "When I have enough to share".

How do we know we have enough? When we have enough to share. The very act of sharing causes our entrance into abundance.

How do we as a country know we have enough? When we have enough to share. We are in a crisis based on a paradigm of scarcity. And this is a spiritual crisis which cries out for a new understanding, a new paradigm of abundance and inclusion.

There is enough to go around; enough that I *can* afford to give up some of what I have. In fact, I can't afford *not* to give because not to give is to fall prey to the fear that keeps us from experiencing ourselves as living in abundance. When we share we are witnessing to our belief that there is enough.

The opposite of abundance is not the poverty; the opposite of abundance is fear. Fear keeps us from becoming the community and the country we have proclaimed ourselves to be. It is impossible to be grasped by a sense of abundance when we are in the grasp of fear. Impossible. They cannot mutually co-exist.

If we will understand ourselves as living in abundance meant for everyone; if, as a community and a country we will run the risk to see that *all* have what they need, then, we can *all be free of the threat* of scarcity. And inclusion is not a difficult concept to embrace once one embraces abundance.

If, we will embrace the heritage of grace given us by our faith then we will emerge in this the years ahead, not as a people crippled by fear but as a people robust in the well-being of the common good. The world is in desperate shape, divided by issue after issue, most of them could be solved with the values of abundance and inclusion. The Canaanite woman saw some glimpse of the Messianic hope, the feast of victory and cried out for her part in it, "Even the dogs get the crumbs."

We are, of course, both the woman and Jesus, both the ones in need of the gift and the ones called to expand our ministry. The hosts by virtue of being of having been the guests. The Canaanite woman in the midst

of her pain had a hope in the abundance of God's activity. She found hope in her conviction that she and her daughter were included and Jesus recognizes his own ministry in her nagging.

So let us work and pray that a renewed paradigm of abundance and inclusion will overturn the indifference and fear sweeping our nation. Let a renewed sense of abundance rise above our fear of loss and pain. Let a renewed sense of abundance free us to embrace our brothers and sisters in need rather than keeping them at bay. Let us commit to tear *down* the barriers that would keep *anyone* from the table. Let us become the voices and the actors who will speak and act for *all* those who ask: "Aren't I included? Let us, today, in this place, and as we go from this place tomorrow, hear the voice that nags at us to become for others *holy* nags, relentless paradigm changers in the church and in the world. Let us demand as did the Canaanite woman, as did Mukhtar, that we will not be satisfied with a paradigm of scarcity and exclusion. We know better. We know there *is* enough to go around.

Let a renewed sense of abundance be marked by a renewed commitment to run the risks and take the challenge to create *the common will to choose the common good* because of that great and *uncommon* mystery - the abundance of grace. Thanks be to God.