

WHEN THE ANSWER IS "NO"

(Matthew 20:20-23)

On this Mother's Day morning, I'd like to lift up the *witness of women* from the scriptures. It's a witness that is often silent and nameless, but a witness without which the fullness of the scripture story as a whole could not be told.

A case in point is the woman whose witness we lift up this morning, the one who is called in the scriptures by the name of Salome.

Salome was one of the many people who ministered to Jesus while Jesus was ministering to others. In fact, we know that she was one of many *women* who not only ministered to Jesus, but who was also no doubt one of his disciples. We don't often hear about the female disciples of Jesus, and even less about those women who were benefactors of Jesus; but they were there, enabling Jesus to do what he was sent to do. And Salome was one of them.

Salome also happens to be one of the few female followers of Jesus that we know anything at all about. It so happens that we have a

couple of interesting tidbits of information on Salome that have been passed down through the years.

✚ One is that Salome was the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who along with Peter were the “inner circle” of the apostolic band.

✚ Another tidbit of information is that there is a chance that Salome was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. *So, at the most,* Salome was the aunt of Jesus. *At the least,* Salome was the mother of two of Jesus’ closest companions—and we know the kind of bond that can develop with the mothers of our best friends.

So, there was indeed a relationship between Jesus and Salome.

Perhaps a relationship of *kin*; maybe a close family relationship of *love*.

But almost no doubt a relationship of *curiosity and excitement*.

✚ *No doubt* Salome heard the things Jesus said, and witnessed the things Jesus did;

✚ *No doubt* she marveled when demons were cast out of those who were sick, and those who *used* to be lame could walk again;

✚ *No doubt* she got goosebumps when her sons told her what happened on the mountain of Transfiguration.

The witness of the scriptures points to Salome not only *ministering* to Jesus, but also *believing* in Jesus. No doubt she had, in some shape, form or fashion, become excited about this ministry of Jesus that offered possibilities of new life to those who would follow and believe. But no doubt, Salome was also learning—like all followers of Jesus must learn—that faith is only faith when it has learned to accept the “no’s” as well as the “yes’s” of Jesus. All disciples who walk with Jesus—whether they walked in Salome’s time, in our time, or any time in between—must learn this lesson in order to be able to keep pressin’ on with Jesus. We must keep pressin’ on anyhow, and keeping the faith anyhow, even when the answer to our prayer is “no.”

II.

This was a lesson that Salome had to learn on her own faith journey—just like it is a lesson that we all have to learn on our travels with Jesus. Even though she was possibly the aunt of Jesus, definitely a loyal supporter, a financial backer, and a praying partner of the Lord, Salome still has the distinction of *being the only woman in the Gospels whose request was denied by Jesus*. In the Gospels, whenever a woman made a request of Jesus, Jesus usually complied. For example:

- When Jesus' mother asked him to intercede for a young couple whose wine had run out at their wedding feast, *Jesus did what he was asked*. He may have been a bit irked because his mother was disregarding his timetable, but he did what he was asked nevertheless.
- When Mary and Martha sent for Jesus to come see about their brother Lazarus, who was sick, *Jesus did what he was asked*. He may have taken his own sweet time about it—to the point where

by the time he got there, Lazarus was dead, and both Mary and Martha were pretty put-out with Jesus—but he did what he was asked nevertheless.

- When the Syrophonecian woman brought her sick daughter to Jesus to be healed, *Jesus did what he was asked*. His initial response may have been demeaning and dismissive, but Jesus did what he was asked nevertheless.

Usually in the Gospels, whatever women sought from the Lord they usually received. Yet, Jesus turned down the request of Salome—his kin, his supporter, his sister-in-the-struggle.

The answer to her request was “no.” Even though the scriptures say that Salome came *humbly* before Jesus, kneeling before him. She didn't come *demanding* anything because she was one of his supporters. She didn't come *threatening* to withdraw her financial backing. She didn't come *laying a guilt trip* on Jesus because she was his aunt, or because she was the elder, or because her sons were off following HIM instead

of taking care of HER. She came to Jesus humbly, with the right attitude and spirit—yet, Jesus told her “no.”

The answer to her request was “no.” Even though she was not asking anything for *herself*; she was interceding for *others*, giving of herself on behalf of her sons. Jesus understood that, because Jesus was *always giving*, and was essentially a *giver*. Jesus gives *much more* than he receives, and returns *much more* than he keeps!

- ❖ When Jesus received a little boys lunch of 5 barley loaves and 2 fish, he gave back a banquet for 5,000 people;
- ❖ When Jesus received words of praise, he gave them back as praise to his loving Mother/Father God;
- ❖ When Jesus received bread and wine, he gave it back to his disciples as symbols of their redemption.

Salome was a giver, and Jesus understood. She gave of herself, gave of her substance, gave herself in intercession on behalf of her sons, and made *one request* of Jesus . . . but Jesus told her “no.”

On bended knees, with her two sons, she came to him and said

“Master, I have something to ask of you for these two sons of mine who are already close to you and whom you have already taken into your confidence on more than one occasion. Command that one may sit on your right hand and the other on your left when you come into your kingdom.”

Let us note, that there is nothing wrong *per se* with a mother looking out for the best interests of her children. What good parent doesn't want a better life for their children? Good parents hope that their children will go further in life than they have, and if they can do anything to pave the way to help them, they will. Salome in her request was only looking out for the well-being of her children as any good mother should—yet, Jesus told her “no.”

Let us further note that there is nothing wrong *per se* with the desire to be next to Jesus in the kingdom that he will establish. Salome and her sons are to be commended for believing in the power of this homeless,

penniless, weaponless, army-less preacher of God's word whom they followed to bring a kingdom into being. Some mothers want their sons to be seated next to persons of great social standing and wealth. But Salome desired that HER sons be seated next to Jesus! But Jesus told her "no."

Jesus recognized that although Salome's faith was well-intentioned, it had much to learn. Jesus said *"You don't know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"* They said to him, *"We are able."* Jesus said to them *"You WILL drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and my left hand is not mine to grant; it is for those for whom it has been prepared."*

III.

Before we can fully appreciate the impending kingdom of God, there are some cups from which faith must drink, some of which can be bitter. Our inclination is to ask God to remove the bitter cups from our

lives. Sometimes God says “no” to us because those cups qualify us to learn a little bit more about the ways of God’s kingdom.

There was a woman of great faith who constantly prayed for healing. Her healing never came; but she had such a deep faith and such a wonderful disposition that she encouraged everyone who met her. I don’t deny that her cup was bitter, but the fact that she drank it well allowed her to understand a little bit more what the kingdom of God is all about.

It is only as we drink from certain cups that we are more able to understand and appreciate the surpassing mysteries of the kingdom of God.

- It was only as Charlotte Elliot drank from the cup of illness that she was able to write her hymn of commitment, “Just As I Am, Without One Plea”;
- It was only as Charles Wesley drank from the cup of persecution that he was able to write, “Jesus, Lover of My Soul”;

- It was only as Fanny Crosby drank from the cup of blindness that she was able to write “Blessed Assurance,” and “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior”;
- It was only as black people drank from the bitter cup of chattel slavery that they were able to sing “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” a long way from home . . .

It's only as we drink from certain cups that we are able to better appreciate what the presence and the mysteries of the kingdom of God are all about.

Jesus could have predicted the future to Salome. He could have told her, *“You and your sons will drink from my cup. James will be the first disciple to be martyred for the kingdom. John will experience a long life of persecution, banishment and distress. And you, Salome, will also have your share of the cup of sorrow. But I still must say “no” to your request. To sit at my right hand and my left hand is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”*

Jesus could also have told Salome: *"If I say "yes" to you, I'll have to say "no" to too many others. If I say "yes" to you, I'll have to say "no" to too many Christians who will come after you, who will face raging lions and be burned at the stake, and who have as much right to those places at my right hand and at my left as you do. If I say "yes" to you, I'll have to say "no" to too many faithful men and women who will stand by the church for years, who will struggle to keep the doors open in lean times. If I say "yes" to you, I'll have to say "no" to too many people who are waiting for their crowns of glory."*

Sometimes God says "no" to us so that God can say "yes" to others.

Many a Christian has stayed beside the sickbed of someone, praying for recovery in this life. But while God said "no" to the one who was praying, God said "yes" to the one who was sick. God told that person *"Yes, you've fought the good fight, you've run the race, you've kept the faith. Now come, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!"*

God may have said “no” to Salome, James and John; but thank God, God said “yes” to the great multitude from the book of Revelation, the great multitude which no person could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues and nations, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, who have come out of the great tribulation, and who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. They sit before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in God’s temple, and they shall hunger no more, and they shall thirst no more, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and guide them to springs of living water . . .

Rest assured Beloved: even God’s “no” is God’s “yes.”

It is part of the unmistakable mystery and the unfathomable love of the presence and power of God, as God opens up God’s kingdom right in our midst. May God open our eyes, so that we may see . . . even when the answer is “no.”

Amen.

(thanks to the Rev. Dr. William Watley, St. James AME Church, Newark, NJ, for the inspiration for this sermon).