

33rd Sunday 2008

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A question. Do you prefer the "abridged" or "unabridged" version of something you are going to read or listen to? Does it matter that if you choose the abridged version, you are missing something of the story?

Today we have the "abridged" version of the first reading, the editors decided that we didn't need to hear all about this woman who is first described as a "perfect wife " but who we hear described in much fuller terms.

"She considers a field and buys it, with her own earnings she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. She makes linen garments and sells them. She supplies the merchant with sashes. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom and the teachings of kindness are on her tongue. "

When I hear this passage in its entirety I cant help thinking of my mom whom my dad would have considered a perfect wife and for whom the role of wife and mother was defining, given the age and context in which she grew up. There was a defining moment for my mom, however. a moment of liberation for her when she experienced first hand the prejudice and inequality that came with being a woman and someone's wife. My mother, while she was raising her five sons, needed to go to work. Although she said it was because we didn't have enough income, it probably had to do more with getting away from the five boys. She first donned a Peter Pan costume and handed out samples of Peter Pan peanut butter in the local supermarket. Then there was a stint in Woolworth's as a salesgirl (I'm using the language of the time) And finally she was a waitress at Stouffer's in Garden city. A

job that she loved. She used to keep a big jar with all her tips (mostly coins in those days. Like the collection baskets here (only kidding) What we didn't know was that she was saving for a surprise gift for my father, an outside awning that would give them a place for alfresco dinners and entertaining. When she went to the store she was told that she could not make this purchase without her husbands' approval. She was furious. Somehow she figured out a way of making the purchase and surprising my father but I don't think she was ever the same. It was her moment of liberation, confronting a system that was simply unfair. Her personal experience of injustice made her question the social structures that did not allow her to act autonomously without her husband's approval.

The reason that I share this story with you is this. A group of parishioners here have spent the past two months reading Elizabeth Johnson's "Quest for the Living God. Mapping frontiers in the theology of God. I've referred to it once and I know that Fr JA has as well. This challenging book on diverse ways of experiencing and talking about God, has been liberating for many who have been taught to image God in only one way, as Father, as King, as lord, simply put, in human terms as male. Perhaps the most challenging chapter for many of us has been "God acting womanish". This theological reflection comes from women's experience of being "less" than men, second class, subservient to men. It comes from the inability of women to see themselves reflected in the primary male imagery of God, despite the passage in Genesis that asserts that God created male and female, in the image of God, God created them.

There is not enough time in a homily to go into all the arguments Womanist theologians have used to challenge the myopic vision of male imagery for God , especially when the scriptures are replete with images of God acting 'womanish", i.e. outrageous, audacious, courageous, willfully desiring the flourishing of women. (An interesting side note: The #1 best seller, The Shack, images the first

person of the trinity as a black woman whose name is Papa. Go figure)

One quote " Feminist, womanist and Latina theologians around the world argue that women are capable of symbolizing the whole mystery of God in as adequate and inadequate a way as male images have done. In other words, women reflect God not only as mothering, nurturing and compassionate... But also as powerful, taking initiative, creating, redeeming, saving, wrathful against injustice, in solidarity with the poor, struggling against and sometimes victorious over the powers of this world.

Which brings me back to the first reading which is about so much more than being the "perfect wife". Is it possible to hear this reading not only as praise for an individual woman who is industrious, compassionate, committed, caring etc but as an image of God? Can we even begin to see, know, experience God through this lens, through this imagery. Can we be open to the liberating God who is beyond all imagery, who is Holy mystery and is able to encompass all our images as inadequate as they may be?

Have we been living with and reading the "abridged" version of the mystery of God?. Have we been hiding the gift of God in all its richness, like the servant who buries the talent, afraid to explore the multi-faceted dimensions of mystery, of Holiness, of Love itself? Could those talents of today's Gospel be the wealth of images and experiences that God offers us and that we are called to.

I'd better go ask my mother.