

Why has this happened?
 Rev. Cindy Maddox
 December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-45

Many of you are probably familiar with the Bechdel test.
 It is a measure of the representation of women in fiction,
 particularly in television and movies.
 In order to pass the Bechdel test, the work of fiction needs to include
 at least two women
 who talk to each other
 about something other than a man.

Frankly, there are not very many stories in the Bible that pass the Bechdel test.
 There are a few noteworthy cases, and our story today is one of them.
 This is a scene in which no men are present,
 a scene where there is no rivalry between the women,
 a scene in which women are agents of liberation.¹
 It is a scene where both women are blessed.

In the verses immediately before our text for today,
 Mary was told by the angel that she was going to have a baby,
 and before her marriage to Joseph was complete.
 In her time and place, “blessed” would not be the term most young women
 would use to describe a premature pregnancy.
 She was from a poor family, and her ability to get married
 was crucial to her financial survival and to that of her family.
 But if she was found to be pregnant before the wedding,
 and her fiancé did not claim the child as his,
 she could be killed or at the very least,
 be an object of shame and scandal.

So this message from the angel?
 We couldn’t blame her if she thought it wasn’t such good news.

“Mary is aware of her humble status in her time and culture.
 She was property as much as anything,
 belonging first to a father and then later to a husband....

¹ Mckenzie, Alyce. <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/blessed-are-we-women-alyce-mckenzie-05-29-2012>

She didn't belong to a famous family, hadn't grown up in a big city,
 and had absolutely no prospects whatsoever to make a mark in the world
 or to ever be remembered beyond the next generation or so.
 Yet miraculously, God had visited her with news so stunning,
 it would take at least the rest of her mortal days to understand it all."

So at the beginning of our passage for today we read,
*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill
 country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When
 Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was
 filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among
 women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me,
 that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your
 greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that
 there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste" to visit her cousin Elizabeth.
 I wonder why she went, and why she went with haste.
 Was it excitement, to share this amazing news?
 Was she seeking confirmation, or commiseration?
 Was she getting the heck out of Dodge, because her parents didn't believe
 the whole angel story?
 Was she afraid? Was she worried about how Elizabeth would respond?

If Mary was worried, she needn't have been.
 Elizabeth greeted her with blessing. Lots of it.
 Blessed are you among women.
 Blessed is the fruit of your womb.
 Blessed is she who believed.

Blessed. Blessed.
 What a relief that must have been to young Mary.
 What a balm to her spirit.
 No judgment, no question, not even an "are you sure?"
 Just blessing.
 And Elizabeth didn't whisper it, either.
 She used her "outside voice," so that anyone—everyone—could hear.
 Blessed are you!

But look again at Elizabeth's words about herself:
 "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"

I'm usually the queen of "why," so I wondered why Elizabeth,
herself already blessed, would ask why Mary would come to her.

I started seminary in 1999,
and soon after that I was accepted into the ordination process
in the Western North Carolina Association of the Southern Conference
of the United Church of Christ.

There was only one problem: they knew they couldn't ordain me.
Although openly gay and lesbian people had been ordained in the UCC
as early as 1974,

the Western North Carolina Association was then one of only two in the country
that had passed a resolution banning the ordination of
"self-avowed practicing homosexuals."

When I graduated from seminary and was ready for ordination,
the Committee on Church and Ministry asked me
to travel across the association, and ultimately across the state,
to "tell my story."

I spoke to women's groups, men's groups, Bible study groups,
groups of clergy and groups of laity—
even to reporters when those who opposed my ordination
took the issue to the media.

I told my story again and again, only to be told by some
that I was not morally fit for ministry.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted to point out that they were the ones out of step with the denomination,
not me!

I wanted to shout, "I'm worthy!"

But instead I tried to prove that I was worthy
by being gracious and understanding,
polite and unthreatening.

When I finally did get ordained,
it was not because I changed anybody's mind,
but rather because we challenged the polity rather than the theology.

In my ordination service, as I stood in a sanctuary packed to the rafters
with people who had come from across the entire state to celebrate,

I suddenly was hit by the realization: I was not worthy.

Not because of my orientation, but because of my humanity.

After all, I thought, who can ever be worthy of such an amazing calling?

Who could ever deserve to be invited into people's lives
 at the most painful and the most joyful moments?
 Who could ever claim that they are worthy of standing up here
 week after week and trying to bring to you a word from God?

I wonder if this is how Elizabeth felt.

All her life she had been denied what she most longed for—to bear a child.
 All her life she had probably been questioned about her infertility.

In a world where women were valued for their ability to bear sons,
 a world where people thought God controlled fertility,
 Elizabeth would have been scorned for not having a child
 almost as much as Mary would have been scorned for having one
 before she was supposed to.

I can imagine her response through the years
 as well-meaning people questioned her:

Elizabeth, is there something you need to confess?
 Elizabeth, is there some hidden sin God is punishing you for?
 Elizabeth, are you following Torah and keeping kosher
 and giving yourself to your husband the way you should?
 Elizabeth, clearly God thinks you are unfit for parenting.

I can see her wanting to cry out, “I am worthy!”

Then she finally conceives, this miraculous pregnancy with this mysterious child,
 and she says, “This is what God has done for me,
 when God looked favorably on me
 and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

She feels blessed.

But the mother of the Messiah coming to visit her—
 well, that is one blessing too far! one blessing too much!
 “Why has this happened?” I’m not worthy.

I hope Elizabeth eventually learned what I have learned,
 or at least what I hope I’ve learned, but sometimes need to remind myself:
 God doesn’t wait for us to be “worthy.”

God doesn’t wait for us to “deserve” God’s gifts.

God just loves us.

God declares us worthy with a drop of baptismal water
 and every drop of rain.

It’s not that we are unworthy and God’s love makes us worthy.

It's that God made us worthy all along.
 Worthy of blessing.
 Worthy of love.
 Worthy of carrying God into the world.

The Rev. Janet Wolf used to serve as the pastor
 of Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee.
 “Hobson UMC is a wildly diverse congregation that includes,
 as Janet has described it,
 ‘people with power and PhDs
 and folks who have never gone past the third grade;
 folks with two houses and folks living on the streets;
 and, as one person who struggles with mental health declared,
 ‘those of us who are crazy and those who think they’re not.’”²

A woman named Fayette found her way to Hobson
 and attended the new member class.

Fayette lived with mental illness and without a home.

The minister spoke to the class about baptism—

as she describes it, “this holy moment when we are named by God’s grace
 with such power it won’t come undone.”

This concept grabbed Fayette’s imagination and wouldn’t let go.

Janet tells of how, during the class, Fayette would ask again and again,

“And when I’m baptized, I am...?”

“The class,” Janet writes, “learned to respond,

‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’

‘Oh, yes!’ she’d say, and then we could go back to our discussion.”

The day of Fayette’s baptism came, and she was to be baptized by immersion.

Janet says, “Fayette went under, came up spluttering,

and cried, ‘And now I am...?’

And we all sang, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’

‘Oh, yes!’ she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

Two months later, Janet received a phone call. She writes:

“Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital.

So I went. I could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth.

When I got to the door, I heard, ‘I am beloved....’

She turned, saw me, and said, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and....’

² As told by Jan Richardson, <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2010/01/03/epiphany-1-baptized-and-beloved/>

Catching sight of herself in the mirror—
 hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face,
 dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew, she started again.
‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and...’
She looked in the mirror again and declared,
‘...and God is still working on me.
If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!’

In moments of pain, there are few answers to the question
 of why a particular bad thing has happened.
But in all moments we need to learn to say “I am beloved, precious child of God.”
In all moments we need to know that God loves us,
 exactly as we are and as we may become.
If we really believed this—if we truly knew this deep in our bones—
 and if we really believed this to be true of every other person as well—
 then there would be a lot more leaping for joy,
 there would be an abundance of blessing,
 there would be more voices raised in magnificent song.
May it be so.
Amen.