

**The Good Shepherdess
(Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23)**

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Family Dynamics

When I was growing up in the 1970's, I remember seeing letters in our mail addressed to Mrs. Kosuke Koyama. Kosuke was my dad's first name. At the time, I wasn't quite sure why her first name hardly ever appeared on mail, other than that it was customary. I thought that maybe the idea was to protect women from the dangers of the world. Her name was Lois, but even the phone book only had a K and L before our last name. It seemed odd to me, because an old friend that might want to look her up or someone who had forgotten her name would have no way of finding her.

Our family was fairly typical for those days. Dad was the central figure and the family was his supporting cast. His career was the only one that really mattered. His opinion carried the most weight. And if there a major declaration of some kind, it came from him. I can still remember one night when he got angry about some poor grades I got and let us kids know in no uncertain terms that laziness was not acceptable in his house. And I remember the stunned silence that followed; the kind of shock that only he seemed able to create.

I never questioned the way things worked in our family. Dad was not a tyrant. He was doing his best to be a good father in a time where we assumed that it was the role of a good father to call the shots.

But there was much more to the life of our family than just dad and his attitudes and behaviors. Mom had her own personality and integrity that was very different from his. And because she did not have the same megaphone that dad did, her influence was more by example and more subtle. I think she would have liked to have more of a voice and I think it bothered her that she was sometimes ignored and her words were not taken as seriously as his. After her children were grown, she went to seminary, and served a church in Syracuse, New York for nearly a decade. And I think she did it in part as a way of finding and asserting her own voice.

Dad was a passionate and hard working man who was very good at saying all the right things. But he was also kind of temperamental. He would panic about little things and when we were growing up he had a real temper, which frightened us kids. He also had some strange and somewhat foolish behaviors. He was an impulse shopper and loved buying things that were oversized, like giant silverware and coffee cups, so that our kitchen cabinets made it look like a giant was living there

with some tiny elves. And sometimes he would say things about Mom's family that were unfair and unkind. Like most of us, he had his good and bad qualities.

Mom, was the even keel in our family. Although she was not as noticeable as dad, she lived what I would call a morally impeccable life. While dad could say disparaging things about other people or complained about things, she never indulged in that kind of behavior. And although there were things that upset her, she never ever shouted or spoke unfairly or unkindly. She didn't hold grudges or blamed other people when things went wrong.

She had no interest in wealth or fame, glamour or possessions. Instead, she enjoyed music, nature, expanding her horizons, good books, especially children's books and church. And she put her children first, feeding us, bandaging our skinned knees, rocking us when we were sick, and taking us shopping for clothes.

I remember that bell bottoms were the rage when I was in junior high school and how I desperately wanted a pair that would have just the right size of bell; and that my belt needed to have the double holes and not the single holes and how she patiently shepherded me through the

clothing stores, getting me what was affordable and consoling me when I didn't get exactly what I needed in order to be cool in front of my friends.

Mom was also the piano teacher in our neighborhood and I have spoken with an adult student or two who remember her lessons with fondness and appreciation. I didn't know that she was a good teacher, because I was rebellious and refused to take piano lessons from my own mother.

So, my point is, there was much more to our family than the name of my father on all the envelopes would suggest. It was not really the Kosuke Koyama family. It was the Kosuke and Lois Koyama family. And you could say that, even while Dad had the spotlight, Mom, by her example, was the one who guided the day to day moral behavior of our family. Her way of being lives on in her children and commands our respect and gratitude, every bit as much as does our Dad, rest his soul.

Dorcas

I guess that is why our first reading this morning is, I think, such a wonderful reading to have pop up on Mother's Day. It is a story about a community weeping in memory of a woman who must have had the

qualities of a true mother. For the most part, the story of the early church is about the deeds of men moved by the Holy Spirit, men like Peter and Paul. But here, and in several other places, there are references to women that hint to us that there was much more of significance going on in the communities of faith than the names of the men on the “envelopes” would suggest.

In our reading, Peter responds to a call to visit the house of a woman who has just died named Dorcas, which incidentally means graceful or “Gazelle.” When they arrive they are greeted by a group of mourners who the story says, “were weeping and showing the tunics and other clothing Dorcas had made while she was with them.”

For a brief moment in the story, we catch a glimpse into a reality that is mostly going on outside the spotlight in the New Testament – of a woman who played an important role in holding together her community of faith, a role that was somehow symbolized by the items of clothing that the mourners had brought with them. And the powerful impact of her life on theirs is made clear by the wet tears that soak the garments in their hands.

Limitations in our Language

I think that this story also points to one of the limitations in our own records, in the way we have used male pronouns and language, to refer to all people, both men and women. You, like me, probably notice this less, because when we see words like “mankind” or “he,” we have been trained to know when the intention is to refer to everyone, just as when my Mother saw letters addressed to my Father, she understood that they were for her by the Mrs that was added.

And when we sing the hymns in the Red Hymnal, we understand which male pronouns refer to men and which refer to everyone. And so my guess is that for most of us, this whole business of pronouns is not big a deal, and we are willing to sacrifice being up to date in order to continue to enjoy the often exquisite phrasing and familiarity of the old hymns.

But I don't think that should blind us to the fact that there is still a sense in which maleness is spotlighted and women are cast into shadow by this traditional language in a way that is not fully consistent with our experiences of how God's love has come to us.

Based on my own experience growing up, and wanting to be true to how I believe God has been at work in my life, I think the spotlight we have been handed by tradition needs to be widened. My mother was every bit as intelligent and gifted a servant of God as my father was, even though society afforded him all the accolades. And there is no doubt in my mind that there is nothing about being male that makes a man inherently closer to God or inherently more profound than a woman. And the same is true the other way around. As the Apostle Paul said, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but (that) all are one in Christ.”

And so, I think that our Black Hymnal came into being as part of this same growing realization in our population. It is an attempt to revise some of the wording in a way that broadens the spotlight so that the female half of humanity is visible in a way that is in keeping with our actual experience of God in this world. And it is true that in some cases, the Black Hymnal has replaced decent poetry with pretty lame lyrics in order to accomplish this. But it is also true that some of the new wording is very eloquent, and represents a worthwhile advance on what came before.

I, for one, enjoy having the two hymnals side by side. It is like an old-timer sitting next to a young adult. The tension that it creates in me, when I see them side by side, constantly reminds me to respect both the old and the new and to see how the strength of one relieves us of the flaws in the other and vice versa.

But the main thing I want to do today, is turn the spotlight in the direction of our Mother's. And to lift up the truth that God's love in Jesus Christ is mediated to us through the way you have shepherded us through life. You who are mothers, both biologically and in spirit, deserve our gratitude, all day today and every day.

And so I would like to finish with my own very sentimental and somewhat lame attempt at poetry as a tribute to all you women in the congregation who are mothers to the people around you.

(over)

My Mom was my shepherd, she made sure we had what we needed.
She tucked us in at night and sang us lullabies to still our souls.
We wanted to follow in her path; to do what is right and good.
When we went through tough times growing up, she was there,
Her example, was the rod and staff that guided us.
She made us birthday cakes to celebrate our lives.
She anointed our foreheads with kisses,
to let us know we were special to her.
Our tears overflow onto our garments in gratitude,
when we think of her.
Surely, the goodness and mercy of God that flowed through her,
will bless us our whole lives long.
In her house, we learned that we were in God's house.
And that her love was God's love, and that her love would last forever
and ever. Amen