

**Shelley Finson - The Whole Damn Loaf**  
**Sermon at Celebration of Life Service**  
**February 9, 2008**  
**Rev. Linda Yates, M. Div.**  
**Scripture - Matthew 15:21-28**

I too have my instructions from Shelley. She was very clear as she always is. She said there would be others who would speak about how wonderful she was. I have a different task. I am to focus on scripture. I can do that. I am to preach a word of challenge. I can do that. I am to preach a word of hope. I can do that. I am *not* to talk about how wonderful she was. I can *not* do that.

The story of the Canaanite woman is not a nice one. Well, for Jesus at least. Jesus is depicted as cranky, even rude. Some might say even say callous. Many commentators, almost all male have tried to explain away or rationalize his behaviour. They suggest, Jesus anticipated what she was going to say and was using it to teach the disciples and perhaps her. They say he didn't really mean to compare the woman to a "nasty" unclean dog but that the Greek word is in the diminutive, kind of like she is a Shitzu as opposed to a feral, wild dog - as if that makes Jesus seem any better.<sup>1 2</sup> Others imply that Jesus was just "testing" her, as if that kind of cruelty makes him look any better.<sup>3</sup> The truth is, Jesus, quite frankly, was wrong.

The story appears in Mark as well, but the writer of Matthew sees something very profound and far reaching in it. In Matthew the woman is described as a Canaanite. She is not only gentile but is also an indigenous woman. She is of the people who lived in the land before the Hebrew people took possession of it. Like all indigenous peoples throughout human history, the Canaanites suffered from suspicion, exclusion and oppression. The unnamed woman is apparently not associated with a man. So, what we have here is a status-less, unattached indigenous woman appealing on behalf of an even more powerless person, a sick beloved female child. She hears Jesus is in the area, seeks him out and then annoys the heck out of Jesus and his disciples. She shouts to get the great healer's attention. She employs all the things, desperate, smart women have done through the ages. She cries out using a titles of deference like "Son of David...have mercy upon me," (v. 22). She "gets" him. Even the disciples and the crowds up to that point don't get that Jesus is Son of David. This confession of faith comes first from a Gentile woman living in another country. Nonetheless, Jesus ignores her. She is persistent, connected as she is by that living strand between herself and her female child. "Have mercy upon me," she cries, (v. 22). The disciples become VERY annoyed. They appeal to Jesus to

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<sup>1</sup>David Rhoads, "Jesus and the Syrophoenician Woman in Mark," Journal of the American Academy of Religion LXII/2, pp. 357.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Dufton, "The Syrophoenician Woman and Her Dogs," The Expository Times, 11:417, August 1989, p. 417.

<sup>3</sup>Douglas Hare, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching - Matthew, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 176-179.

send her away. Jesus turns to address her and explains that he was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel, an explanation designed to send her away. His mission is defined by ethnic boundaries. Now go away. However, the woman has a bigger vision, a more expansive vision than does Jesus. She has a more expansive vision FOR Jesus. Again, she does what women have often done. This fiercely loving woman prostrates herself before him in a position of worship. She calls him "Lord" and pleads "Help me," (v. 25). Jesus still can not see the both/and in the situation. In his mind, tending to a stray gentile, even a small female one, means not tending to his Jewish mission. His response is to tell her that the children's bread (his own ethnic group) should not be thrown to the dogs, (the Gentiles). He is telling the woman that she has no right to expect help from him. The woman on the other hand, thinks differently. Cleverly, very cleverly she takes his words and turns them back to him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters table," (v. 27).

I always imagine at this retort that Jesus has a really startled look on his face. The implication of her comment is "Jesus, would you, *you*, of all people withhold bread, from a child?" If you would not withhold bread from a child, then would not healing a child be even better? In other words, "Even a household pet or a feral dog would fare better than what you are suggesting for this child, Lord" Her appeal is for mercy. Her tool is logic and her reference is her own realm of influence. Mercy seems to be the economic principal by which the woman runs her own household in which the bread is baked, her beloved child is fed and even the dogs under the table are fed. It is a model of divine mercy. If she can operate by this principle, would not also this Jesus she had heard so much about? She must have been shocked by his refusal. It is amazing she can keep her composure - but then such is the connection she has with her child and with her God.<sup>4</sup>

For Jesus' part, his surprise becomes conversion. Jesus does choose to offer this kind of mercy after all, partly, because the woman has expressed her faith in him. When someone expresses faith in you, it changes you. Jesus then expresses his faith in her by declaring publically and forever within our sacred scriptures that her faith is "great," (v. 28). Jesus changes. He steps up to the challenge and not only changes his mind about healing her daughter but the whole encounter has so altered his psyche that from that point on Jesus transforms his entire ministry. It not only include gentiles from then on, but he physically moves deeper into gentile territory, along the Sea of Galilee. It is no accident that immediately after this argument about crumbs being thrown to the dogs, Jesus takes five loaves of bread and feeds a crowd of four thousand deep in Gentile territory, (vv 15:32-39).

It is also no accident that in the chapter prior to this, Jesus explains, using another feminine metaphor that the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened (13:33). Bread and crumbs, bread and crumbs. When I think of Shelley and her life, I think of bread and crumbs and a tenacious woman who rejected the crumbs and demanded instead, particularly for disenfranchised women, that the whole damn loaf be shared.

I think of Shelley driven by her connection, her duty, her care, her passion, her

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<sup>4</sup>Judith Gundry-Volf, "Spirit, Mercy, and the Other," *Theology Today*, 51, (1995), 519. (Note: I have used much from this excellent article).

commitment to other women challenging systems, powers and principalities to include women's voices, women's concerns: Shelley demanding a place set for all around table. Shelley and her persistent, annoying, constant challenge to those who were convinced they were doing "good" as they participated or benefited from patriarchy. Shelley reminding us all that in the sharing of the loaf, if we could only be brave enough, it would multiplied by four thousand or more, with many baskets left over.

No one fought harder for the use of inclusive language throughout our United Church. No one fought more fiercely for the inclusion of feminine imagery and metaphors in our theological discourse. The loss of Shelley's voice and perhaps Barb Rumscheidt's is impoverishing us. I am amazed in my role as Presbytery Education and Students Co-Convener, as I sit through interviews with all manner of theological students from all manner of theological modes of education. God, apparently has shed any and all feminine aspects and attributes, and is not even gender neutral but has, in fact, grown a penis - again.

Feminism, apparently, is a thing of that past, also. This is what I am told more often these days, particularly by my collegial brothers, that is those brave enough to name it out loud. We don't need it anymore. We are "behind" in the Maritimes because we still think about it. So now, we are to go back to imaging God as male and somehow the other half of humanity will all just intuitively "get it" that they are included in the nature of God, in the activity of God, in the plans of God, in the kingdom of God. Shelley was fond of quoting Sallie Mcfague who warned us that divinization is reciprocal. What we divinize in heaven we divinize on earth and visa versa. Words and images and metaphors are important. Advertisers know that naming, imaging and metaphors are absolutely critical in naming what is important. **Empire** sure gets that words and images and metaphors are important. Why on earth, after decades of work, after groundwork laid carefully and painfully by women like Shelley Finson, would the church begin to say again, "Nyah, inclusive language - not important. That is so done." An exclusively male God is a God of crumbs. We want the whole damn loaf and Shelley taught us we had the right to ask for it.

So feminism is done. Shelley and Barb Rumscheidt always said you should read the paper alongside the bible. I decided in her honour that I would see what the papers had to say these last weeks as Shelley Finson lay dying. Once in one of our classes, probably thirteen years ago some one said that the church hierarchy was filled with women so why was she saying women had no power? She replied that no one cares about the church anymore and we always let women into positions which hold no power- a very shocking thing to say to students studying to be ministers. She went on saying the real test would be the upper echelons of the boardrooms of the corporate world. A headline a couple of weeks ago? Last year, the percentage of women of women CEO's in Canada declined again, from 6.3% to 5.8%. The tables of the board room are too important a place I guess to let women sit at. They will have to be satisfied with the crumbs underneath.<sup>5</sup>

Also, in the news, diabetic teenage girls not taking their insulin, making themselves blind

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Ottawa Business Journal Staff, "Glass ceiling thickens for women execs at top 100 companies: survey, Ottawa Business Journal, January 17, 2008, <http://www.ottawabusinessjournal.com/290782174412345.php>

and destroying their kidneys. Why? So they can be thin. The researcher said that for the very first time in eighty years, diabetic health progress has been set back. Dying to be thin. Teen age girls dying to be considered thin enough to be lovable. Our sick female children *using bread* to damage their bodies. Shelley always reminded us that the denigration of women's bodies throughout history was directly connected to a Christian theology that denied that God could be embodied in women as well as in men.<sup>6</sup>

Letters to the Editor. Letters after letters were written concerned about whether Veterans received enough pension money to be comfortable. When was the last time you read a letter concerned about old ladies living in poverty? This is our biggest group living within poverty. These are the same women who kept the home fires burning, worked in factories and raised the boomer generation. They were discouraged from working outside the home. They were told the "home" job was important, just as important as the husband's job - and so it was. Nonetheless, many of them found themselves sitting across tables from their ex-husband's lawyer who told them that they deserved crumbs in a divorce settlement because they did not contribute anything "economically" to the household. The scandal is that we consider it "normative" that old women live in poverty. Perhaps even quaint. We think that old women, crones, unattached women are used to living on crumbs. It has always been thus, we say. Does God care about old, unattached women? Shelley and Barb made us read Dorothee Soelle who predicted in the 1960's and 70's that as men immersed in a capitalist society aged along with their wives, the women would be traded in for the next, newer model, like their washing machines. This is the same Dorothee Soelle who reminded us that in economic laws laid out for us in Deuteronomy there is much said about the care of aliens, orphans and widows. Do we hear about the growing scandal of senior women living in poverty from our pulpits in this age of post feminism?<sup>7</sup> Whether widowed by divorce or death, there is a direct connection between exclusion of the feminine in God imagery, God language and theology and the exclusion old women from the household economics of society. As churches, we sure do love their pennies though.

(Finally, there was an article in the Globe and Mail. It said that women are primarily responsible for the demise of church. Apparently women left in the 1960's and 1970's because of a language, imagery, hierarchical structure and theology that not only did not include them but actively condemned them. Now, apparently, it is those women's fault that no one is in church. It turns out that women make the decisions about where or even if families worship. As for the ones who stuck with church, fought and insisted on sharing both the loaves and the language - many have blamed them for the departure of men from church life. It is all the women's fault all fo the time. There is no mention of male responsibility whatsoever in this article. Shelley always said that you know a group is oppressed when they are held collectively within a double bind. Damned if they do and damned if they don't. Patriarchy threw crumbs so women left. The ones that stayed asked for a share in the loaf and many men left because of it. If only, if only, women

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.cbc.ca/health/story/2007/06/18/insulin-weight-loss.html#skip300x250>

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/canada/regions/atlantic/Publications/Tides\\_of\\_change/4\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/canada/regions/atlantic/Publications/Tides_of_change/4_e.html)

could have just taken the crumbs and shut up.)<sup>8</sup>

The last course I took from Shelley was a post graduate course. It was entitled, I think, “Women’s Voices.” It was about the third wave of feminism which seeks to address the failures of the first two waves of feminism. Shelley talked of her journey of beginning to hear the persistent voices of women of the South. These are women of the two thirds of our world who have said, “You white, northern first world feminists should not have spoken for us and do not speak for us. In your scramble to secure bigger crumbs for yourselves you have forgotten that we have voices and places at the table.” They said “You have not asked how the health of *our children* have been broken by the labour required to bring any of you the bread you demand.” In her pain around this I saw that Shelley could listen, learn and change as well as speak. Kind of like Jesus in our passage today.

There are two very big dangers facing us now as people within the United Church. In his book Germ, Guns and Steel, Jared Diamond makes the point that throughout history societies have obtained knowledge and then lost it.<sup>9</sup> The most striking example is that of the people of Tasmania. Tasmania used to be connected to Australia and the people living within both places had much in common, including the use of bows and arrows, shaped rock tools, boomerangs and various other tools. After the last ice age, as sea levels rose, Tasmania became separated from the continent of Australia. There is a critical mass in terms of knowledge held by a population, Diamond says that at a certain point, loss of knowledge increases rapidly. By the time Europeans arrived, Tasmanians had lost the use of all of their tools and had even lost the ability to make fire. We always have this image, in capitalist post modernism of the “forward movement” of ideas. It is inevitable, we think that ideas will “progress” and expand. It is not inevitable. We lose craftsmanship and technology because we lose the knowledge of craftspeople. We can lose philosophies, stories, wisdom and theology. It can happen and has happened throughout human history. I am afraid it is happening now - to us.

My collegial brothers in ministry have told me that in the Maritimes we are behind theologically the rest of the country. Behind. What if, though, what if the presence of Shelley and Barb and others kept a feminist consciousness alive and moving and advanced in this small place we call the Maritimes? What if the rest of the country has fallen behind? What if in the panic of this age of post-Christendom we have begun to think that feminist theology was a luxury we can no longer afford? That it was a kind of an experiment throwing out to the dogs those bigger, fluffier crumbs of inclusive theology and inclusive language. Perhaps we think we have to gather the crumbs back and hang on to them tightly because we worry there will be no bread left as fewer and fewer people come to church. Perhaps we think by reverting back to orthodoxy, tradition, personal piety and conservatism we will “preserve” the church in these difficult times. My fear, my biggest fear is that with the loss of this persistent, caring woman

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<sup>8</sup>Note: I did not use this in the sermon at the funeral due to length, (Michael Valpy, “Churches Come Tumbling Down,” Globe and Mail, December 22, 2007)

<sup>9</sup>Jared Diamond, Germ, Guns and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), pp. 308-315.

named Shelley Finson who so fiercely believed in us, fought for us and hoped for us, that we are in danger, even in the Maritimes, of losing that feminist consciousness. A feminist consciousness that was constantly hounding us, shouting out after us, reminding us that all of our liberation, brothers *and* sisters, all of our salvation is bound up together and that our loaves will never multiply by four thousand or more until we stop hanging on to them so tightly.

When I worry too much about these things, I think about the kingdom of heaven being like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened, (13:33). This heavenly woman uses heavenly yeast which, according to Matthew stands in stark contrast to the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of the Sadducees (and patriarchy). Women in ancient times, women in Canadian pioneer days (and women in many parts of the world today) shared with their neighbours and friends starter dough. These were bits of dough from their household that contained active yeast used to seed a new batch of raw dough. I love that image. I think of thousands and millions of households, thousands and millions of women's hands, thousands and millions of belly's fed all connected to each other by sharing that dough with the yeast of generosity. Shelley's influence is like that yeast and was given with the same care, generosity and hope. When you were taught by her, she didn't tear at you. She kneaded you, which as many of you know, was not always a comfortable process. Kneading is necessary because it makes the fibre in you tough and stringy and helps gives you shape, so you can withstand the heat in the ovens of the world. With her it was always a process of engagement, inquiry and connection. So, for anyone who learned from her, worked with her or lived with her, the yeast of Shelley, rises up in us yet to be shared from one to another well into the future, generation upon generation.

Shelley's need to share and be connected happened even as she was dying. We witnessed this with her online Blog which documented her journey and kept her connected to all of those who cared to log on. With Shelley there was always the incredible intensity of connecting, understanding, being present to the moment and to the Spirit within it as she walked this journey toward death. Dianne, the love of her life was the one she was most connected to, of course. As with most things, Shelley was very concerned about the impact of her death on those she loved - Dianne, her children, her family, Shelley's family and that wonderful circle of close friends. Her friends. Shelley taught me one more thing. She taught me how to die. She spent those weeks, surrounded by a circle of women; vigilant, quiet, waiting, caring, serving, tending women. What does it say about a woman who has a circle of friends who take time off of work, time out of their busy full lives to do this difficult, painful task of ultimate connection?

One of the last comments, (or instructions I should say), from Shelley was that she never wanted to be remembered as "a woman in the centre of a circle." She saw herself as a woman who was a part or member of a circle of women. That is how she wanted to be remembered. I don't know that she gets to choose how people remember her and how her influence will be felt. I have often thought that if Jesus picked up the gospels, he would be totally confused by what was written about him - how he was remembered by that early Christian community. I think that happens when you offer yourself to the world in service and self giving. In that kenosis, or self emptying the world becomes different. In other words, you don't get to decide what shape the loaf takes once you have offered the yeast to that other household. You just trust that your offering will nourish, sustain and transform.

In that same last conversation with Shelley, she shared a dream with me. She thought it was a shocking dream. In the gospel of Matthew, dreams are very important. It is often how God speaks most directly to people. On the night before she was ordained, Shelley said she had the most vivid dream of her life. She was part of a circle of women sitting on the ground. The women were learning from each other and sharing. A man came to the door and asked to become part of that circle. She told him politely that the circle was only for women and it was not appropriate for him to be there. She turned to go but the man, more insistently, asked to be part of the circle, promising not to be disruptive. Again, she told him that it was for women only and it was not appropriate for him to be a part of it. Then the man became quite insistent, asking again to made part of the circle. Shelley finally gave him a little push and closed the door, returning to the circle. She woke up with a start realizing that the man was none other than Jesus himself. She said she kept the dream to herself for years because she was a little mortified. Then she began sharing it. I don't know that she came to any conclusion about what the dream meant for her. But I know what it means for me. Shelley knew that for women to be able to claim a place in the Divine, to claim a share of the whole loaf, there needed to be a safe place for women to gather together to remove the layers upon layers of patriarchy from themselves. Then and only then could they relearn what God always wanted us to know in the first place. Shelley's safe spaces sure allowed an awful lot of women to open up that door and meet Jesus again in a brand new way; a healthier way, a liberating way. It did me. I have never been the same. Given Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman, I think Jesus would be okay with being made to wait at the door. Well, after he got over the shock, that is. When I learned on that Sunday morning that Shelley had died, as I drove to church, I imagined her opening that door again. I was wondering what Jesus would say. Likely, he would say, "Woman, great is your faith and *thank you*."

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