

LET THE CHILDREN COME

I couldn't have been much more than seven years old when my life changed more significantly than it has at any other time since that afternoon. Looking back on it now, nearly a century later, I've gained an understanding of just how much of a radical the Man was, and the extent of danger He faced when He spoke as He did. I probably didn't realize it then, and wouldn't necessarily have comprehended its magnitude even if I did, but His actions were just as liable as His words to get Him into big trouble with the ruling class and the most pious among the synagogue hierarchy. He didn't seem the least bit concerned about any of that, though. If He was, my youth prevented me from perceiving any caution or wariness on His part; even as a child, I sensed He maintained a higher priority than a discomfort over whom He may offend or antagonize.

He was a small-town rabbi who presumably hadn't been properly trained for His position; yet His wisdom and understanding, His compassion, and what all of us felt that day as His unconditional love, went far beyond that of any teacher in our local communities and even in the magnificent Temple at Jerusalem. He didn't have a formal headquarters and seemed to prefer an itinerant lifestyle; His ministry, I heard years later, was loosely based in Capernaum, but He spent the first year or two of His life in Bethlehem, with a brief jaunt into Egypt, before settling into His parents' hometown of Nazareth where He learned the family trade, carpentry. But somewhere in the midst of all that, He apparently had a chance to study the Torah pretty thoroughly and pick up some very controversial ideas.

As a girl, of course, I hadn't received any formal training in the Law whatsoever; but my brothers and some of the other older boys in attendance that day told me later that His teaching was vastly more interesting than anything they'd ever learned in their studies. Following each lesson, the men were permitted to speak and ask questions; and no matter what reference from the Pentateuch or the prophets' writings they threw at Him, He provided what appeared to be a very complete and satisfactory interpretation. A few people did become angry when His thoughts conflicted with what the leaders had always taught, and occasionally He even condemned some of their practices, like wearing their phylacteries and following the ceremonial cleansing rituals on the outside, while inside they were still consumed with greed, pride and other sins.

That sort of thinking challenged foundational religious beliefs, and looking back, I think it may have hit a nerve in many members of the upper levitical and priestly echelon. But the common people, like my parents, my grandparents and most of their friends, enjoyed this new way of thinking. It's funny I should remember this so clearly after all these years. I was, after all, the lowest of the low. First of all, I was a child at the time, ranking no higher in any household than a foreign house slave. Secondly, if and when I should reach adulthood, I was destined to be a mere woman. Considering all this, I'm surprised my family even bothered to take me along when they went to His teaching sessions. What did it matter to anyone what I might learn? And really, didn't it frighten them to think I may actually learn anything at all? That was a *male* privilege; again, as a girl, I knew education of anything beyond rudimentary housekeeping and mothering skills was not meant for me. I guess my parents must have been very progressive people, that they would break with conventional thinking enough to let me go with them. But the odd thing was I wasn't the only girl who attended these meetings. Other families took a chance and brought their daughters, as well, and He not only seemed to tolerate us, but He frequently reprimanded His disciples and other onlookers if any of them tried to make us leave.

My parents had seen Him in action a few times before we began to follow Him from place to place. They told stories my two brothers and I had a hard time believing, tales that had Him doing everything from healing diseases, to providing enormous amounts of food from next to nothing, to raising people

from the dead – and even assuming the authority to forgive the sins of anyone who wanted to follow Him. Though I was just a lowly female child, I understood that the offense of making oneself equal to God carried a death sentence; and only God has the authority to forgive sins, right? So they'd seen some pretty dramatic things, and while I didn't know it at the time, they were taking all of our lives in their hands when they began to openly regard Him as a prophet and a teacher. The authorities couldn't have liked that very much; and I'm sure they must have been watching pretty closely by that time.

Nevertheless, whatever the risk, whatever my parents' motivation might have been, I was there that day, and it became a day I've not forgotten during the entire lifetime that has elapsed between then and now. We left early in the morning because the folks didn't want to miss a thing He said. They'd learned His routine somewhat, and they knew He liked to start the day alone and in prayer. During those hours, His closest followers, about a dozen of them, sometimes taught things they'd learned from Him in private. My father used to say he couldn't begin to imagine the magnitude of what those men had learned, because he was certain they'd been privy to some things they weren't allowed to share, in addition to all the teachings they *could* pass along to others. They didn't mind discussing their insights with the men; but the women, and especially we children, seemed to make them very uncomfortable most of the time. It wasn't like they didn't have families of their own, of course; most of them had wives and children – maybe they all did. But typically they left those wives and children at home, where they belonged, while they went out to tend to the important issues. And they didn't really appreciate the fact that many of the people who came to the teaching sessions saw fit to arrive with an entourage of insignificant people who would then have to be fed at some point during the day, and who would hear lessons involving matters too deep for them to comprehend, and of which they really had no business being informed.

It was a lovely morning. One or two of the disciples, who were a little more patient with young people, took a group of the boys aside for some sort of group learning activity while a couple of the others resumed a lesson the men had been studying the previous day. That left me and the other girls with very little to do. A pile of Torah scrolls sat near the front of the gathering, and I longed to know how to read, even if only a little, so I could see and utter the sacred words for myself. But that would be out of the question. Naturally, I did not know how to read; and if I had, I wouldn't have considered dishonoring my father by displaying that kind of insolence in front of his peers. He would likely have been ostracized from the synagogue and from the community; and he would have been mortified to know his daughter had brought such humiliation to our ancestors. And yet, paradoxically, one of this Teacher's favorite themes seemed to be humility, and how humble people are actually higher in God's esteem than those who hold positions of power. Still, no one was going to teach me how to read, and I wasn't about to touch those scrolls, which were as good as useless to me.

I saw some lovely pink, lavender and yellow flowers growing throughout the meadow where we were meeting that day; I didn't know their names at the time, but now I think most of them were probably rockroses and Jaffa groundsel. I briefly considered picking a bouquet; but then I thought about the long, hot day ahead, and I knew they would be droopy within a very short time, and dead long before I would have access to any water. Besides, with water as sparse as it is, living so near the desert, it would be wrong to waste any of it in this way. That thought reminded me of something else the Teacher had brought up one day. He said we should focus our thoughts on things of God, heavenly things, because everything that belongs to this world is just like the flowers that look beautiful in the morning, but by evening are dead, with no trace they'd ever existed. No, I decided; let the flowers grow. It's not up to me to decide what should live and what should die.

Toward afternoon, I continued to muse on this, and I was still trying to think of something to do while

we waited for the Teacher. I may have dozed for a little while as the sun climbed higher and felt hotter, but I became very much awake when I suddenly noticed a great deal of agitation a short distance from us. My mother, both of my grandmothers, a group of my aunts and many other women, who had been drowsily chatting among themselves, became instantly alert, as well, and were soon running to the source of the commotion. Standing with them, I looked in the direction they were headed and saw a very young boy in the midst of a seizure. His mother was attempting to quiet him before he interrupted the men and their teaching, but his body was rigid, his face contorted, and the moans that emanated from him were unworldly.

As the women gathered around the afflicted child and his mother, someone spoke just a bit more loudly than necessary. "It's a demon grabbing hold of the boy," she said, "sent to torment him for some sin that's been committed."

At this, the mother began to cry. "No," she wailed. "My Shimon and I have kept the law perfectly since well before he was born. There's no sin in our home."

"It might not be your sin," called someone else, jumping into the discussion. "Sins of the fathers are punishable unto the third and fourth generation, you know." This only made the mother's denials louder, and it wasn't long before the sound carried to the men's area and caused heads to begin turning toward the disturbance.

"Shimon, isn't that your Rebekah over there in the middle of all that pandemonium?" asked one of the disciples.

"You really need to learn how to control your woman," shouted a voice from the crowd.

As the men's voices threatened to become as disruptive as the women's and the child's, Shimon assessed the situation. He'd seen his son, Abishai, behave in this way before, and he knew it was only a matter of time until this particular episode would end. But as he grew nearer and heard the accusations being thrown at his wife and his little boy, he quickened his pace and tried to convince the group, which had by then assumed mob-like proportions, that there was no hidden sin in his family tree and that he could, indeed, keep his household under control. By the time he'd shoved his way to the center of the circle, Abishai had become limp; his eyes were still rolled back into their sockets, but Shimon and Rebekah knew it would only be a moment before he was back to normal. The question of a demon attack had jarred both of them, however, and mulling it over in her mind, Rebekah had come up with an idea which she now proposed to her husband as the other women continued to listen.

"When the Teacher gets here, I want us to take Abishai to Him and let Him lay His hands on him," Rebekah said. "That way, if there is truly a demon inside him, He can cast it out; and if not, then He can heal whatever else might be wrong with him, so this doesn't happen again."

"What, and would you have Him forgive all your family's sins while He's at it, too?" called a first-time attendee, who had never heard the Teacher speak and had not witnessed any of the miracles He'd performed. She'd only heard rumors and was there out of curiosity and anxious for a good show, nothing more.

"Rebekah, really, you can't seriously mean to do something like that!" Shimon said, barely louder than a whisper. "We've caused enough of a stir already."

“I certainly do mean to do it,” Rebekah replied. And I feel that as head of the household, you should be the leader; but if you refuse, then I would obediently seek your permission to do it alone.”

A number of the nearby women gasped audibly at such audacity on Rebekah’s part; but after a moment of thoughtfully watching their own children returning to their activities as the excitement began to die down, the concept didn’t seem quite so outrageous. Isaac, the baker’s, wife, Miriam, spoke first. “Why don’t we *all* take our children to the Teacher?” she asked. “If He would only touch them, even for a second or two, it may very well ensure their good health and blessing for years to come. And even if it doesn’t, it certainly can’t hurt. He seems like someone who wouldn’t be ashamed to be seen with a child.”

“Even the girls, Miriam?” asked another mother in the crowd. “I’ll take my boys and join you if you really want to go through with this. But I’d love to also take my little Naomi; she’s always been a very frail child, and a touch from the Teacher could very well restore some strength to her little body. Do you think we dare approach him with our daughters?”

“Yes!” I heard another woman shout, firmly and decisively. I was surprised to realize, when I looked up, that it was my own mother. She was talking about me! I might get to go and meet the Teacher?

As the daring thought continued to take root among the women, the men had begun to approach. There was no point in continuing with their lesson until this unprecedented interruption had been quelled. Behind the men, one of the disciples called out, “Now look at what’s happened. This is exactly why women and children have no place in these gatherings.”

The other women who weren’t already a part of the group gathered around Rebekah and Abishai eventually heard what the others were thinking, and they had moved in closer to the core so they, too, could hear the plan being hatched by the mothers. By the time the men arrived, the women were in a state of excitement such as they’d likely never experienced in their lives up to that point. They began gathering their children close to themselves and explaining to the fathers what they’d decided to do. By then, all protocol had been lost; a lifetime of subservience had gone by the wayside in many cases, and the women even forgot to lower their eyes when they spoke with their husbands. Many of them had probably considered the beatings and tongue-lashings they deserved for such reprehensible behavior, and still they presented their shocking proposal.

Surprisingly, most of the men thought it was a good idea. It took a few minutes before anyone would admit it, but then a grunt of approval began to trickle through the male portion of the crowd. This was followed by nods of assent and words of affirmation. “Yes, our children should receive a blessing from the Teacher. Who knows when we may have an opportunity like this again?”

“That’s right. Who’s to say this isn’t ordained by God?”

“What are you saying?” one of the disciples cried. “You’re proposing to bother the Master with your silly idea of asking Him to touch your children? That is complete and utter nonsense, a plan hatched by a group of ignorant women who have nothing better to do than pretend they’re worthy to sit here and learn with the men!”

“Let’s organize some crowd control,” said another disciple. I recalled that he was one of the leaders among the group and had some authority. But I thought he was rather impetuous and seemed to be jumping into action without a really defined plan.

At that moment, Yeshua, the Teacher, arrived – or appeared. I don't have any recollection of anyone mentioning He was there, and I didn't see anyone move out of the way to allow Him to pass into the group. But suddenly, there He was, right in the middle of everyone, disciples, students, women and children, all blended into one area. And He didn't look the least bit ruffled by any of the confusion. I recall that He smiled, a gentle but piercing smile, as He looked around at all the expectant faces waiting for His direction. "Peter, would you come here for a moment, please?" He asked quietly.

The disciple who'd tried to organize the crowd control stepped forward, flustered and sweaty. "I'm sorry, Rabbi. This group of people has abandoned all propriety, and now they want to bring their children to You for a blessing."

One of the other disciples picked up the explanation when Peter paused to catch his breath. "We explained that You can't be bothered with such things," he said, "but they aren't listening to reason."

"I can't be bothered?" the Teacher asked sadly. "What makes you think it would be a bother to give My blessing to My own precious little lambs?"

The disciples didn't have an answer, and the entire crowd seemed to have grown silent, because even those of us some distance away from the Teacher heard Him as clearly as if we were standing directly in front of Him. "Let the little children come to Me," He said gently. "Don't keep them away. Don't you know by now that My kingdom is made up of people just like them? Anyone who desires to come to Me must be exactly like one of these little ones. Please, let them come."

The hush over the crowd continued only a moment longer, and then the first couple stepped forward. Shimon and Rebekah brought little Abishai to Yeshua and knelt before Him. Following them were their daughters, Esther, Rachael and Mary. "Teacher," Shimon began in a shaky voice, "my wife and I are concerned for our son, Abishai. We don't know if he has an illness or if a demon has taken hold of him. We know of no sin in either my wife's family or mine that would warrant such a punishment, but if You would cast it out or heal him, we would be forever grateful; I'm prepared to offer my finest bull as a sacrifice to repay You, for my wife and I believe You are, as You say You are, the Son of God."

"No sacrifice will be necessary, Shimon," the Teacher said. (I didn't recall Shimon telling Him his name, or anyone else's name in his family except for Abishai. But He seemed to know them all.) You and Rebekah have served Yahweh faithfully, as have your parents and your grandparents for many generations. You have attempted to raise Esther, Rachael and Mary to become godly women, and I know you will begin to make a man of God out of Abishai as soon as he is old enough to understand the teaching. There is no one without sin in this world, except for One, and I am He. I am here to make atonement for your sins, as well as the sins of everyone who will receive Me. I will be the sacrifice for all of you; I do not need a bull from your pasture.

"Now, from this moment forward, your son will be well." With that, the Teacher laid His hands on the little boy briefly, and then did the same for each of the family's three daughters. When He had done so, He took a seat on a nearby large rock and then looked expectantly at the other families pressing in on Him. Eagerly, they formed a line, and He spent the next several hours taking each child to Himself and pronouncing a blessing as He laid His hands on them. Even the shyest children seemed happy and excited to receive His attention.

Somewhere in the line, I even noticed the newcomer who had heckled Rebekah earlier, waiting to

present her own children to the Teacher.

When it was my turn to finally meet Him, my knees were shaky and I wasn't sure I could walk the few steps to where He was waiting for me with His arms outstretched. He didn't seem the least bit tired of speaking to young people, whether they were boys or girls, and in fact, He appeared delighted to meet each of us. I finally reached him, and as I approached, I felt one of His hands take hold of one of mine. It was as if a bolt of lightning had touched me, yet at the same time it was completely painless. Perhaps someday in the future a word might exist to describe this kind of jolt, but I don't need a word to recall the sensation. "Hello there, Abigail," He said kindly. Then He spoke one phrase to me, which I have recalled all these years; and I was shocked to find exactly the same wording in a letter one of His surviving disciples, John, recently sent to the churches which are now growing throughout not only Israel but in many Gentile countries, as well. He said, "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life."

I guess maybe that crown of life could be interpreted as a long life here in this world, because there aren't many of us who make it to 100 anymore – not the way they used to do in ancient times when Adam, Methuselah and Noah walked the earth; so I've been very grateful to know my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and a few from the next generation, as well, all of whom, boys and girls alike, have been taught about the Lord from infancy. But I think it also means a life that will continue after this old body finally wears out from age and usage. I'm looking forward to that life because I'm pretty sure it means I'll get to see the Teacher once again. And I'll likely be reunited with my mother and father, who took that brave step so long ago, to let me meet Him when I was nothing but a little Jewish girl.

Oh, and by the way, if you haven't figured this out already, I did eventually learn to read; how else would I be writing this? You see, the boy my parents had negotiated to be my husband was also present on that wonderful day so many years ago, and he decided if the Teacher had deemed me worthy of His blessing, then it would be neither a waste of time nor a sin if I learned to read the Scriptures for myself. So he taught me. We didn't make a big deal of it; we pretty much kept it to ourselves, just because we didn't want to cause any issues with the church leaders or the apostles or anyone. But now I've reached an age at which it doesn't make much difference what I do, so long as I know that what I'm doing is acceptable to my Lord. If the authorities decide to kill me for it, well, it will just be that much sooner I'm with Him. So this is my story, and I encourage you to tell it to your children.