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Listen to Women
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There once was a deadly virus that knew no limitations. For 13 hundred years it traveled the world and took the lives of three out of every ten persons it infected. Those who did not die from it were left with scars on their skin that looked like pock marks, which may be one reason it was called “The Pox”. Today, the virus known as smallpox has been eradicated, according to a statement made by the World Health Organization in May of 1980. The eradication of this deadly virus is considered one of the most important achievements in public health.

The story of how smallpox went from feared to defeated spans multiple centuries, but the achievement couldn’t have happened without the voice and advocacy of – not a medical doctor or a virologist or one of those experts we tend to turn to in times of a medical crisis – but of a woman.

Her name was Mary Wortley Montagu. She was born in 1689 to a wealthy aristocratic family in Great Briton. In addition to being a poet, writer and wife of a diplomat, Mary was intimately familiar with smallpox. It started when her beloved brother died from smallpox 1713. Two years later she contracted smallpox herself and after suffering its miserable symptoms survived with scars on her face as a permanent sign and reminder of the virus.

Understandably, Mary worried her young children would get smallpox. Which might be why when she traveled with her husband and family to Turkey in 1718, she couldn’t help but notice the absence of those telltale smallpox scars on the people who lived there. Curious about how this might indicate the virus was not as bad there, she discovered the people of that part of the world had developed a preventative form of treatment to stop the virus from infecting people. It happened like a ritual. Mary observed that every fall, before the time of year when smallpox was likely to spread, the people of the towns gathered their children together and women with nutshells full of puss from a blister of a person infected with smallpox would scratch the arm of each child and rub a small amount of the puss on the open wound. According to the local women who administered this treatment, although some children would develop symptoms, very few died, and most children did not get sick all. Although it sounds gross, it was a very early form of inoculation.

To Mary Montagu, it didn't look gross at all. To someone who had lost a loved one and suffered physical scarring from smallpox, it looked like hope that her children might be spared suffering from the virus. She told her husband and wrote to family and friends back home in Great Briton explaining what she had seen. When no one responded, she decided to show them how much she trusted the local women and their preventative treatment by having it administered to her own young son who was almost five years old in a public event at the British embassy. After he was inoculated, she gave regular reports of his health to her husband and other family and friends that their son never developed any symptoms.

Despite this, her efforts were not acknowledged or supported. So, when she returned to Great Briton, she had her then five-year-old daughter inoculated in another public event in 1721. This was the very first inoculation in Great Briton. And although her daughter never contracted smallpox which inspired a few people to have their children inoculated, most of what Mary Montagu got was pushback and rejection of the whole idea.

The reasons for the resistance were many. One reason was the concept of preventative medicine was very new and went against conventional wisdom of the time and culture of Great Briton. If a body – be it a human body or the body of the country - was healthy, then the idea was to preserve that health. Putting something potentially harmful, even if it was in a weakened state, into the body in order to prevent possible illness in the future didn't make sense to them. Of course, another reason was Mary was not a scientist or a medical professional. And she was a woman. A mother. Who had gotten this idea from other women, who were not medical professionals and were from a culture Great Briton considered uncivilized. Even though Mary had proved it would work and continued to advocate for this preventative treatment of smallpox, it failed to catch on.

But her advocacy did not escape notice. Seventy-five years after Mary had her daughter publicly inoculated, a doctor in rural England named Edward Jenner developed a different way of inoculating people against smallpox using the less deadly and contagious cowpox virus. Today history credits him with the invention of the vaccination process as we know it. The vaccination of smallpox gradually became so successful that one hundred sixty-two years later in 1958 the World Health Organization proposed a global program to eradicate smallpox and it only took twenty-two years for their goal to be realized.

However, this goal would not have been realized without the hope and advocacy of a woman whose name is not mentioned in the CDC's and many other histories account of the of the smallpox vaccine. A woman who listened to other women out of a desire to care for the health of her children.

Mary Wortley Montagu is not that different from another woman, the woman Jesus encountered in our Gospel reading today. Although this woman is not named, it is obvious Jesus did better than many of the people of Mary Montagu's time because he listened.

The author of Mark's Gospel may not have recorded the name of the woman who tracked down Jesus when he came to her part of the world, but the author did go to great lengths to describe her as not Jewish. She was not one of Jesus' people. Her culture was different. And there was some of what we would call xenophobia between Jews and the people of the region where Jesus went to try and get away from the demands of his ministry for a while.

That is why most scholars and commentators are not shocked nor surprised when Jesus not only refused the woman's respectful plea to heal her daughter but did so with such obvious sexism and racism that it makes this a hard story to deal with. But that might be because we make a lot of assumptions about Jesus and try – like the disciples and others of his time – to make Jesus into the leader we want him to be instead of letting the author of the Gospel show us something remarkable. Sometimes we need to let go of what we assume Jesus was and let the Gospel show us who Jesus is. To see that, we have to do what so many weren't willing to do to Mary Montagu: we have to listen to a woman.

At first glance, it is hard to understand why Jesus refused her request. She is not the first person in Mark's Gospel to approach Jesus for help, nor is she the first woman. There was the woman suffering from years of hemorrhaging who touched the fringe of his robe who was healed. And there was Jairus, the man of prestige who knelt at Jesus' feet just like the woman in today's Gospel who asked Jesus to heal his daughter. Jesus had no problem saying yes to him. He even deviated from the direction he was traveling to go to Jairus' house.

The unnamed foreign woman did not approach Jesus in public. She did so in the house, away from prying eyes. She addressed him as Lord. It looks like she did everything right. But like the culture of Mary Montagu's time, there may have been something offensive about her request.

Some scholars say the one misstep the woman made was that she spoke on behalf of the needs of her family, a role that traditionally belonged to a man. Not just any male family member, but the senior male relative of the family. A role the woman could be seen as wrongly and disrespectfully usurping. That might explain why Jesus refused her and called her a dog.

For Jews, dogs were considered vermin. They were partly wild scavengers that hung out at the edges of towns and were considered unclean. But in the culture of the woman who asked Jesus to heal her daughter, dogs were viewed differently. They were domesticating dogs and bringing them into households where they helped with protecting families and farm animals. These dogs were fed table scraps because they were seen as valuable parts of families and economies.

When Jesus called the woman a dog, she responded with wisdom. She didn't seem to get offended and call Jesus all kinds of names in return. She responded by using his terminology to remind him the way of his culture and those purity laws are not the way for all people. In her eyes, dogs are already at the table, where there is more than enough to go around.

This is not just a literal statement. Scholars like N.T. Wright believe this is reference to the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus was bringing to reality through his life, death, and resurrection. Here the woman was saying she sees this in-breaking of God's love for all people right then, in that moment, through Jesus' presence. She was saying God's Kingdom doesn't need to wait, it has already come near. Which is what Jesus proclaimed when he started his ministry in Mark's Gospel.

And Jesus listened. He heard. And he healed her daughter. There are scholars and commentators who warn us we shouldn't look at this account as a woman getting the better of Jesus or besting him in an argument. Their comments show despite the numbers of years that have passed, it can still be difficult for some to listen to women, especially when women are showing something that may not be easy to see, something that challenges comforting cultural assumptions.

I like to think that might be why this miracle is immediately followed by Jesus healing a deaf man, giving him the ability to hear and speak clearly. It is as if the author of Mark's Gospel might be saying it is important to listen to women but for some only a miracle might open their ears. Some Biblical scholars believe this could be a reference to some members of the early church struggling with the

leadership of Gentiles and women. It is unfortunate that even today women in leadership in some churches is still controversial, for if Jesus could listen, then certainly, so can we.

I didn't learn about Mary Montagu's contributions to the development of the smallpox vaccine and the eradication of the virus until recently, when I read about her in a book about the history of pandemics through historical literature by Kari Nixon, a professor specializing in social reactions to infectious disease at Whitworth University. In the first chapter of her book *Quarantine Life from Cholera to Covid-19*, she writes about how during a crisis much like the one we are in where creative responses are needed to help us return to health, we need to look to unexpected people and places for help. That was how I was introduced to Mary Montagu who despite being left out of many histories still contributed to the development of one of the most effective vaccines in human history and the eradication of a virus that took a loved one from her and made her worry for the health of her children. Her story makes me wonder who else gets left out because society's norms teach us not to listen to them.

And it makes me appreciate and love Jesus even more for showing us it is a Godly thing to listen to women, and to all the voices that can see and point us to God's love and healing in places we might not have thought to look and find when we do that God is already there.