

Misbehaving Women

Exodus 1:8-21, Matthew 1:1-6

It may surprise you to know, but I was not a kid who misbehaved at school. I am a rule-follower by nature and by nurture. I didn't stand a chance. You try stepping out of line when your mom's teaching in a classroom down the hall. There was no way I could have misbehaved at school and gotten away with it even if I was inclined to!

Imagine my surprise – and the surprise of my classmates – when one day, the high school principal's voice came through the classroom intercom calling me to his office. I was a junior in high school and one of the school's newspaper editors. I had just run a column where I called attention to an unfair exam policy. The principal – a Summerville native like me, a fellow church member, someone who knew my parents well – was “disappointed,” he said, that I hadn't come to him with my complaint rather than publishing it in my column. Something could have been worked out. For me, sure. But what about others who were caught up in the same fix? That was the day I began to learn how to be a misbehaving woman.

It may surprise you to know that as Methodists, we all come from a long line of misbehaving, uppity women: Frances Willard, Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Howard Shaw, Sojourner Truth, Phoebe Palmer, Barbara Heck – all the way back to Susannah Wesley, mother of John and Charles, who used to lead a Bible study out of her kitchen – a group that attracted more parishioners than the average Sunday morning worship did. Susannah's the one who persuaded her son John to allow women to preach and lead within Methodist societies back in the 1700s, a practice that remained until John died and the Methodists decided to be conventional again, relegating women back to behind-the-scenes roles within the church for another 200 years. Not that that stopped us from changing the church, or the world. I may be a rule-follower by nature and nurture – but I am also a Methodist woman. I – we – come from a long line of misbehaving women.

It also may surprise you to know that as Christians, we come from a long line of misbehaving women starting with a group of women who financed Jesus' ministry, including Mary of Magdalene. Mary goes on to be the first apostle, the first one sent out to tell others the good news of Jesus' resurrection. Priscilla and Thecla worked alongside Paul. Perpetua and Felicity and hundreds of other women chose martyrdom rather than compromise their loyalty to Christ. Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard, Katherine Zell, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa – we Christians come from a long line of uppity, bossy, trouble-making, Kingdom-building, misbehaving women.

But then maybe it shouldn't surprise us at all since Jesus himself came from a long line of misbehaving women. Hidden in the midst of Matthew's well-organized begets, we find Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba – women who challenged the status quo, who put God first, spoke truth and held others accountable to God's ways over and above the ways of the world. Tamar refused to let her father-in-law ignore his responsibility to his family. Rahab risked her life to help the Israelite spies in Jericho. Ruth left everything behind in a display of loyalty unmatched in Hebrew scriptures. And Bathsheba changed the course of a kingdom by fighting for her son's right to the throne. Even in his detailed, if a bit stuffy, list of Jesus' ancestry, Matthew couldn't ignore these women as a part of Jesus' story. Our salvation story includes the witness of these heroic women.

This isn't the only part of our salvation story that we can trace back to the work of uppity women. Does it strike anyone else as interesting that while historians and scholars alike can't figure out which Pharaoh is featured in Exodus because his name is NOWHERE to be found in Scripture, but we can tell you the names of the Hebrew midwives? When the not-named Pharaoh initiated an edict of genocide, Shiphrah and Puah defied his orders. When called to explain their actions before Pharaoh, Shiphrah and Puah used the king's own prejudice about the Hebrews to their advantage, continuing to do what they could to protect the Israelite children and families.

No-name Pharaoh, in his ignorance, accepted the midwives' explanation.

But then No-name changes his edict, declaring all male Hebrew children born must be thrown into the Nile. Of course, one of those boys wasn't thrown into the Nile, but placed there in a basket by a brave mother, Jochebed, and loving sister, Miriam. That baby was saved by Pharaoh's daughter, named Moses, and raised in Pharaoh's own house. In the midst of persecution, destruction, and genocide, the actions of these brave women – these misbehaving women – would lead to the complete downfall of Pharaoh and his army. Never underestimate the power of uppity women to change the world!

So why bring up these women this morning? To simply remind us of their stories? Frankly, that might just be enough – for us to call their names aloud and to remember that whenever we hear stories of Moses or David, Solomon, Martin Luther, John Wesley, or even Jesus, there are also countless stories of uppity, misbehaving women who were also great leaders of faith. Women whose own faith challenged authority and patriarchy, stood up for justice, and who feared God – and who ultimately changed the world...

Maybe we need to read these stories aloud to remind ourselves of our task to raise the next generation of misbehaving girls...to affirm that being called “bossy” is actually more of a compliment than insult, to raise girls that speak out on behalf of others, fight for justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

But most of all, I think these misbehaving women have something to say to *all of us* about what it means to follow God. Daniel never set out to end up in the lion’s den; Moses never expected the burning bush, and shepherd boy David wasn’t raised to be a king. In the same way, these women never set out to be heroes – they set out to be faithful to God, whatever may come.

The theme verse for Vacation Bible School this year is from Psalm 34: Do good! Seek peace and go after it! I love the action verbs – Do, Seek, Go! To be a super hero, someone God can use, takes action on our part. We must go after, pursue, seek, a life of faithfulness. These misbehaving women didn’t make a one-time choice to fear God – they lived every day pursuing peace and going after holiness, regardless of the cost.

What would it look like for us to live like these misbehaving women?

We have to show up. Each and every day, we have to show up for this life of discipleship. Somewhere along the way Christians decided that a life of discipleship was a one-time decision, a momentary occurrence. I hate to break to us, the life of a disciple is more than a one-time decision. It’s not even about showing up here on Sunday mornings. You can be in the building every day of the week and still not be pursuing faithfulness. Discipleship is a daily decision when every day we say, “God I’m here. Use me today for your glory.”

We show up. And then we pay attention. Have you ever written out a whole grocery list, walked through the whole grocery store, filled your buggy to the brim only to get home and realize you missed half a dozen items off your list? This happens to me almost every time I step in the grocery store! The list doesn’t do any good if we don’t pay attention to it, right? If we say every morning, “ok God, I’m yours today!” and then go about our day without paying attention to where God is leading us, what’s the point? We say yes to God, and then we look carefully at the world around us, paying attention to what God is showing us. Paul called this praying without ceasing, keeping an ongoing conversation with God running throughout our day whether we are at work or school or home.

We show up. We pay attention to God. And then we collaborate with God.

How many of you grew up watching Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood on public television? One of the many things that Mr. Rogers taught us is that whenever something bad happened, whenever he was scared his mother told him to look for the helpers, because you’ll always find people helping. When we’re paying attention to God, we will always find God at work. When we see people in distress or struggling – God is there. When we see people hurting or lonely – God is there. When we see signs of light and love – that’s God at work. As disciples, we are sent out into the world to join God who is already at work ahead of us. When we’re paying attention, we will know where God is calling us to go.

The midwives feared God. Though in the darkness of their slavery, they may not have seen clearly or understood, they knew that God had something greater in store for the Israelites. They paid attention to God and acted on behalf of God’s people.

Show up. Pay attention. Collaborate with God.

The story of the midwives could have ended differently – it could have ended with their death. For countless misbehaving women throughout the centuries, their stories did end with death or persecution; they were considered trouble, cast aside, and ignored. But their call from God wasn’t to be successful or rich or famous. It was a call to faithfulness – whatever the outcome. We too are called to faithfulness, to seek peace and go after it. That’s what it means to be heroes of faith like Shiphrah and Puah and all these misbehaving women. We show up, choosing every day to be in relationship with God and our neighbors. We pay attention to the ways God is working and to collaborate with God wherever God is at work. Regardless of the outcome.

Show up. Pay attention. Collaborate with God. Release the outcome into God’s hands. This is the witness of centuries of misbehaving women. May it be our witness, too.