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THE IMPROPRIETY OF JESUS' TEACHING: THE WOMAN AT THE WELL AND THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES

Susan O'Shaughnessy Poppe

I dedicate my message to the women and men who worked against nearly insurmountable administrative resistance to put on the performance of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* March 8th, and to those 800 students, faculty, and members of the community who came to the performance, half of whom had to be turned away, and to one young man, perhaps a student here, who in the discussion that followed the performance asked a probing question. He asked what resources in Christianity might be brought to the struggle to end violence against women and the silencing of their sexuality. Perhaps the story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well gives us reason for hope.

Would that I had the courage of Socrates, the cunning of Odysseus and even the wrath of Achilles this morning as I address my friends and colleagues in defense of values central to our work as scholars, mentors, citizens, and Christians, the pursuit of truth and the protection and support of those whose voices would be silenced, whose suffering would be ignored and whose justice would be denied.

Perhaps my fondest wish today is for the "indecent" of Jesus of Nazareth whose impropriety was necessary to his ministry. Often it seems he took special care to offend against proper conduct. This was evident when he journeyed through Samaria, stopped at Jacob's well and asked that shameful Samaritan woman to give him a drink. She was no stranger to impropriety, it was the only way she could survive. She suspected Jesus was a prophet because he knew her life story, her sexual history and her pain. She believed him when he said he was the source of living water and drank her fill. That is why she left her water jug behind when she went to the city to tell the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be Christ?" (JN 4:29). "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony...And many more believed because of his word" (JN 4:39, 41).

For the woman at the well, the mark of Christ was the invitation to be known and the power to speak. She who had been shunned, ignored, and silenced; she who was unwelcome at the well during civilized hours; she who was no stranger to impropriety, was chosen to speak. Moreover, when she speaks, she tells everyone that he knows all about her. The people in the city who shun her and force her to

the well in the heat of the day because they know the kind of woman she is, somehow listen to her now. This is miraculous. And still more amazing, they believe in Jesus on account of what she says and follow her back to the well. They go to see a Jew, Jesus. Being only half-Jews themselves and a people shunned by Jews, they must expect him to treat them as they treated the woman until now. They want to see how their own stories might be known and their lives recognized by Jesus. Jesus gave them the living water to drink and accepted their invitation to stay in Samaria for two days. Jesus' solidarity with them, despite how Jews were supposed to treat Samaritans, was the sign to them that he was the Christ. The bonds of sexism and racism had held the woman at the well and the Samaritans in silence. Jesus undermined both forms of oppression in his visit to Samaria. His scandalous recognition of the woman and the people of her city showed his love for them and brought liberation.

Recently I heard several stories that reminded me of the woman at the well. One was a story of a Bosnian woman who had been raped with a rifle by a group of enemy soldiers. She was frightened that they would fire the rifle inside her. She was humiliated, brutalized, and shocked. After the assault, she was shunned by her community and forced to wall up her shame inside herself. Years later a woman named Eve Ensler asked to tell her story. I like to imagine that the woman raped in Bosnia felt relief and empowerment when Eve asked her to tell her story. I pray that like the woman at the well, she was liberated from her shame when she was invited to share her experiences. By retelling the stories of woman and girls of all ages, nationalities, races, and religions, who are silenced by custom, war, assault, the church, synagogue, and mosque, by their husbands, bosses, religious leaders, and others, Eve intends to bring healing and a confident voice to those who attend a performance of her play, the *Vagina Monologues*.

Eve Ensler allows her play to be performed on college campuses for free for one month each year. She is committed to ending violence against women by the year 2005 and needs the help of college students and others to get the word out. What a wonderful way for her to ask academic institutions to examine their commitment to the liberating power of liberal education. Sometimes, the

academy whose sated goal is the free pursuit of truth, in its institutional structures and policies and in its struggle to maintain its place of privilege often times neglects this goal, for fear of offending against propriety and for fear of offending donors, parents, church officials, or perhaps even for fear of discomfiting itself. Eve and those who perform the *Vagina Monologues* wish to liberate women and their sexuality from the subtle and silent bonds that seal off women deep within themselves.

It is our mission as a college of the Church to defend and preserve academic freedom. Let us remind ourselves that it is also the mission of Christ to break the chains of oppression by means of inflicting discomfort on a person's of power or privilege who despite a generalized friendly feeling in their hearts toward women, people of color, and gays and lesbians, remain complicit in that oppression by their taking up a position proper and pure by customary standards.

May God give us the courage to speak about sexuality, about our bodies, about sexual violence and rape. May God give a troubled conscience, a compassionate heart, and inspired deliberation to those who have the power to grant or deny requests for space and resources to perform the *Vagina Monologues* or bring *The Laramie Project* to campus. When we are in the presence of those who silence others by subtle and overt means, may God give us the wit, presence of mind, and the courage of to speak out and act out against them. When others have the courage to speak out, let us not leave them alone. Let us stand with them even at the risk of our social status, our popularity, our careers, our physical safety. Let us love one another as Jesus loved us - as he loved the woman at the well.

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