

# Sermon

OCTOBER 2, 2016 | Luke 1:39–56 | Preacher: Dan Puchalla

In 1985, the cartoonist Alison Bechdel wrote a comic strip titled “The Rule.” In it, there are two women on a date, walking down a sidewalk and about to pass a movie theater. One of them asks the other if she wants to see a movie and get popcorn. “I dunno,” the other says, “I have this rule, see. I only go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. One, it has to have at least two women in it, who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man.”

“Pretty strict,” the other says.

“No kidding,” she replies, “Last movie I was able to see was *Aliens*. The two women in it talk to each other about the *monster*.”

The couple keeps walking past the theater and decide they’ll just eat popcorn at home.

In 2005, the roles set out by Bechdel’s comic strip got a revival on blogs and social media and remains now a handy if imperfect tool for measuring the depth of women characters in all works of fiction. Indeed, it has inspired the invention or reclamation of other tools for analyzing the representation of women on screen. Some of my favorites are the Smurfette Principle coined by Katha Pollitt, which calls out any movie or TV show “in which a group of male buddies [is] accented by a lone female, stereotypically defined” (Pollitt, *New York Times Magazine*, 1991); Kelly Sue DeConnick’s Sexy Lamp Test, which a story fails if one of its female characters can be replaced with a sexy lamp without affecting the story; and the Furiosa Test, which a movie passes simply if it ticks off all misogynists on the Internet.

Though awareness of women’s shallow and unrealistic representation in fiction is being seriously addressed today, this specific criticism was raised almost 90 years ago by Virginia Woolf. In her semi-fictional essay *A Room of One’s Own*, she literally surveys the vast panoply of female characters in the western canon on a bookshelf and realizes she can remember few stories in which any two women who were represented as friends. “Almost without exception,” she writes,

“they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen’s day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman’s life is that, and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose. Hence, perhaps, the peculiar nature of woman in fiction;

the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity ....” (*A Room of One’s Own*, ch. 5, 1929).

I want you to remember that last part about the extremes of beauty and horror. We’re going to come back to that.

But first, obviously I bring up all these tests because the church has its own awareness to raise about how women are represented in our own sacred stories. We know that there are plenty of negative or purportedly negative depictions of women in the Bible, from Eve to Delilah to the Whore of Babylon. But there are also plenty of heroes, like Miriam, Deborah, Ruth and Naomi. But what if we apply the Bechdel Test to the Bible? You see, the interesting thing about this test is that it’s not about whether women are positive characters or negative – it’s about whether they are *seen* at all. Seen in the full sense, seen as true human beings with all the depth and complexities true to our species, seen for having dimensions that exceed her relationship to men. To pass the Bechdel test, a woman character can be a hero or a villain, what matters here is that she’s *real*.

So let’s apply the Bechdel Test to today’s gospel story.

The parameters, to remind you, are this: 1) the story has to have at least two women in it, 2) those women have to talk to each other, and 3) they have to talk to each other about something other than a man.

Does today’s story have two women in it? Sure does. Do those women talk to each other? They sure do. Do these talk to each other about something other than a man?

Well, that one’s a bit tougher. After all, Mary and Elizabeth are talking about their *male* babies. And Mary’s song is all about “the Lord” and all the things that *he* has done and will do. So does this story fail the test? I don’t think so.

First, let’s keep in mind the whole story here. Let’s remember that this story is remarkable for its deliberate removal of men from the action. The most dramatic way that happens, of course, is the redundancy of Joseph to Mary’s pregnancy. But a here’s an even more intriguing way this happens: Luke’s gospel begins with Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband, who is a priest in the Temple. The angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah and tells him that Elizabeth is going to give birth to a son who will be a great prophet. Zechariah doesn’t believe him because Elizabeth is infertile and, besides, both of them are pretty old at this point. For his unbelief, Gabriel makes Zechariah mute until the baby is born. Zechariah’s silence is paired to Elizabeth’s great

voice. When she greets Mary, it says she exclaimed with a loud cry, with a *mega* voice if we read the Greek. One commentator has linked Elizabeth's mega voice with the first word of Mary's song, *megalunej*, to make great or magnify, which is where we get the title Magnificat. (Karl Jacobson) If we can give a modern spin to this, I'd say Luke's silencing of Zechariah makes space for Mary and Elizabeth to speak and to sing. There's a lesson here for all men, that we could stand to voluntarily take on what was inflicted on Zechariah.

In this sense, today's story certainly passes the spirit of the Bechdel Test, even if not in the letter of it.

But perhaps it passes in that sense, too.

Let's look again at the content of Mary's song. "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and set the rich away empty..." Mary is not just talking about the Lord but is talking about what the Lord is doing. Mary is talking about the plight of the oppressed with an awareness of economic inequity, about a history of geopolitical empire-building that has ravished her people, about her own personal theology that the injustice she sees everywhere is not the way things are supposed to be. In this brief scene we see women with dreams and ideas deeper and broader than their relationship to men. This first-century text represents these two women with more depth than half the stories told in our own time.

But let's take it one step further. Mary has a long history of being represented as the paragon of beauty and virtue, both physically and in her song, or as Virginia Woolf put it, in the extreme end of women's "heavenly goodness." But when we stop and think about what Mary is saying, she instead seems to fall into that *other* extreme which Virginia Woolf sees for women in literature: horror and even hellish depravity. Mary revels in the upending of society, the overturning of its economic and political structures. Trade and commerce, law and order – all toppled from the bottom up. This mighty God whom she magnifies is seemingly a God of *chaos*.

## SOURCES

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Julian of Norwich, A Song of True Motherhood in *Enriching Our Worship* (1998).

Remember Bechdel's original comic strip? The last movie one of the women had seen was *Aliens* because the two women in that movie didn't talk to each other about men – they talked about the *monster*. Well, that's how I read today's story. Mary and Elizabeth talking to each other not about a man but a monster.

But monstrosity is in the eye of the beholder. Such a God is indeed a monster to those who benefit from the most from the order of the world, from the ways the world has always been. Such a God is indeed a monster to those who only see others for what profit they can reap from them or for what sexual gratification they can extract from them. When such a God re-presents to us the realness of those we objectify, its disruptive and chaotic and terrifying.

But we also know that the Horror to which Mary sings and to which she gives birth is not the destruction of the world but its rebirth. Mary's child brings to life a new creation in the turbulent and unpredictable fluidity that is inescapable when relations are based in love rather than hierarchy and subjugation, when we start to embrace the beautiful terror of finally seeing one another fully.

Perhaps the beautiful monstrosity of the gospel is nowhere better magnified than a Magnificat composed a millennium after the Virgin Mary, a song written by Julian of Norwich, an ode to the fullness of God's gender:

*God chose to be our mother in all things  
And so made the foundation of his work,  
Most humbly and most pure, in the Virgin's womb.  
Christ came in our poor flesh  
To share a mother's care.  
Our mothers bear us for pain and for death;  
Our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.  
Christ carried us within him in love and travail,  
Until the full time of his passion.  
And when all was completed and he had carried us so for joy,  
Still all this could not satisfy the power of his wonderful love...*

Amen