

Talitha Cum: The raising up of Women and Girls to Overcome Violence

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One of the many extraordinary facts of the New Testament is its interplay of languages. Jesus and the disciples of that time spoke Aramaic, knew Hebrew, but possibly read the Hebrew Scriptures in Greek. The New Testament was written not in classical Greek, but a dialect—Koine. In the Gospel witness, there are very few words remaining in the original, spoken language of Jesus, Aramaic. Why do only these few sayings remain: what was their significance for the early Christian community? What is their consequence for us today?

A possible explanation is that these few Aramaic phrases were often repeated, either liturgically, (within the worship celebration), and/ or by the believers themselves, within the primitive Christian community, as sayings of Jesus that believers rescued, repeated and remembered, used in prayer, healing and devotion. This would underscore the impact and importance of the phrases, for their repetition echoed a deep, recurring and felt need.

Let us look at three of the main sayings of Jesus that remained in Aramaic in order to understand their deeper significance for the early Christian community:

- From the cross: (Mark 15:34) “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabactani”— “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me.”
- In the healing of the hearing/ speaking impaired man: (Mark 7: 34) “Ephatha”— “Be opened.”
- “Talitha cum” “Little girl (Woman), I say to you, rise up!” (Mark 5: 41)

Taken together, we see in the first saying, crying out and fear of abandonment by God; in the second the need to be open(ed) to Jesus' healing hand; and, finally, the lifting up of the girl/ woman. Each of the three sayings merits an entire study. But for our purpose here, mindful of the other two, let us focus on the latter, the lifting up of the girl/ woman.

There are various texts in the Gospel witness of healing and “lifting up”, among them that of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29- 31), a paralyzed man (Mark 2:1-12) and of a young boy suffering from epilepsy in Mark 9: 14-29, but these texts do not retain a parallel “lifting up” phrase in Aramaic. What makes the healing and lifting up of the girl/ woman different?

The age of the adolescent in the text is significant: the girl was twelve years old. By Jewish tradition, a girl becomes a woman at twelve years and one day; so the young girl was poised at the very threshold of womanhood. As in other texts, after the healing and lifting up of the girl/ woman, Jesus commends her to the care and nurture of the community.

Touching the dead would have made any “holy healer” ritually impure; Jesus, unafraid of religious prejudice and the stigma of ritual impurity, touches her and lifts the girl by the hand. The text of the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, which literally “interrupts” the Talitha cumi text, shows another “impure” woman, doubly afflicted by her condition of living as a social outcast as well the suffering caused by her physical affliction, who has endured for the same number of years as the young girl has been alive.

Both healing stories taken together show the vulnerability of the female situation in a patriarchal society. The two women are linked as sisters, bound by blood, marginalization and impending death. Together they represent both sides of the “female condition”—menarche and menopause. Both considered untouchable and unclean: the young girl, loosing life almost at its beginning, at one extreme of the age and social spectrum, protected by a powerful, well-placed father, family and community, united in seeking healing for their daughter, and the woman with the flow of blood— ritually unclean by Jewish law, at the end of her “reproductive” life, outcast from that same community, humiliated, alone and abandoned... spending all she had seeking healing, implying that there were no family members caring for her, ever worsening, facing death.

In this context, with the “mirror” effect of the two women, two sides of the same coin, perhaps the impact of the lifting up phrase “Talita cum” can be more deeply understood.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he shows a remarkable ability to transcend the social, cultural and religious discrimination against women. He argues theology with women (John 4), defends their right to sit at his feet (Luke 10) has many female disciples (Luke 8:1-3) All of these were issues that NO rabbi of that day would have permitted. Jesus touched and was touched by women, even being anointed by an un-named (but probably known) woman in Mark 14, of whom Jesus says “Wherever the Gospel is preached, throughout the whole world, it will be told in memory of her, of what she has done for me.” – the woman who anointed the anointed one—for both the terms “Christ” from the Greek, as “Messiah” from the Hebrew, mean “The anointed one.”)

However, we know that these remarkable facts were not always received as welcome or happy news, even for other (male) disciples. In John 4 we read that the disciples, upon returning and seeing Jesus conversing thus with a woman were “scandalized” (the literal translation of the Greek, not “surprised” or astonished” as most English translations render!) or their reaction to the anointing of Jesus, in Mark 14, where they showed abundant anger, thereby rebuked, grumbled and murmured against HER (not against what she had done, but against her) and accused her unjustly.

We witness the fate of the first apostle, Mary of Magdala, lifted up by the Church not for her decisive role in being the first sent with the amazing news “He is risen! Jesus lives”, but, astonishingly, remembered for a supposed sexual past, which the Bible NEVER mentions, leading one to suspect that Mary’s role as “prostitute” was a later invention to discredit her witness, leadership and ministry.

Ironically, the recent popular publication of “The DaVinci Code” follows the same line of reasoning, arguing that Mary of Magdala’s role in the band of disciples must have been that of wife or lover to Jesus, as women could not possibly have been there for any

other reason! (leadership, learning, discipleship, witness, etc.—the same reasons as the male disciples, impossible!) This reveals that popular culture still stereotypes female roles along lines of sexual objectification, apparently having learned little over the past two thousand years.

Given the context of a patriarchal society which continues to minimize, marginalize, put down and objectify girls and women, should it surprise us that one of the only remaining Aramaic phrases in the whole Gospel witness is a phrase that lifts up women and girls, as did Jesus throughout his ministry?

The purpose of rescuing these early utterances is not to re-construct a romanticized, rose-colored view of a horizontal community, but rather to lift up the eschatological vision of Jesus, which permeated the way in which Jesus related to women and others marginalized and powerless in the society. This vision impacted the early Christian community by giving a glimpse of God's goodness through the new creation, restoring in its expression a new ordering of relationships, including a different understanding of women, not as objects, but rather as subjects in Christ's vision of the new humanity.

Perhaps “Talitha cum” was one of the most oft-repeated and ergo, most needed sayings of Jesus, precisely by the half of humanity who sought desperately to break the bonds and constraints placed upon them in order to hear the healing and life-giving words of Christ as they lay poised and paralyzed between life and death, on the threshold of their call to restored life, work and ministry: Girl/ woman, I say to you, ARISE!!!

As in the biblical text, the faith community’s response in continuing the Jesus’ work to lift up, nurture and promote and restore the health of girls and women cannot be ignored or underestimated. Along with this, the need to cling to Christ as the source of life, healing and as the one to usher in the new humanity and restore right relationships is central. Reconciliation to “right relationships” is key to overcoming violence.

Talitha Cum—these healing and holy words stand in stark contrast to a culture which puts down, violates, marginalizes and treats women as unclean objects rather than subjects in the history of salvation, promised by God to all humanity. The phrase perhaps repeated, lifted up especially by female followers, disciples, those who felt the society ignored or abandoned them, as words of life, of hope and promise of God’s salvation in the Present tense.

We might imagine that “talitha cum” served as a faith antidote to other biblical favorites, which attempted to “keep women in their place”—in addition to responding to reactions of scandal, anger and rejection on the part of many to female presence, power and leadership within the faith community:

Biblical Gems such as:

- “Women should keep silence in the Churches” (1 Cor. 14: 33), Talitha Cum! (ignoring that earlier in 1 Cor., (11:5) Paul exhorts women, when they preach in church, to cover their heads!)
- “Wives be subject to your husbands...” (Ephesians 5:22 ff) Talitha Cum!
- “And (the women). ...said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” (Mark 16: 8b)—Talitha Cum!

- “But these words (of the women) seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them (Luke 24:11)—Talitha Cum!

Talitha Cum!! Girl /Woman, I say to you, ARISE. May these words, declared in healing love by Jesus, repeated and imprinted on the hearts and imaginations of countless believers, continue to lift up, dignify, and restore life to all who have ears to hear. Ephatha. Talitha cum. Amen.