

## Feisty Women – Niquita Hohm

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

I'm not very feisty. I do however, look up to and admire a number of feisty people. When I think of feisty characters that I love, my mind jumps to Hermione from Harry Potter, knitting the night away creating socks to free the house elves, or to Jo from Little Women, giving an impassioned speech in one of her plays, or Mary Jackson from "Hidden Figures" responding that if she were a white male, she wouldn't have to wish to be an engineer, she'd already be one.

My friend Lisa is another one of the first ones who comes to my mind. She's the one who has given me the most real, don't-really-want-to-hear-it, but kind-of-need-to-hear-it, pregnancy advice so far. And it extends beyond hearing about gross bodily functions. Her realness isn't a mode she switches into and out of when it works to her advantage. I know when I go to her for help navigating a problem, she won't just tell me what she thinks I want to hear. She digs deep into the nitty gritty of my situations, and deep into the heart of issues her community is facing. Persistently, and annoyingly to those in power, she continues to push and nudge towards justice. Staying with my parents when we first moved back to town, and therefore getting lots of time with our sweet family pup, Ada, has shed another light on this Gospel passage for me. Ada (and I'm sure you all have or know dogs like this) does adorably irresistible things during mealtime. For starters, she knows Dad's praying voice. Even if she could have smelled the evidence long before then, it only takes a few words into his mealtime prayer and we hear the soft click of puppy nails and soon she is right there to join us. Also, just in case I have somehow forgotten how adorable she is, she rests her nose gently on my leg, staring her big puppy eyes into my eyes, "Remember me, and how cute I am and how much you love me?" If I'm moved to a desire to share even more than crumbs with this little creature, I just don't understand how Jesus can respond the way he does to this image-of-God woman pleading, kneeling before him!

A couple years ago I heard an unforgettable sermon about God's ears. The young woman started the sermon with a story of one of her greatest fears from her childhood. For whatever reason, she had always been afraid of something falling into her ear and getting stuck there and never being able to get it out. This caused her to be extremely conscientious when cleaning her ears, never letting the Q-tip venture too deeply in her inner ear. And then one day her greatest fear came true. She was trying to put in her earrings and one of them fell in her ear and not only got temporarily stuck, but messed up her hearing for a period after that. She made a profound connection from that experience to her sermon and we sat, dumbfounded along with her as she asked, "God, why don't you hear us? Why aren't you listening to the cries of the oppressed black community? Do you too have an earring stuck in your ear, impeding your hearing? Are you running around with tweezers, trying to remove this earring? Or are there too many competing noises?" Jesus, why don't you hear her?

My grandpa recently shared another story of what seems to be God's hearing loss. After his father was diagnosed with colon cancer at 56, he was in excruciating pain and called my grandpa into the room and said, "Son, isn't God's Word true? The Bible says, 'He forgiveth all thine iniquities and healeth all thy diseases.'" So Grandpa responded with words his friend had recently shared with him from Isaiah 63:9, "In all their affliction he too was afflicted."

But Jesus can't get all the questioning here. We need to read ourselves into the story too, standing alongside Joseph and the disciples. Like the disciples, when do we ask Jesus to ignore people who are annoying or inconveniencing or embarrassing us? Like Joseph, when are we reacting to people out of our woundedness rather than continuing our journey toward becoming a wounded healer?

I've previously read this story as an incredible testament to Joseph's willingness to forgive, and it is that too. But there are other subtleties that caught my eye this time as well, namely all the mind games and tricks Joseph plays on his brothers, imprisoning them, framing them for robbery. It may make him feel a little better temporarily, but his actions corrode the few possibilities of paths forward to truly restored relationships. We of course have to take into account the story as an even wider whole. Maybe Joseph has been so traumatized by earlier events that he is unable to respond in a healthier way. But by God's grace, and insofar as we are able, we need to choose a different path toward reconciliation. Joseph and his brothers never make it fully there, as far as we know. His brothers are nervous that Joseph is still out to get them after their father dies, so they plan to convince him that his father wanted Joseph to forgive them. There are tears and kind words throughout their encounters, but the brothers and Joseph have treated each other in ways from which it is hard to recover.

When we **do** move beyond those moments, we gain glimpses of the psalm:

*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*

*It is like the precious oil on the head,*

*running down upon the beard,*

*on the beard of Aaron,*

*running down over the collar of his robes.*

*It is like the dew of Hermon,*

*which falls on the mountain of Zion.*

*For there the Lord ordained his blessing,*

*life forevermore.*

I wrote a version of this psalm with an analogy that speaks more deeply to me in this current moment:

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

It is like cream cheese frosting,

    running down upon the gooey cinnamon roll,

    buttery cinnamon running down over the layers of soft bread.

It is like the sweet sweet juice of peaches and mangoes,

    dripping down the chin.

For there the Lord ordained his blessing,

    life forevermore.

(If you can't tell, I've been craving sweets this pregnancy.)

Whatever your own version would be, it is a beautiful, poetic sentiment. But I wrote my psalm before last Saturday. Praying this psalm genuinely is more difficult, but even more important following the firescape of hate in Charlottesville. I know how I think I would like to teach my

kids to respond to their torch-wielding neighbors: “You are a child loved by God, but you are siding with the forces of evil and I have to stand between you and my brothers and sisters, children of God you want to destroy.” In these initial moments I have trouble imagining looking into those hate-filled eyes and speaking that rationally. But I do want to be feisty and be loving and be bold and be peacefully confrontational in situations that warrant such a response.

So I have to keep going back to the woman—the feisty woman shouting at Jesus and the desperate mother kneeling at Jesus’ feet. I’m also drawn to the imagery from a couple weeks ago of Jacob wrestling with God. How will we engage in the time-consuming commitment it takes for genuine reconciliation to occur? How will we shout and wrestle and kneel to bring about the reconciliation and love and wholeness we want to see in the world?

In a few moments, we will move toward the Table, and I would like us to picture this brave, feisty woman as the celebrant of our kingdom feast. She, like Jacob, won’t let the Divine Presence depart from her until she has wrestled away a blessing she can take back to her daughter, who is sick, vulnerable, utterly dependent upon her mother’s strength and Jesus’ healing power. The following poem from Jan Richardson helps me envision that mother here, inviting us to take big handfuls of God’s abundance and nourishment and strength to fight for people’s lives:

Don’t tell me no.  
I have seen you  
feed the thousands,  
seen miracles spill  
from your hands  
like water, like wine,  
seen you with circles  
and circles of crowds  
pressed around you  
and not one soul  
turned away.  
Don’t start with **me**.  
I am saying  
you can close the door

but I will keep knocking.  
You can go silent  
but I will keep shouting.  
You can tighten the circle  
but I will trace a bigger one  
around you,  
around the life of my child  
who will tell you  
**no one** surpasses a mother  
for stubbornness.  
I am saying  
I know what you  
can do with crumbs  
and I am claiming mine,

every morsel and scrap  
you have up your sleeve.  
Unclench your hand,  
your heart.  
Let the scraps fall  
like manna,  
like mercy  
for the life  
of my child,  
the life of  
the world.  
Don’t you tell me no

As my grandpa said in his response to his father: “In all our affliction, he too was afflicted.” I don’t always understand the shape of that presence, but I know it to be real and consistently available to all God’s beloved children.