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# Saving Women from the Church

*How Jesus  
Mends a Divide*

by Susan McLeod-Harrison



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If you've felt  
alienated and  
judged in  
church...

chapter

1

*Should I sit some place new today?* The thought made me shiver slightly, and I pulled my arms in close to my body and decided against it. I headed toward the left side, back row, near the aisle, sat down, and turned off my cell phone. My teenage children, who had sworn off church, often called for any reason at all, such as not being able to find the ketchup in the fridge.

When the low hum of chatter faded into silence, a man seemed to be speaking from far away and saying, “Mwah mwah mwah mwah mwah,” like the teachers in the *Peanuts* TV cartoons. The chords of “Amazing Grace” wooed me into semi-alertness and I sang automatically.

After the song was over, the emcee said, “Welcome visitors! We want you to feel at home here, and we hope you’ll enjoy the service as much as we enjoy having you here.” He had said the same thing every Sunday for the past two months. And then, like

always, there was the excruciating “visiting” time when everyone shook hands or hugged. A couple of times people had welcomed me with a cheery, “Good morning!” but I normally managed to avoid this by returning to a meditative posture with the bulletin.

Today was different. A woman whose perfume announced her presence came and sat down beside me. She lifted my limp left hand, squeezed it, and said, “I’ve seen you across the church for several weeks now and wanted to come and invite you to our Women’s Auxiliary meetings. And your husband could come to the weekly men’s breakfasts we have. I’d be glad to introduce him to Artie.”

I felt like someone had dropped by my house unexpectedly when I had no makeup on. I looked up and straight ahead at the large, plain, brown cross on the baptistry. Out of the corner of my eye, the woman seemed like a perfectly-coiffed Macy’s mannequin, willing to wait an eternity. She continued to hold my sweaty left hand. When would she realize that there was no wedding band there?

“Um. My husband and I...are...divorced,” I finally sputtered. “I know God hates divorce!” I had heard it over and over from friends, neighbors, relatives, and above all, my pastor. It was better to say it myself before anyone else could. “But my husband was terribly abusive,” I finished softly. It was none of her business, but somehow I felt I had to tell her this to even have a chance of being accepted in this church.

“Oh, honey, it couldn’t have been bad enough to divorce!” she said. “Why, Artie is no saint to live with either, but we’ve been married thirty years. It’s just better for everyone if you stay together. That’s the woman’s job, you know,” she continued, and patted my knee. “We keep the family together. We’re peacemakers. I’m sure it’s not too late for you and your husband too,” she said.

By then, the strains of “Blessed Assurance” were beckoning the crowd to return to their seats. I couldn’t think of a reply. I didn’t have to, because when I looked up again, the woman was gone.

My face flushed into what must have been a deep pink. I felt so ashamed. I, an elder’s wife for fifteen years, divorced! Sarah Hancock, devoted wife and mother, organ-player, bulletin-writer, cookie-maker, Sunday school teacher—divorced. Why did I even bother trying to be a part of the church anymore? Why did I keep coming back? *They don’t want me here! I’m not welcome!* I thought.

A train of memories and thoughts captivated my attention the rest of the service. I pictured my ex-husband, in a parallel, but very different world. He remained an elder, immovable as a steeple, at my former church. I saw him now belting out some song, maybe “How Great Thou Art.” His voice always overpowered everyone else’s in the row. And then as he was singing I saw his expression change to rage, as though he could see me now. He began to hit me with his ringed fist,

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everywhere that was covered by clothing. This was the way Sundays had often ended in our home.

“Why did you wear that sultry silk blouse to church today, Sarah?” This is how it would start. Or “What’s with the red lipstick?” “What do you think people are going to say about me at church, if you keep making mistakes like that on the organ?” “I noticed a typo in the bulletin. What’s wrong with you? Are you trying to make me look like I married a fool?”

If I said nothing, he would go on and on, his voice rising louder and louder. If I defended myself, he would pick another thing to criticize. Either way, I would eventually get hit. The kids would retreat to their rooms or leave the house, or sometimes try to come to my defense. These were the worst days, when they would get involved.

The day before we all left him, my fourteen-year-old son must have heard me yelling out. He came flying out of his room like he was on fire and put my husband in a chokehold. Our son is thin and only five feet five inches, so my husband plied his arms off fairly easily before he threw him against the wall, holding our son by the collar, threatening to kill both my boy and me.

What would I have done without the women in my domestic violence support group? Most of them aren’t even believers. But they have been a shelter in my emotional tsunami. Just last week I told them about what had happened when I called my quilting buddy at church to ask her if we could get together. I just wanted to

explain to her why I had divorced my husband; I knew she'd heard rumors that weren't true. My "friend" refused and hung up the phone. I knew that if Lucy could reject me, anyone would.

After I told my support group about this, one woman, a pediatric cardiologist (she left her husband because all the head injuries he had given her started affecting her memory), said, "You need to get rid of the church entirely, Sarah. Has anyone there even asked your side of the story, or seen you at all for who you really are, rather than just the wicked woman who divorced her righteous husband?" The curls of her hair bobbed back and forth as she spoke. She was angry—with me, it seemed.

Suddenly I felt as on-the-spot as I had in my pastor's office, sitting in that luxurious black leather chair and being told to "submit" to my husband's violent ways.

"Well, probably not," I answered. "But I love the church. I love God. This is who I am," I said, and then I ventured, "Are you sure *you* appreciate who I really am?"

I was thankful when the group leader said, "Sarah does love the church, despite all the hurt she's experienced there. It's up to her if she wants to keep trying to be a part of it."

But now, as I sat with tears in my eyes, surrounded by strangers and the drone of a sermon I could not really hear, I wondered for the first time if the cardiologist was right.

*One Sabbath a crippled woman stood among the crowd gathered outside the synagogue, clasping her hands together as if shaking hands with herself. She had walked bent over for a long time.*

As she waited, enfolded into herself like a flower ready for spring, she heard the familiar whispering.

“There’s the woman with an evil spirit.”

“My mother said it runs in her family,” another voice said.

The woman hobbled along to get away from the gossipers, her eyes cast down. She considered the dirt and grass, the colorful flowers and passing insects, to be God’s gifts to her. Even now she gazed down at her dirty feet as if they were old friends.

She had not come to synagogue today to hear Jesus, but because she came every Sabbath. Sometimes she would hear a word from Scripture that she could recite throughout her week, gleaning great comfort. She particularly liked the latter part of Isaiah. Just the week before she had memorized this: “The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

She entered the synagogue and found her place in the women’s loft. Something about Jesus’ voice made

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 51:3.

her want to look at him. He was telling a story about a farmer who sowed seeds in the ground, and what happened to the different seeds. In the middle of his story, he became silent. She heard the women around her changing positions, as though they were looking around at one another in questioning ways. Unable to contain her curiosity, she positioned her body so she could raise her head and see the teacher down below.

Jesus caught her eye, an action as unexpected and impossible as any miracle, and then he said, “Woman, please come here.” She saw the surprised faces of the men, below, turn to look up at her. She closed her eyes, longing to simply disappear. One woman whispered, “It’s you the teacher is calling!” She took an unwilling step and then hobbled through the gazing, whispering women, down the stairs, and up to the front, her eyes still on her feet. Her thoughts whirled. What had she done? What would this teacher say to her; how might he humiliate her?

She anguished at the stares of so many men and women. Collective whispers sent waves of shame over her. As she came within a few steps of Jesus, he spoke to her: “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.”

She jerked away as she felt warm hands on her spine—such an odd sensation. She knew only the touch of squirrels as they ventured near and perched on her back to be fed breadcrumbs. She had never come this near to a rabbi. What would people say about her now? Then she felt a mighty gale, the power of magicians and

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the prophets, move in her. As it flashed through her, something else—a thing that had been choking the life out of her—rushed out. She heard her body healing before she could discern what was happening; her back cracked several times and settled her into perfect posture. The inward space where she slept, ate, breathed, and dialogued with herself and her gray emotions began to fill up with light and love. Inexplicably, she felt as though she had been perfectly loved these past eighteen years, as though she had never been alone.

Turning around and gazing without fear into Jesus' attentive, dark eyes, she spoke words that sprouted up from her deepest heart, "Praise the God of Israel! God is my help and my deliverer!" She looked at the open-mouthed, amazed faces of the men who were now standing, and the women above who were pressed around each other. She could see it in their expressions—she who had been shameful was now unsurpassingly honorable. God had chosen *her*. Her smile erupted into laughter, igniting a dozen more flames of joyful laughter around the room.

But not everyone was happy about the miracle that had just unfolded. The synagogue ruler stood at the back of the room, arms crossed, eyebrows furrowed. He was fine with healings. But he was there to keep order, to make sure the people obeyed the law. Did not this fellow know what time of the week it was? Besides, why had Jesus healed a woman, an old, barren spinster at that?

The ruler himself suffered from pain in his feet. Wasn't he far worthier of healing?

He walked up in front of Jesus, partly blocking him from view. He was taller than Jesus, but the ruler's presence was diminished in light of Jesus' power and the woman's joy. Nonetheless, with a crooked finger in the air, and his other hand clutching the scrolled Torah, he lifted his head and shouted, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days and not on the Sabbath."

With one long stride Jesus was at the ruler's side, fixing an angry gaze upon him and then upon certain others in the crowd. "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman—" Jesus gestured toward her, "a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

The ruler and those who were against Jesus cast their eyes downward, as if the afternoon light from the windows was too bright. The common people reflected another light, looking again and again to see the shining face of the healed woman.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A fictionalized version of Luke 13:10-17.

### *Just what was Jesus doing?*

The religious people around both Sarah and the “bent-over” woman pronounced judgments against these women—even in the women’s suffering—that left the women feeling alienated from community. The bent-over woman had likely heard, for “eighteen long years,” that she was shameful due to a physical condition caused by an evil spirit—a condition completely beyond her control. Sarah also had an unshakeable shame over her new status as “divorced,” and was quick to quote Malachi 2:16 which she had heard again and again. (Her shame was likely compounded by the abuse, as women often blame themselves for it).

Sarah had not heard the latter part of that declaration: “‘I hate divorce,’ says the Lord God of Israel, ‘and I hate it when people clothe themselves with injustice,’ says the Lord Almighty.” The conviction that Jesus condemned divorce often comes from a lack of knowledge about the injustices prevalent in Jesus’ time. When Jesus said, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:9), it is likely he wanted to protect women and children from poverty. In Jesus’ day women were usually economically dependent on their husbands. Jewish law allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason (“It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Mark 10:5). Women normally could

not initiate divorce themselves (although they could sometimes do so with the help of a male family member), so divorce really was about the “hardness of heart” of husbands and fathers (see Matthew 5:31-32). That’s likely why the twelve disciples seemed uncomfortable when Jesus spoke against divorce (Matthew 19:10; Mark 10:1-12).

While this doesn’t make arbitrary divorce “okay,” it does imply that Jesus was very concerned with justice issues for women. He was willing to “break the law” (the law that men could divorce their wives for any reason) in order to bring about justice for women. In light of this, it’s reasonable to assume that a person is not breaking Jesus’ law of love in obtaining a divorce in order to escape an abusive marriage.

Divorce is certainly not the only reason hurting women feel at odds when they are in church or around a group of Christians. I focus on divorce, however, because it is such a common occurrence, and yet despite this reality divorced people in the church still carry a “mark,” even when they did not initiate the divorce or were divorced through no fault of their own.

There are many other reasons women might feel judged and alienated in church. Some feel like outcasts because they have a history of being abused sexually, even by a respected church member or leader. Sometimes girls and women are not believed or are told to “just forgive” their abuser

(even if he continues to abuse freely), and so the victims either “stuff” their anger and hurt, or they feel forced out of the church. Some church leaders prefer to forsake a hurt girl or woman rather than confront an abusing but powerful church member.

The Gospels show us that Jesus had a different perspective. He became particularly angry when religious leaders misused their power and religious followers who had little power suffered for it (see Luke 17:1-3). But he did more than just get angry. He loved.

In order to show God’s love, as well as the difference between tradition and love, Jesus “broke the rules” for the bent-over, outcast woman who bore not only her illness but the judgments of others. She likely had no real place in her society, perhaps being unable to do the things that gave a woman a minimal amount of respect (such as cooking and cleaning). It is quite possible she was—as I suggest in the narrative—without husband or children. Hence, when Jesus saw her, he felt her suffering as well, on every level. He loved her with a love that fulfilled every law, even as he broke cultural and religious laws right and left.

It was frowned upon for a rabbi to touch, or even talk to, a woman who was not his wife, yet Jesus touched this woman to heal her. When he called the unnamed woman “a daughter of Abraham” (Luke 13:16), he broke the “gender rules” as

“son of Abraham” was a term reserved for male Jews. (Every woman present must have held her head a little higher that day!) Jesus also shamed those among his opponents who were particularly concerned with their status (Luke 13:17). Most significantly, in order to love this woman Jesus appeared to break the Sabbath (Luke 13:14) and garnered public rebuke for doing so. When he stopped in the middle of his sermon because he noticed the woman and her pain, Jesus’ loving compassion taught those in attendance more than any sermon about true religion could (see James 1:27).

Jesus message was and is: *Love supersedes every cultural law*. Like Sarah’s husband, like her pastor and her quilting friend Lucy, the synagogue ruler and others claimed to love God and to be obedient, but they refused to love their fellow human beings (see 1 John 2:9; 4:20). They valued law over love (see Matthew 22:37-40). Jesus, however, embraced the wounded outcast. He, too, experienced rejection in the very places he should have been welcomed (Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:16-30).

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*Questions for Reflection/Discussion*

1. What “cultural laws” did Jesus break in order to love the bent-over woman?
2. What “cultural laws” in our churches make it likely that hurting women (and men) will feel alienated from and unloved by others?
3. What similarities do you see between the divorced woman and the bent-over woman? Of the two, whom do you relate to more, and why?
4. Have there been times in your life when you have felt judged and alienated in the church because of your gender, marital status, ethnicity, life circumstances, sins, hurts, addictions, appearance, or physical disability? What made you (or makes you) feel this way? In light of what you have just read, what do you think Jesus thinks and feels about how you may have been (or are being) treated?
5. How are Sarah’s husband, the pastor, and Lucy similar to the religious leaders and the synagogue ruler? Have you ever acted in a way similar to them? How so?

### *Meditation for Healing*

Find a place where you can relax. Invite the Holy Spirit to come close and to help you be aware of being in Jesus' presence. (Even if you don't *feel* Jesus' presence, go ahead and affirm that presence.) Use whatever medium (writing, drawing, picturing in your mind, singing) works for you to envision the following scene: Jesus is preaching a sermon in your church, or any church. In the middle of a sentence, he sees you in the crowd, your eyes meet, and he stops speaking. He calls your name and asks you to come forward. In front of everyone, he calls you by a name meaningful to you and others (Favored Daughter, Compassionate One, Courageous Daughter of God, and so on). Then he heals you of whatever is hurting you—physically or emotionally. Everyone present can see that he loves you and has given you “a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7). Someone who represents those who have discriminated against you or rejected you stands up and objects to Jesus empowering you, a woman, and Jesus points out very explicitly the hypocrisy shown by this objection. Everyone else (not only the women, but the men as well!) is on your side and delighting in what Jesus did for you.

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