



From Healing to Wholeness,

Leanne Benoit, Feb 5, 2012

Year B, Epiphany 5 – Mark 1:29-39

Emily Carr, one of Canada's most renowned artists, represents the energy and rhythm of Vancouver Island landscapes in a modern style. She is particularly known for her expressive work in which she threw caution to the wind to paint West Coast images through the lens of her imagination. She somehow was able to express the lively spirit of the landscape itself.

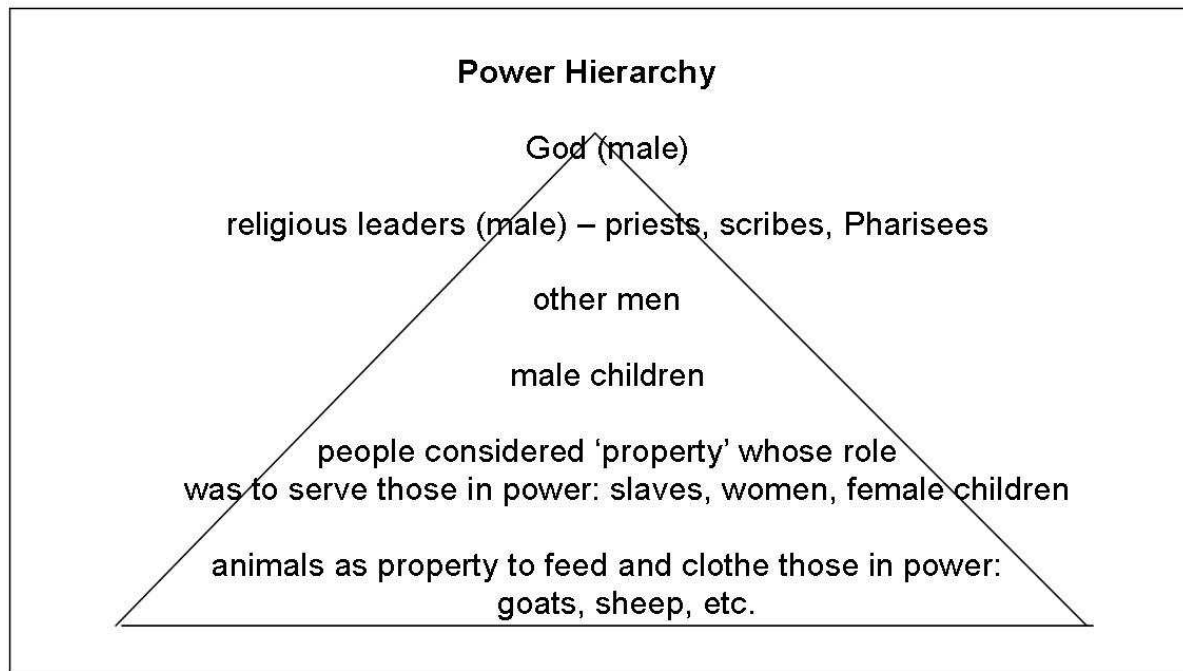
However, in her lifetime, many did not appreciate Carr's modern flair. In 1934 she was upset that the National Gallery of Canada wanted to represent her in its collection with her "tamer" art rather than her "modern" paintings.ⁱ To that she responded, "If the work of an isolated little old woman on the edge of nowhere, is too modern for the Canadian National Gallery, it seems it cannot be a very progressive institution."ⁱⁱ

Today Carr would be considered a powerful woman creating paintings that fetch \$2 million. But in her day Emily Carr was marginalized in some ways. She was outside the center of power in the Canadian art world for a variety of reasons:

- Geographically – Emily Carr actually did live "on the edge of nowhere" in the early 1930's when travel to and from this island was more difficult
- Gender – It wasn't until Carr reached the age of 45 that women had the right to vote and run for public office. Prior to that time Prime Minister Robert Borden declared that women were not considered "persons" under the British North American Act. That's just under 100 years ago that women were not legally considered 'persons'. We owe our gratitude to pioneers like Nellie McClung who fought for women's rights. I'm sure we have many female pioneers among us. One I do know about is Reverend Laura Butler who was the first woman to be ordained by the Methodist Church in the Boston area. It's difficult to believe that even today some churches still do not allow women to become ministers, elders, or to be on the church board.
- Failing health – Carr had heart problems which limited her. Far too many of us know from experience that injuries and ill health can marginalize people. Poor health results in social isolation, and sometimes poverty, pushing those who are sick further towards the edges of society.
- Artistic expression – As Carr continued to study and experiment, she expressed color and movement in new ways. However her art was rejected by some as being too modern, or too child-like.ⁱⁱⁱ It's interesting that these many decades later, we have come to value that very artistic imagination which was previously rejected.

In Jesus' day, women were very much outside the center of power. Our scripture story introduces us to Simon's mother-in-law; a woman marginalized by gender, ill health, religious laws, and the societal rules in which she lived.

Let's look at gender roles in this story. Our first clue about the gender hierarchy in play is that Simon's mother-in-law is not even named in the story. In ancient patriarchal societies, women were identified by the name of their male relative. There was a gender-based power hierarchy in religious, political, and societal life. At the top of this hierarchy was the male God, Yahweh.



We can see that when God is understood primarily as male, then males in society become valued over females. That is why it is so important to use inclusive language translations when reading scripture.

Now there are some other understandings of God in scripture; some are feminine and many are non-human, such as rock, bear, and eagle. Sometimes I wonder if by using human images, we are actually trying to make God into our image. In scripture, the pronoun most often used to describe God is masculine – “He”. Even today, when children and youth speak about God, they often use masculine pronouns. Therefore it’s wonderful to see Megumi and other leaders introduce a variety of images to the children; images that help to flatten the gender hierarchy.

Let’s explore the healing aspect of this story. The physical healing is a symbol of restored wholeness.

Jesus took Simon’s mother-in-law by the hand and helped her up. He offered the gift of respectful human touch and recognition of her personhood.

The scripture story tells us that Jesus “lifted her up”. The Greek word for that phrase is the same one used to describe Jesus being raised from the dead. That is another clue for us that this story of Simon’s mother-in-law is to be read symbolically. It is not only a story of healing; it is a story of transformation towards wholeness. Jesus lifted her from oppressive religious and social rules and treated her as a full and valued human being. Jesus offered more than physical healing; he offered wholeness of body, mind, emotions, spirit, and social acceptance.

In response to this holistic experience of healing, Simon’s mother-in-law began to serve Jesus and his disciples. It is important to note that this was not a return to the ways of servitude enforced on women by religious and social laws. Rather, the Greek word used to describe this type of service is *diakonein*. It is the same word used to describe the angels ministering to Jesus in the desert. And so, upon her return to wholeness, Simon’s mother-in-law is *ministering* to Jesus as the angels did. She has been transformed from forced servitude to diakonein.

The United Church has an understanding of wholeness as it relates to people who are marginalized. Our statement on Anti-Racism says, “We cannot be free from pain unless all are free from pain... We

cannot be whole unless all are whole.”^{iv} 1 Corinthians 12:26 is also a call to wholeness, saying, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.” (NRSV)

That statement would hold true whether one is discriminated against because of gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, economic class or any other standard that allows one group to have power over another group.

“We cannot be whole unless all are whole.”

The journey towards wholeness is a communal effort which requires the healing of social, religious, and political structures that marginalize certain groups of people. The journey towards wholeness is a call to pastoral care, prophetic witness, outreach, advocacy, and social justice work.

May the Loving Presence we know as God, encourage us as we engage in *diakonein*; as we engage in ministering to one another while together we walk the path towards wholeness.
Amen.

ⁱ Mary Jo Hughes & Kerry Mason – The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. *Emily Carr On the Edge of Nowhere*

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p 13

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*, p 19-20

^{iv} The United Church of Canada Statement on Anti-Racism – *That All May be One*. p. 9