

"The Eyes Have It"

I'm going to ask you to open your hearts and unclutter your minds, and lend me your imaginations for a few moments if you will.

I don't need to tell you my name because you have never heard of me. You have heard of my mother although as history goes, she remains nameless too. That's how it is with women of our day. We are only good for cooking, cleaning and bearing children. And if anyone is defective in any way, then we must be terrible sinners.

That is what I was always told about my mother, although she is just mother, "Imah" in Hebrew to me. My mother has been completely bent over my whole life. Now, I don't mean that she is a little stooped or simply has a crooked back. Her body is like this – like an upside down "V", and it has been that way for 18 years – since before I was born.

As I said before, everyone always said that my mother must have done something terrible, something unmentionable in her early life to be so bent and twisted. She is looked upon as disobedient, demented or demon possessed. People are even afraid to be around her because she has been deemed unclean and they don't want to be given the same name. I guess this must be what my father thought too because I don't even remember him at all. As soon as I was born, he left us to make our own way the best we could.

I've never really had any friends because they are all afraid of catching what she "has" – as if sinfulness can be spread like germs. But I understand – it is what society teaches us. Still I

would like to have someone to run through the meadows with, to share secrets with and skip pebbles in the stream. But she is my Imah after all, and I cannot abandon her. I am all she has.

My whole life I have had to go to the market with my mother, choose an item and then hold it down close to the ground so she can see it. Even when I was small, everyone communicated with her through me, which is of course another way of emphasizing that she just doesn't exist in the eyes of others. I am all she has – just me and feet!

I can't help but think that if someone, anyone would just put themselves in her sandals for even a minute they would treat her differently! Can any of us imagine? Having a world that consisted only of feet. . . dust . . . rocks and grass. How could you know anything about a person from their feet? You wouldn't know their hair color, if their smile was crooked, if they had freckles or a large nose. And worst of all, you could never see their eyes! Eyes tell us so much about a person.

In eyes I can see love, hatred, confidence, anger, fear, sincerity. You don't have to hear a *word* if you can look into someone's eyes. Truly they are the window to the soul. Animals judge a man's intentions by looking right into his eyes. Even a rat, when you hunt him and bring him to bay, looks you in the eye. (1) But no one would ever stoop down to look my mother in the eye or let her see them so intimately. That's why I could not believe what happened when the man named Jesus of Nazareth came to our village.

Imah and I were on the way to the well to draw out the day's water. Of course, she cannot do that. I remember when I was just 2 or 3, trying to stand on rocks to drop the bucket down unless someone took pity on me and did it for me. And then dragging the bucket home, spilling half of my water on the way, so we could cook and clean. Now, Imah just goes along,

walking a few paces behind me, just to get out and breathe the air – though it must be dusty down there.

Any way, on this particular day, there was quite a commotion around the synagogue – so many people that they were spilling into the streets. My curiosity got the best of me and I headed over just in time to see the one called Jesus of Nazareth about to go in. Many called him rabbi and I had heard stories about miraculous healings that he had caused. He was followed closely by a group of friends and many Pharisees who had the grumpiest faces. But Pharisees seem eternally grumpy to me – always finding something to scowl over!

I just sort of drifted over to where Jesus was, not meaning to get so close. And since my mother always follows my feet, she made her way over too, although we would NEVER THINK to enter a synagogue. Someone as sinful as she would certainly not be welcome THERE! Doesn't that seem rather odd to you? You would think that the place where the Lord is supposed to be is where sinners should be also, to repent, to pray or be healed. But I am just a girl. What do I know?

Well, even with the crowds all surrounding him, this Jesus saw us and called us to come to him. This was remarkable – most people yell at us to get away. “Unclean, unclean” they hiss and turn up their noses and hold their arms tightly across their chests. But not Jesus. He asked us to come to him and to stand right among his friends. I was completely mesmerized by his commanding presence, his strong but gentle voice, the compassion in his eyes. So I stumbled through the crowd with my mother close behind.

And then the most remarkable thing happened. Jesus, the rabbi, a Holy man of God, bent down in the dust and looked my mother right in the eye! He lowered himself, not only to speak to a woman, unclean as she was, but to stare into her face. She crooked her neck just slightly to

see who was attached to the new pair of feet that she was seeing – the only ones who had dared to come near her but mine in EIGHTEEN YEARS! And she saw his eyes too. Dark pools of love and understanding.

But even more importantly than that – Jesus looked right into *her* eyes. *Into her very soul.* And even though it was just a moment, I think Jesus could see my mother’s whole lifetime in her eyes and understood all the ways that she was bent over, not just physically, but emotionally, spiritually. How she truly lived in chains. So he said to her with such love and power at the same time, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Or in Aramaic, “You are loosed from the chains that bind you”.

Then, slowly, cautiously, my mother began to straighten. A little at a time. She stood and stretched and turned this way and that. And she saw – fig trees, donkeys, market stands full of olives and rugs and pottery! And people! The people who had shunned her and judged her. The people that *went with* the feet. And then in pure joy she raised her arms and danced in a circle and began praising God!

Well, those grumpy Pharisees were outraged and cut right into my mother’s joy – the first freedom she had felt in eighteen years – and began to reprimand Jesus. They didn’t ask her at all how it felt to stand straight for the first time in so long or what it looked like to see how tall I had grown. Instead they cried, “It is the Sabbath” and began to lecture him about work and rest and the Law of Moses and anything but the miracle, the joy, the freedom that had come to life right before their eyes. What is wrong with those men who claim to be of God? They may have a lot of knowledge about the Scriptures but they don’t understand life at all. Are they so self-righteous that they don’t know that they too are bent over?

After all, every one of us has been bent over at some time in our lives. I know there have been times in my life that I have been bent over with anger. Anger at the way my mother is, anger at my father for leaving, anger at other people for their reactions. And yet, being angry and remaining angry is a sin that could keep me as bent as my mother if I let it be the focus of my life.

I have met many people who are bent over with envy. Perhaps that is the real problem with the Pharisees because they can see that their self-righteousness does not convince people to follow God the way that Jesus' compassion and forgiveness do. Maybe that is why they are such trouble makers where the man of Nazareth is concerned.

Some of us are bent over with loneliness, as I have been most of my life. But loneliness does not necessarily mean being alone. Loneliness can mean feeling left out or feeling that no one understands us or realizing that not one person on the earth feels the pain that you do. Some of us are bent over with grief. Grief at the loss of a loved one, a relationship gone bad, an illness that has no cure, an emptiness that seems not to be filled. Some of us are bent over by guilt. Guilt that is legitimate because we cannot undo the mistakes of our past or guilt that is imagined because someone else, in their sinfulness, has made us feel guilty.

I think I could go on and on but I hope you are getting my point. My mother's bentness was obvious – everyone could see it. Yours and mine might be more hidden. But the way the Jesus looked into my mother's eyes, I KNEW that he could see every pain and hope and question deep within her. And I think he can see that in all of us.

Well, as I have heard that he often does, Jesus would not put up with this hypocrisy of the Pharisees. It really is funny looking back on it now. My mother dancing around like she really

IS demon possessed, the Pharisees quoting the Law to Jesus, the crowds astonished by his actions – talking to a woman, healing on the Sabbath – and me looking on in amazement.

And then Jesus did something that no one expected. Right in front of everyone in our village, the Pharisees and his friends he said in a commanding voice, “You hypocrites! Do not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox from the manger and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”

He said it so everyone there could hear it! And in doing this, he did more than heal my mother. Jesus said basically that she was a sister to the very Pharisees that criticized him. He made her their equal. And in doing this, Jesus restored her position in the community, elevated her status in the eyes of everyone there, and in essence gave her life again.

And he has given me life for the first time. He has given me a mother who can encourage me and laugh with me and cry with me. A mother to braid my hair and teach me to cook! He has given us friends and status and a way to support ourselves. But more than anything else he has given us faith and hope. He gave us this when he gave himself to my mother and healed her in every way.

The prophet Isaiah used to sing that when God looses the bonds of this life that light shall break forth like the dawn and our healing shall spring up quickly. I used to think that the only way this could happen would be to leave this world behind. But now I understand why God sent his son. God sent his Son to teach us about faith and to give us hope. And Jesus is waiting to loose the bonds of your life too. So that you will know that you are a daughter, a son of Abraham. So that you too can praise God with all of your being. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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(1)Hiram Powers, American sculptor (1805 - 1873)