

Instead of Looking for Jezebel, Let's Celebrate the Deborahs in the Church

The false binaries can grind a girl down.

While I was growing up in third-wave charismatic circles, women were often cautioned against "the Jezebel spirit." (I think I just heard half of the old crowd barf on their shoes at that old label, but oh, I'm going there.)

Yes. Terrible Queen Jezebel of the Old Testament was a warning to women in my circles, the death knell for any woman in leadership, carrying the accusations and implications of female bitterness, manipulation, emasculation, power, idol-worshipping, hypersexuality, layers upon layers of pet sins encapsulated in one woman's ancient story of Israel. So sure, let's just take it at face value, perhaps Jezebel was a whore and a power-hungry, idol-worshipping, prophet-killing madwoman. Even so, when a woman in the church betrayed the slightest bit of leadership or giftings or callings, it became the quickest way to silence that feisty woman in question: accuse her of a Jezebel spirit. An unrelenting, power-hungry, manipulative spirit.

She has a Jezebel spirit.

Bury her at the whisper of it, she's done, the final verdict, the final silencing for many a legitimate woman of God.

I think about that old accusation of a Jezebel spirit when people talk about feminism or women in the church or whatever-term-you-want-to-call-it-now. We think you can be a feminist or you can be like Jesus, you can be a feminist or you can be in a happy visions-of-Christ-and-the-Church marriage, you can be a feminist or you can be a mother, you can be a feminist or

you can be mutually submissive, you can be a feminist or you can be servant-hearted, you can be a feminist or you can be a Jesus-follower committed to the whole last-shall-be-first, least-shall-be-greatest thing. We might call you a feminist or maybe we'll call you Jezebel or maybe we'll say you're angry or bitter.

Usually we'll just say we love Jesus and believe the Bible more than you.

How damaging. Not only to the kingdom, but to the souls and lives of people around us, to our own selves.

I believe we serve the both/and God, the God-with-us-God. The Lion and the Lamb, the Judge and the Father, the Love and the Justice. And I believe you can be a feminist precisely because of your great love for Jesus. I believe you can be a woman and be a leader by God, I believe you can be a man and be a servant, I believe you can be both a servant and a leader, and I believe false binaries make us feel more right, but they rarely make us more right in the sight of God.

So the false binaries—the either/or—of most faith discussions grind me down. What an adventure in missing the point...

For instance, regarding women in leadership: there is a vast difference between a Jezebel spirit and a Deborah spirit. Just as there is a vast difference between David and Saul. (Just because two individuals share a gender doesn't mean they share a story or a prediction or a precedent.)

Deborah was a general in the ancient armies of Judah. She was a prophetess and a warrior; she helped lead the armies of Barak into battle and, at the time the ultimate degradation, she was seen as responsible for a major military triumph. Plus, another woman, Jael, was responsible for the death of the opposing force's leadership in her tent. Two women, two warriors, a song in Scripture.

We haven't even talked about Priscilla or Junia, about Hannah or Anna, about Mary or Martha.

And yet, women who showcase leadership in the church today are more likely be accused as a Jezebel than celebrated as a Deborah.

This is the thing I believe about the kingdom of God: it's for all of us. It's for the powerful and the weak, it's for men and for women, it's for the outliers and the insiders. It's for all of us. And so there is no neat and safe and tidy box: instead, there are the wild and untamed and glorious riches of Christ Jesus, there are Deborah and David, there are Junia and Paul, there are Martha and Lazarus, Esther and Sarah, and there is you and there is me. In Christ, oh, hallelujah, there is room for us all. Don't let anyone scare you from the battle, Deborah. God has called you, Esther, for such a time as this.

People cloak it in spiritual language. But don't be deceived: Anything that steals the very essence of God's calling on you, God's shalom, God's justice, God's way of life and living as a warrior, as a prophetess, as a mother, as a teacher, whatever-your-vocation-or-calling as a woman after God's own heart, is a liar. There is a big difference between choosing silence and being silenced.

There is room for all of us in this story of Jesus. The kingdom of God isn't created by fear or shame or narrow name-calling or false binaries. The kingdom of God is created in the rising up, in the singing of the song, in the battle of the everyday justice, in the daily mundane gorgeousness of servanthood and leadership, regardless of gender.

I look forward to the day when women with leadership and insight, gifts and talents, callings and prophetic leanings are called out and celebrated as a Deborah, instead of silenced as a Jezebel.

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