

“Esther John: a Living Stone”

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Second in a series about Modern Martyrs

Matthew 10:28-42

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Please read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

You know those nice plaques you can get to hang around your home, the ones with inspiring sayings. You can get Christian ones too. They have words to encourage you, to deepen your trust in Jesus and strengthen your walk with him. I'm picturing one you might hang up, maybe in the family room. It's on a rustic wood background. It has artistic lettering with these words . . .

*I came to turn
sons against their fathers,
daughters against their mothers,
and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law.
Your worst enemies will be in your own family.¹*

*Love,
Jesus*

Think I could sell that?

Maybe we should stick with the Prayer of Saint Francis?² We just sang a version of it.

Except, when Francis began following Jesus, it destroyed his relationship with his father.

That's the painful truth Jesus talks about it in the Scripture we just heard.

II

Jesus was sending out his first disciples. He's been sending out disciples ever since. He sends us in his name and with his power. He sends us to heal, raise, cleanse and deliver. He sends us to announce God's Kingdom, Jesus' Good News.

Often, though, his good news is not welcomed. Often, the amazing works of God are not celebrated.

Why not? Jesus does not simply make things a bit better. Jesus breaks open our world, turns over the way things are, and upends our lives. We're not so thrilled with that. Not if we like the way things are. Not if life seems fine. Not unless we are crying out for change. (That's why Jesus is more often well-received by folks who have had a raw deal.)

¹ Matthew 10:35-37 (Contemporary English Version)

² Saint Francis almost certainly did not write it. It's origins are probably early-20th century rather than 13th century. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer_of_Saint_Francis

Following Jesus is not a natural, obvious thing. It's only after he has reached into our lives and pulled us to himself. Jesus calls us. The Holy Spirit shakes our spirits. Then we can walk with Jesus.

His reaching-in and pulling-us-out can be disruptive. Especially in the things we most identify with, our most important relationships: workplaces, friendships, and family.

Jesus is not saying that everyone who follows him will find their family relationships strained or broken. But some will, maybe many.

Jesus is not saying we have to reject our families. It's just that, when we are following him, some in our family might reject us.

III

We're hearing stories this summer of modern Christians killed because of their witness to Jesus. They are "living stones." With them, God is building Jesus' church. We are living stones too.

Qamar Zia is a living stone.³

She was born in 1929, in Madras, in British-controlled India. Her first school was government-run. Her family was Muslim. Even so, her father moved her to a Christian school for a better education.

There, it was one teacher in particular who grabbed her attention. Qamar saw how her teacher lived the Christian faith. She began reading the teacher's Bible. While reading about Jesus' death for us, Qamar was "suddenly overtaken by a sense of conversion."⁴ She began following Jesus. Secretly.

British colonial rule ended in 1947. India split into two countries: mostly-Hindu India and mostly-Muslim Pakistan. Qamar's family moved to Pakistan. In Karachi, she found another Christian teacher. She got her own New Testament and read it many times. Her trust in Jesus continued to grow. Hidden.

That is, until parents arranged for her to marry another Muslim. Qamar ran away. A Christian friend took her in. Qamar was baptised, and took a new name: Esther John. She began working in a hospital. She celebrated her first Christmas.

³ I've drawn from the wikipedia entry about Esther John (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esther_John) her biography on the Westminster Abbey website (www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/esther-john), and a blog post titled "Discipling those who pay a great price for faith" on the website [When Women Speak](http://WhenWomenSpeak.net) (whenwomenspeak.net/blog/disciplining-those-who-pay-a-great-price-for-faith-esther-john-1929-1960)

⁴ Esther was reading from Isaiah 53 when she came to faith in Jesus.

Her family kept pressing her to come home and marry.

Esther studied at a Christian training centre. “Everyone loved her,” a fellow-student said. “She and I often went together to visit homes in the villages around. She would speak of her experience of Christ and I would teach a little from the Bible.”⁵

Sometimes, her relations with her family were calm. Other times, they were tense.

She moved to Chichawatni. She would bike to villages, teach women to read, work with them in the fields, and tell them about Jesus.

Esther John was found murdered in her bed. She was 30 years old.

Her family might have had something to do with her killing. Investigators never found out for certain. Whatever the case, it is clear that her faithfulness to Jesus had divided her from them.

She had lived, and perhaps died, the truth of Jesus’ words about his disciples and their families.

IV

We find it hard to imagine that depth of division in Esther’s story.

Actually, some of us don’t. Our families are painfully messy — separations, not speaking to each other, harsh arguments, unreconciled conflicts. We know the hurt. And, sometimes, we know the violence.

What we find hard to imagine is Jesus being the cause.

Except . . . mine was always a church-going family. After my parents separated, I’d go with Dad to his church and Mom to hers. When I was a teenager, though, Dad discovered a much deeper love and allegiance for Jesus than I could understand. That divided us. Later, I experienced a similar growing and deepening in Christ myself. That caused strain between Mom and me.

Many of us are worshipping today, knowing that some of our children are not worshipping God. Maybe none of them. Or our grandchildren. That hurts. We struggle to understand. Understanding starts with knowing that we don’t know. Then ask them. Then listen to them.

We might hear painful things. Maybe things we and our congregations have been doing wrong, that have not helped and often hurt. Maybe that church doesn’t matter and they have better things to do.

⁵ From the recollections of Vivienne Stacey which are included in the blog article on the [When Women Speak](#) website.

I wonder if we've done a poor job of showing who Jesus is and what he's about. I fear that maybe our own trust in him is weak and our own discipleship tepid, and our kids noticed.

Some say we need to downplay Jesus. Then, they promise, folks will start coming through our doors. That's been tried. It does not work.⁶

V

Much more important . . . without Jesus, we have nothing. He is all we have that really matters. All we have is this God-becoming-a-human-being Jesus. All we have is this Kingdom-bringing Jesus. All we have is this sickness-healing, dead-raising, demon-delivering and soul-cleansing Jesus. All we have is this enemy-loving, sinner-serving, scoundrel-forgiving, wrong-side-of-town Jesus. All we have is this cross-dying Jesus. All we have is this resurrected-from-the-dead Jesus. All we have is this Holy Spirit-sending Jesus. All we have is this ruling-all-God's-creation Jesus.

Let's get over the idea this Jesus will be popular. Sometimes he will be, though usually when he is, something important about him has been lost.

Let's get over the hope that church life will rebound. It might. That's in God's hands, not ours.

Let's get over the notion that commitment to Jesus is easy. What he calls you and me to is wonderful. There is nothing like it. But easy? No!

Esther John knew all this. She knew, and she stayed with Jesus. More important, Jesus always stayed with her.

In the midst of all his warnings, Jesus said this: "Do not be afraid." Again and again, he said, "Do not be afraid."

Don't be afraid. He's got you, and he is not letting you go.

Don't be afraid. He is building his church, this global, and timeless, and right-here right-now community of living stones.

And our families? Don't be afraid. He's holding them too. You can trust Jesus with them.

Don't be afraid. Amen.

⁶ For mainline Protestants, and United Church people in particular, an important analysis of secularization and our response to it is offered by Jeff Seaton in his book [Who's Minding the Story?: The United Church of Canada Meets A Secular Age](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018). He builds on the vital work of Charles Taylor, in a more accessible form.