

Eulogy for Katherine Goble Johnson  
Scripture: Mark 7:24-30  
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Her name. Hidden. It figures. She's a woman. Her tenacity. Undeniable. In a room with the most powerful and brilliant of men, she stands her ground and makes her case. Her courage. Unquestioned. Though she and her race of people were deemed inferior and their presence in polite, discriminating company was considered unacceptable, she forced her way in with grace and grit, staked her claim, and demanded her due. Her story. Inspiring. People have researched it, documented it, written it, read it, heard it, seen it, interpreted it, pictured it, role played it, told it, championed it. Her legend. Compelling. It will be so very hard to dismiss or forget it. It will be so very wonderful to remember and extol it. She is as much an irritant who reminds us of our worst inclinations to belittle, demean and disrespect those who are not like us, as she is a balm, whose humble, tenacious spirit reminds us that we can rise above the circumstances others have imposed upon us, and, in so doing, lift not only ourselves but a little piece of the world around us.

*That* is Katherine Goble Johnson.

That is also that woman from Syrophenicia.

Other than Jesus of Nazareth, she is my favorite person in all of the New Testament literature. This mother of a foreign people whose lineage was so despised that even Jesus recalls in his conversation a derogatory term that no doubt many within his own circle attached to her. And to her ill daughter. Dog. "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Not reasonable. Not right. And yet, Jesus will do it. Not because he has to. But because he *wants* to. Because he has always wanted to. Throw the children's bread to everyone who hungers. Include in the company of "children" everyone who has ever hungered.

Prior to this story with this unnamed woman, Mark conveys a Jesus story that comes to an inescapable conclusion. Jesus wants his disciples and all those who follow him, "the children,"

to know that when it comes to eating in the presence of God, there is no food, there is no restriction, there is no boundary, there is no identity that prevents someone from sitting at the table. He is on the verge of making “children,” understood to be a term of exclusivity, a symbol of inclusion. But I suspect Jesus knows that speaking a point and making a point are two different things. In the earlier story, Jesus speaks the point. Here, with an assist from this unnamed woman, he makes it. Using not HIS word this time, but THEIRS. A word he has no doubt heard. A word he will now himself voice. So that, with the help of this woman, he can speak its presence and its meaning into oblivion. He can’t do it without her. In fact, this seems to be the one time in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus of Nazareth cannot do what he wants to do without an assist from someone else. If she is not as courageous, as intelligent, as tenacious, as faithful as she is, this story either never makes it into the canonical record or it does so as an offense against everything Jesus stood for everywhere else in the gospel accounts. The stakes are that high. A fly by the seat of your pants, hope everything happens just the way you hope it happens, everybody responds just the way you hope she responds story about a woman from one space trespassing into another space where she does not belong. A supernatural story of ethnic exclusion becomes a transcendent parable of racial reconciliation and social change.

To see it, you must keep your eyes on her. Direct your eyes away from the drama of Jesus, weary and disconsolate, an immigrant seeking respite and restoration across a foreign border, where no one would know him, no one would find him, no one would bother him. It is hard to look away from Jesus, but, for a moment, look away. Look at this unnamed woman. Look at the way, in just these few brief moments, she lived with more vibrancy, more understanding, more courage, more faithfulness, . . . more *nerve* than all of Jesus’ male disciples combined.

In the back room of a back country where Jesus and his disciples were attempting to hide out, this woman breaks in. On a mission. She has heard of him. But she has also heard that he is not one of her people. Mark’s Gospel makes it clear that she is a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. Not born in the right country, not born of the right people, not born with the right bearing

to engage this citizen of God's Reign and God's people, even if *he* was the one trespassing on *her* land. She shrugs aside the irony of this circumstance, the fear of her rejection, and the presumed inferiority of her people, and *steps up* lest her daughter fail to *bear up* under the weight of the disease that has possessed her. What a mother! She looks him in the eyes. This man who had already crossed a storm of protest to carry the liberating gift of God's presence and power to a homeless Gentile man, living a life shattered by the systemic evil of demonic desperation in a Gentile cemetery on the Gentile side of the sea. This man who had only recently spoken and acted with the defiant assurance that ethnic segregation no longer had a place where the food of God's creation was served to the people of God's world. She begs this man to sneak some of his God's precious power onto her Syrophenician by birth, Gentile daughter. That was when he did it. Either crushed her spirit or opened up her opportunity. "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Said it plainly. Clearly. So everyone one of his disciples would hear it and, before she could respond, no doubt affirm it. You can almost see Jesus doing the calculations in his head. I suspect he *wanted* them to affirm it. I believe he prayed she would confront it. One of the great teacher's greatest teaching moments hinged on whether this brand-new student, suddenly a despised immigrant in her own land, would ace the test he was forcing her and everyone watching her to take.

As Jesus would himself re-frame the cross, one of the most brutal weapons of capital punishment ever devised, into a symbol of hope, this Syrophenician woman absorbed the curse against her people, domesticated it, and set it into service for *her* cause. "Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." I imagine him smiling, the way any teacher smiles when a student whom he knows is bright proves him right in front of a skeptical classroom. When the Gospel of Matthew records this story, he remembers Jesus telling the woman that she had *some* faith. Mark leaves faith out of it. In his telling, Jesus seems to be saying to the woman, "You have *some* nerve." For having that nerve, for showing that nerve, for living into that nerve, "Go. What you asked for your daughter shall be done for her. And for you." Ultimately, for your entire people.

Despite what she knows about the severity of her daughter's situation. Despite what she knows about the prejudice against her and her people. Despite what she has just been told, what she knows everyone in that room believes, that the radical, liberating, healing, justifying power of God does not, cannot, and will not extend to her people, she walks away trusting that Jesus' nerve is as outrageous as hers.

He *will* match her boundary breaking moment with one of his own. He *will* give the food of healing to her daughter. He *will* take God's therapeutic bread and, with it, create a more universal understanding of who could be God's children. He *will*, immediately after he leaves her, take the bread of God's miraculous power and rain it down like manna from heaven upon every person, every people who seek it, regardless of their gender, their country, their ethnicity, their race. The miracle of this story is not the healing. The miracle of this story is the teaching.

No less miraculous is what the almost unbelievable story of Katherine Goble Johnson *teaches* us. Katherine's story is so wondrous, it is almost biblical. I read her story. I hear her story. I keep expecting Jesus to pop in it at any moment. Her story feels that biblical.

That is why over these past several days, this biblical story of this Syrophenician woman with no name has possessed me, as I have reflected on the life of this African American woman named Katherine. Her name, too, for too long, until Margot Lee Shetterly wrote her wonderful book, was hidden among us.

Katherine.

From my perspective, her story, too, is miraculous. In 1940, she integrated West Virginia University, studying advanced mathematics. In 1953, she began her work at Langley, for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, the agency that preceded NASA. When this African American woman sought opportunity for advancement in contexts *possessed* by racial segregation and male gender domination with the kind of *nerve* the Syrophenician woman sought to advance the circumstance of her possessed daughter, Katherine surely knew that she was as likely to be rejected in her endeavors as she was to be tolerated. And yet, she persisted.

By now, we know the story well. Because of Ms. Shetterly's book and the movie, *Hidden Figures*, based upon it. Because of President Obama's conferral of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Because of Congress's bestowal of the Congressional Gold Medal. Because of the legion of accolades accorded her from universities, and schools, and communities, and national and international organizations. Doctoral degrees given to her. Buildings named after her. Books written about her. And yet, . . . were we to have relied upon her, it is a story that would never have been told. Katherine had as much humility as she had nerve. And clearly, she had *some* nerve. "I don't have a feeling of inferiority," she said, "never had. I'm as good as anybody, but no better." *Trespassing* racial boundaries. *Ignoring* male prerogatives. *Defying* spatial limitations. *Looking* up into the wild, reckless abandon of space and daring to calm it and order it to her specifications. *Determining* that the stars God spread out against the backdrop of near infinity she could map out across a blackboard with mathematical proficiency. *Earning* the trust of astronauts wary of machine computer orbital calculations, who knew that this human computer "wearing a dress" had the right mental stuff to guarantee safe flight and sure return. And doing it all while raising three wonderful daughters. What a mother!

I was her pastor for several years before I knew who she was, what she did. And even when I learned, I hardly believed it. She moved in and out of my presence the way I suspect the Syrophoenician woman slipped into the presence of the people who were tasked with surrounding and protecting Jesus. A nobody whom nobody realized was there until it was too late. Who would know from the bearing of this woman named Katherine what a great woman she was?

She slipped in and out of worship, in and out of choir rehearsal, in and out of committee meetings, in and out of Bible Study, in and out of mission endeavors, in and out of my church office, and I had no idea. And so, a visitor to Carver Memorial Presbyterian Church, following morning worship, following me as I headed back to my office, shared with me, in a rather hushed, awe inspired tone, nodding in the direction of Katherine, still in her choir robe, chatting with some friends, "her picture is in high school science books in Texas." I stopped walking. I turned to look in the direction he was looking. I said, "who? Whose picture? For what?" She

walked in that congregation with grace and humility. She worked in that congregation with devotion and love. Her genius and her legend might have been hidden from me. But not her gentle person, not her abiding faith, not her genuine love. Now, as I look back on it, I am deeply grateful that it was Katherine the member of Carver church whom I came to cherish and respect and love as a friend and congregant. That made her seem even more special once I learned of her as Katherine the mathematical savant who helped shape a piece of human history.

Being humble and gracious is not mutually exclusive of being fierce and tenacious. Katherine was all of those. *Had* to be all of those to become what she became. Her story is very, . . . Syrophoenician. A woman from one space who crosses over into other spaces, whether the people in those spaces want her there or not. An African American woman who intends a career in the male dominated world of mathematics in the era of Jim Crow. She walked a path where there were no footsteps in front of her that were like her own. She would have to make the footsteps, cut the path so that others like her would have a lead she herself never had.

She came out counting. In sports, people get counted out. In the world of advanced mathematics, aerospace calculations, orbital flight plans, and moon-shot trajectories, she counted her way in. She said that from her earliest childhood she counted everything: dishes in the cupboard, steps on the way to church, the number of stars in the sky. She might not have found out how many stars are up there, but she figured out a way to fly people up there and bring them safely home again.

She longed to leave grade school and enter high school where her counting would take her to algebra and geometry. But because her people were not allowed the bread of educational opportunity afforded the acceptable “children” of the time, because she was segregated away from the opportunity of education beyond the sixth grade in her hometown, her family moved 125 miles away to where she and her siblings would have opportunity for higher education.

Think about this! America’s early achievements in space hung on the determination of black parents resolved to achieve equal educational opportunity for their children, so that Katherine, the girl her hometown wouldn’t allow in high school, could project the path for men into space.

She entered high school at age 10. Who does that? Who goes to high school at 10? That's not a story you tell unless you check the record, to make sure you're telling the truth. Years later, in the early 1980s, when someone who hardly believed himself was telling me that he thought he heard, but he wasn't sure, and he didn't know how to check it, that Katherine had done the calculations that projected Apollo 11's flight path to the moon and back, I thought "who does that?" And how can you possibly go around telling people that you know someone who did that? That's not a story you tell about one of your church members unless you check the record, but at that point there was no public record to make sure you're telling the truth. The truth is that this woman was a revelation of quiet, unassuming, gracious brilliance.

Continuing her education at West Virginia Collegiate Institute, a historically black institution that became West Virginia State College and is now West Virginia State University, Katherine excelled. Of course, she graduated summa cum laude in 1937, with a double major no less. Because why would you just major in one thing. But being brilliant isn't always sufficient when you're brilliant and black. As the New York Times reported, Katherine found, "unsurprisingly, that research opportunities for black female teenage mathematicians were negligible."

Having become a schoolteacher, and married James Francis Goble, a teacher himself, she was tasked by mentors at West Virginia State to be one of three black graduate students to integrate West Virginia University. How very Syrophenician of her, to know her place and to have the nerve to step out of it.

Withdrawing from the university after becoming pregnant with her first daughter, in 1952, as history would have it, she learned that Langley was hiring black women as mathematicians. Female and black in a world dominated by white men, she was once again out of place. She wasn't just a human computer. She was a *colored* computer. A colored *woman* computer. Fortunately for NASA she was also a *spectacular* computer. Assigned to the Flight Research Division where she would remain for the rest of her career, she did her work and established her legend.

She would raise three daughters, Joylette, Katherine, and Connie. She would marry her second husband, James Johnson. She would calculate the trajectory analysis for Alan Shepard's 1961 mission Freedom 7, America's first human spaceflight. And when astronauts were nervous about putting their lives into the care of electronic calculating machines, they turned to Katherine. John Glenn, as we now know, asked engineers to get her to confirm the math before he made his famous flight. We all now remember Glenn saying, "if she says the numbers are good, then I'm ready to go." We now all know that John Glenn was one of many astronauts who staked their very lives on Katherine's knowledge of her numbers.

Most of us will remember Katherine as the great NASA mathematician. I will remember that. But because I knew her as something else before I knew her as a NASA legend, I will always filter my view of the legend through the lens of the lady I knew from Carver Memorial Presbyterian Church. When I arrived in 1981, though few of us knew it, she was already a giant in her field. At 24, just starting out, I was a gnat in mine. And yet, she treated me with the respect, confidence, and trust of someone who had been a pastor for decades. She honored me the way *she* should have been honored when she was first starting out. So, my principal memories are snapshots of a woman dedicated to her faith and to the mission and ministry of her church, to the care of and loving devotion for her family, her husband, her daughters, her grandchildren. To the friendship and mentoring of her pastor.

I remember her staying so long after church, chatting with friends, greeting, and gabbing and enjoying delightful conversation, that her husband Jim would come up to her at the church door and say "Katherine, here's a quarter. Call a cab, I'm going home."

I remember her mentoring a young girl in a program we had established to provide mentors for young women who had been consigned to the juvenile justice correctional system. She, with many other women in the church, partnered with these young girls so that they would have role models upon their return home.

I remember her as the chair of the church finance committee. Katherine Goble Johnson will probably go down in history as the most overqualified church finance committee chairperson



of all time. And yet she did it with the same attentiveness to detail and disciplined integrity that she put into those formulas that guided men into space.

I remember sitting in the middle of her home or outside in her yard or a nearby park, watching her watch and enjoy the laughter and love of her family.

I remember her singing in the choir, raising her voice to sing hymns to the glory of God who created the glory of the heavens that she was mathematically charting.

I will remember her telling me that she didn't mind saying that her life was filled with grace. A life that had to struggle against prejudice and obstacles that might have diverted or broken many of us. And instead of looking back in anger, she looked back and found grace.

Not up there in heaven, but down here on the ground, we can make our greatest contributions to change. Katherine opened up space in NASA. But she also opened up opportunity for little girls, and particularly little African American girls, and for grown up African American women. That calculus is just as impressive. As CNN contributor Reshma Saujani said in her article, "In your honor, Katherine, I'm going to keep counting -- counting the number of girls we bring into computer science, counting the number of black female scientists in our textbooks, counting the days until we reach gender parity."

I think we are all called to count with Katherine now. The counting not just of numbers, but the accounting of life that gives honor to the way she accounted for her life. Her story tasks us to have the courage to be as smart as we can be, to be as inclusive as we should be, to be as courageous as we need to be. Ours is no longer the same precipice of space travel that faced Katherine and the people of NASA who surrounded her. But we have precipices still. We need courageous people still. Our days of needing smart calculations and saving trajectories have not come to an end. Katherine is doing her blackboard work up in heaven now. Her earthly classroom and the human equations we need to solve belong to us now.

Katherine, now, belongs to God. Her commitment to her faith, amidst her simultaneous faith in her science, convinces me that she believed in this hope of eternal belonging. As surely as John Glenn believed in her numbers. As surely as the Syrophenician woman believed that

Jesus' promise of life would be extended to her daughter. Her daughter's healed life was a cipher for our resurrection life. I know from conversation with her that Katherine believed that Jesus' promise of this new, resurrected life would one day, this day be extended to her. Because resurrection is the ultimate children's bread. Not physical food, but spiritual sustenance. The sustenance born of hope in a thing unseen. The hope of a new and eternal life. In the end, that IS what the confrontation between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman was all about. New life. Her fight for what Jesus had. It is what the confrontation between Katherine and the obstacles that confronted her were all about. New life. Her fight to live using the gifts God had given her, to die in the assurance God has bequeathed her.

So, . . . they are connected in my mind now, these two women.

Two mothers, driven by *some* nerve.

One's name forever hidden. The other's name finally revealed.

One a Syrophenician. The other an African American.

One whose identity will endure provocatively in the biblical record. The other whose name will persist strikingly in American legend and lore.

Katherine.

You can step back from the blackboard. Lay down your chalk. God will do the calculations now. This time, you get to be the astronaut. This time it's you who gets to leave this earth and orbit into transcendence.

It's your turn to fly.