

Rev. Dr. Julia Burkey
May 8, 2022
Mother's Day

The Story of Thecla
or
The Girl who Baptized herself
or
Ancient Christian Bodily Autonomy

May the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be aligned with you oh God
our rock and our redeemer. Amen

This is a story of a girl who belonged to herself. And in belonging to herself, she belonged to God. This is a story of bodily autonomy for women in the early Jesus following communities. Women who cut their hair, fled from the rich families and men they were betrothed to, created new pathways of liberation for themselves, by following Jesus. This is a story that did not make it into the Bible, but has rich commentary about the life of early Jesus followers and the early Jesus movement.

This is what we call a non-canonical or extra-canonical Biblical text. More recent scholarship debunks the term "Gnostic" as it denotes a secretive type of wisdom only available to a few. Gnosticism is actually a made-up category by scholars to try to understand the communities who wrote the texts that did not make it into the Bible. It makes those texts as part of a secret mystery school- which is kind of cool at first, but ultimately demarcates those texts as outside of the Christian tradition.

And today, and for the next three weeks, I want to claim that these texts are very much from within the Christian tradition, they belong to us and were suppressed or lost or burned on purpose, because those in power did not like what they said. In our case today, Thecla shows us that women were preaching and administering sacraments- baptism.

We do not need to go outside of the Bible to find powerful women, but the way. We do not need to go outside of the Bible to find examples of Jesus caring about women's bodies and stories and lives. I love the Bible. But sometimes reading these extra-canonical texts alongside of the canonical Biblical texts, illuminates our Bible differently- as amazingly weird and powerful and beautiful and transformative.

Thecla shows us a woman who belongs to herself and does what she wants, what she believes God calls her to, with her body and soul. Thecla isn't a mother, isn't a wife, but is a follower of Jesus, or to use her language is one of the enslaved of Jesus. She is so gripped by the path of Jesus that she can do no other.

The “Acts of Paul and Thecla,” was a wide spread text judging by how many copies have been recovered, recovered because theologian Tertullian in the second century tragically ordered for all copies to be destroyed because he believed it did not fit into the master narrative of how the Jesus movement was becoming organized into Christianity, women couldn’t administer the sacraments or preach. You can judge for yourself whether you want to call this text holy.

Thecla was young woman from an important family in Asia Minor or modern day Turkey, and she was engaged to be married to an important man. The Apostle Paul came to her town talking about Jesus, and the scripture has it that Thecla was glued to the window, staring out, listening for three days straight, hearing the gospel for the first time, and she was entranced.

Her fiancé begs her to come away from the window, that she should be ashamed, that it is the her duty and the law for her to marry. But hearing about Christ, Thecla’s life is changed.

So the fiancé essentially tells on her, he gets the big guns; her mom, to try to convince Thecla to get in line, but Thecla remains. At this point, the fiancé calls the governor, saying that Paul is a magician who has powers to sway young women from marrying. And so Paul is arrested and thrown in prison! And Thecla says goodbye to her life and escapes in the night to visit Paul and learn more about Jesus.

The next day word gets out, and the punishment for subverting social order is harsh; the fiancé and mother agree that Thecla ought to be burned breaking the law and following her own courageous heart toward Jesus.

And on the funeral pyre just before the flames begin lapping at her feet, she makes a sign of the cross and a thundercloud covers the whole area and puts the fire out; Thecla grabs a men’s robe, and cuts her hair off and goes to find Paul, saying that she is ready to be baptized. “Only give me the seal of Christ and no trial will touch me,” yet Paul dawdles! He says to her “be patient,” and she remains close to him, waiting for his authority for baptism, joining him in on his adventures.

Paul and Thecla travel to Antioch, where the Syrian leader Alexander sees Thecla and says he must have her as a wife, and she is defiant, in public she rips his crown from his head and tears his garments and saves herself. But because he is a powerful man, she is brought to court and is sentenced to death in the arena, where everyone is awaiting the wild beasts who would be unleashed to destroy her. The lions who should tear her apart lie down at her feet, then tear the bears apart who approach her. After a lot of this, and this is where we meet Thecla in the text today, she sees a pit of water with sea lions in it and decides in the face of death and Paul’s dawdling, that NOW is the time to be baptized.

Thecla cries out in the arena, “In the name of Jesus I baptize myself.” Then a cloud of fire surrounds her so she can’t be touched, and the sea lions die. And the crowd who was once against her, turn in her favor, especially the women, they are amazed and start throwing in

perfume and roses and cinnamon to deter the animals, and it lulls them to sleep, and Thecla is saved. The women conspire

The crowd begins to turn, seeing Thecla's courage, and the women begin chanting together "unholy judgement," to proclaim her innocence, and they begin throwing rose petals, nard, cinnamon, cardamom into the arena, and the intoxicating smell of the perfume and spices and roses lull the wild animals asleep. The scripture reads, "All the women cried out in a loud voice, as if from one mouth," praising Thecla's courage. Theologian Meggan Watterson writes about this moment, "In saving herself, Thecla has unified the force of love in all the women around her. In freeing herself, and uniting herself with the source of love, she has freed the women." The text ends saying that Thecla lived until 90 years old healing and teaching in the name of Jesus. To this day there is a cave in Turkey with a fresco on it of Paul and Thecla.

When I thought about what I wanted to do on mother's day- I decided I wanted to hear the story of Thecla, and share it with you. So thank you for going along with me on this. This is the story of Thecla, the girl who baptized herself, or Ancient Christian Bodily Autonomy.

Ritual:

We are our own. We belong to ourselves, and in belonging to ourselves, we belong to God. Thecla led the way in a self baptism, and like her, we can claim this water as what we need it to be today. Take a moment to loosen your mind and let it come to you, ask the Christ within, what you need from this water today, what the world needs through you. Is this the water of justice, the water of healing, the water of bodily autonomy, the water of anger, the water of gratitude, the water of gentleness, the water of love, the water of new-life, the water of forgiveness? Take a moment to claim it. And I invite you to take the water and make the sign of the cross on either your forehead or hand.