

Seeing the Whole Person

This story of the Samaritan Women at the Well is a story of freedom, even transformation. Not, however -- and as far too many interpreters assume -- from a life of immorality to one of morality. I do not think the Samaritan woman is a prostitute. I don't even think that she has a shady past. Jesus understands her and he calls her not to repentance but to life-giving faith. Let me to explain.

Not surprisingly, Jesus was dusty and thirsty under the noonday sun after his walk through the high hills and low mountains about forty miles north of Jerusalem. He had come as far as Sychar in the district of Samaria on his way to Galilee. The well near which he sat to rest has great symbolic significance for the story John is about to relate. It was Jacob's well, which means it went back to ancient Israel. The Samaritan woman even refers to it thus: "... our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself." She had enough Hebrew religious education to testify, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ)." Near where she lived there had been a Samaritan temple; and she even gets into a discussion of which is the better place to worship, "on this mountain" or in Jerusalem.

By the time of Jesus, not only should a Jewish man certainly not speak to a Samaritan woman, but very likely not to any other Samaritan as well. Jesus was not following the rules here. Jesus was teaching all that Samaritans were not "unclean pagans." And there should not be any such thing as "My group is better than your group."

Let us not be too hard on the disciples for adopting the standard prejudices of the day. Since the time when the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity by the Assyrians, there had been dissensions between the nation of Judah & the nation of Samaria. It had become a barrier. You can almost hear the wall breaking between the two peoples. According to John's account, the disciples had only been in training a short while. There was the dramatic lesson at the wedding at Cana, when they really started believing in Jesus. They followed Jesus to the town of Capernaum. John's gospel features the encounter of Jesus with the money changers in the temple threw them for a loss early on. So here they were returning from downtown with the groceries for lunch when they stopped dead in their tracks. John reports that "they marveled that he was talking with a woman." No one asked, "Why are you talking with her?" or "Do you want to get us all in trouble? Have you forgotten?"

After more training in the new "Gospel of Discipleship course," these students of Jesus' teaching would forsake such bigotry and discover a whole new way of seeing people. Later on, they would find that Jesus did not hesitate to draw near to "unclean" persons, sick people, sad cases of leprosy, a person raving with an evil spirit, a rich young ruler, and also a centurion; you name it, Jesus dealt with it, whatever the "it" might be. They would be in the Discipleship Course for several more semesters before they got the point & could see others thru Jesus' eyes.

Jesus begins the conversation in a remarkably simple and straightforward manner. Nothing about "Please," "You can understand how thirsty I am since I've walked a long way," Jesus said, "Give me a drink." And, as was so like him, he almost immediately departs from the mundane topic to a spiritual one: "living water." This woman had some "strikes against her, she got born into a Samaritan family; & 2nd, she fails at one marriage after another. Jesus may well have known this before even addressing her; but he does not focus on this or that stigma, failure, or mistake. He just begins by recognizing her as a person, a person with a bucket that can bring up water from Jacob's well.

The Samaritan woman intuitively recognizes the symbolism of some kind of living water and finally asks a favor in return. She had been to the well often and had come away still thirsty for a fulfilling life, a refreshing fellowship. Maybe she had not had her thirst quenched at other kinds of wells of life; who knows? The point is that Jesus was not turned either by her ethnic barrier nor her misfortunes. When she is finally caught in the conversation as Jesus reveals her present situation, Jesus does not bring the law of adultery crashing down upon her head, as he well could have since the Judeans and the Samaritans had had long controversy about how to interpret the Torah (Commandments). He even affirms her by saying, "... and he whom you have is not your husband; this you said truly." Layer after layer of her life unfolds in the conversation to the point where she exclaims that Jesus must be a prophet of some kind.

What kind of impact did Jesus' encounter with the woman have? It was very positive, and very likely quite different from the many negative experiences she had with relatives and neighbors, who would have said, "If I told you once, I've told you a thousand times, if you keep on like this you'll come to no good." After this fairly brief encounter with Jesus, she rushed back into Sychar and exclaimed, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" The people must have been amazed that she did not flee from one who knew all this bad stuff about her. Here was acceptance in spite of blemishes, handicaps, mistakes, failures, and sin. She experienced grace, the grace of God, and knew it. It was good news for her, the good news she wanted to share with others.

The Samaritans also sensed the blessing of Jesus' presence and grace and asked him to stay with them. One wonders how many others got a clearer vision for their lives because of their encounter with this prophet, who could see so clearly all that made up the whole person, the strengths and weaknesses, the shame of group rejection and prejudice as well as the guilt of failures.

How gratifying it is to be accepted for the many other aspects of our personality, ability, capacity, and potential even though there are those couple defects or deficiencies. And we all need that since none of us, I believe, is perfect; except for our Lord, Jesus.

It's a challenge. Every time we can react like Jesus did with the Samaritan woman and others who deviated from normal and ideal, that is another time we are blessing someone and growing in grace a little more ourselves. It is a good feeling when it happens, when grace happens within us by the help of the Holy Spirit.