

“Ready to Relate”
John 4:1-29
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3rd Sunday after Pentecost - Unraveled Sermon Series
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The “Jesus was a feminist who liberated women from misogynistic Judaism”¹ school of interpretation has become so mainstream that it’s tough to engage this text today as *it is* instead of as we’ve heard it to be. Chances are you’ve heard that school of interpretation so often that it doesn’t even seem like interpretation anymore. It just seems like what the text actually says. That interpretation goes something like this: the woman from Samaria was an outsider, ritually unclean, a “sinner.” She was, in the words of one scholar, a “publicly recognized shameless person. . . as a shameless woman, she embodies most of the social liabilities that would marginalize her in society.”² This interpretation is reinforced by the preaching guide for the “Unraveled” sermon series that we’re using which states that “the text implies unjust treatment of Samaritan women by Jewish men.” It goes on to suggest in this same line of scholarship that the woman comes to the well at noon in the heat of the day, an unusual time for drawing water, because the Samaritan woman may have been ostracized by the community. In this interpretation, Jesus, in contrast to all other misogynistic Jewish men, and in opposition to the oppressive regulations of his faith, rescues this woman from the isolation created by her own culture.

I’m more than sympathetic to this interpretation of Jesus - I’ve preached a version of that sermon many times. *Jesus did push his own religious faith toward inclusivity.* He did include those who had been named unclean, sinners; inclusion beyond what was acceptable to some in the religious hierarchies of his time. He did surround himself with women and men whom he respected, taught, and who sustained his ministry. The early church pushes in the same direction - toward a rejection of distinctions between male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free; a Pentecostal church where people of every race and nation are considered eligible for an expanded covenant with God. So it makes sense that we would read Jesus in this light. But Amy-Jill Levine, the feminist orthodox Jew who is also a Professor of New Testament, has me convinced that this isn’t what this text actually says.

¹ This phrase is borrowed from Amy-Jill Levine whose book, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, is formative for this sermon, as will be obvious soon enough.

² Jerome Jeyrey, “What’s Wrong with This Picture? John 4. Cultural Stereotypes of Women, and Public and Private Space,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 24 (1994):77-91, quoted in Levine, p. 135.

Levine points out that the woman is not an outsider in this text. The fact that she comes to the well at noon is not likely due to any kind of ostracism from the community but is part of the Gospel writer's narrative art. John wants us to contrast this Samaritan woman with Nicodemus in the previous chapter. If you remember, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night so he won't be seen. The Samaritan woman comes at high noon. Nicodemus, the religious insider to Jesus' faith, can't understand Jesus' mysterious claim about being born from above. The Samaritan woman, the religious outsider in relationship to Jesus' faith, understands that Jesus is the light and goes and tells her neighbors all about it. "Many Samaritans from that city believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony," the text says. Dr. Levine makes the astute observation that "Townpeople are not likely to believe the testimony of a marginalized, shameless sinner."³

What about the text's observation that "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans?" "Like most stereotypes," Levine says, it's exaggerated. Herod the Great married a Samaritan woman so clearly some Jews shared quite a bit with some Samaritans. What's missed by portraying Jews as the exclusionary party and Samaritans as the marginalized, excluded victims, is the fact that both Jews and Samaritans shared a kind of mutual animosity toward one another.

What's more, there is nothing said in the text about this woman being ritually unclean or Jesus ignoring any purity laws. Christian interpreters of this text have sometimes lifted a passage here or there from rabbinic texts to make that claim, but reducing "rabbinic ambivalence about the Samaritans to a singular xenophobic, misogynistic Jewish hatred," Levine says, "and then retrojecting this image back to Jesus' first-century context" would be as unfair as taking one the misogynistic writings of the early church fathers and retrojecting that back to what Jesus said, did, or taught.⁴ We shouldn't make Jesus the hero by making Judaism the villain. When we do, then we're not preaching a Gospel of liberation, we're just recreating the same old structures of oppression with Christians on the top and others on the bottom.

That warning seems important to heed right now since we've been living within a public culture that tries to reduce everyone down to heroes and villains. Our President has led the charge with his Tweets, his vitriol, his use of public power to divide us all up. But in that climate that we're living in, it's very easy for that us vs. them mentality to seep its way into every aspect of our living, poisoning the way we view too many of our neighbors near and far, making it less and less possible to cross some of the boundaries that have led us to so much division.

Please don't hear me as suggesting a false moral equivalency between what the President does and those who speak out against his abuses of power. Or between,

³ Levine, 135.

⁴ Ibid, 136-137.

say, white nationalists and those of us protesting their racist ideologies, woven deeply into the fabric of the American experiment. I'm simply saying that we have to get better at condemning systems that divide us without condemning people caught in those systems. We have to get better at engaging in the difficult conversations with people we don't know, suspect we don't agree with, or think we may not understand instead of writing them off.

That's definitely what Jesus and the Samaritan woman do in this text, it's just that some scholars feel the need to make this woman labeled as "sinful" in order to make Jesus more heroic in his efforts to engage her. Amy-Jill Levine says that while having been married to five husbands and living with a man who is not her husband is not conventional, "it need not be seen as sinful either."⁵ She points to Sarah in the apocryphal book of Tobit who was multiply married and to Jesus himself who is questioned in Mark's Gospel over the hypothetical example of a woman who is married 7 times. Jesus says nothing about sin - neither about that woman nor about this Samaritan woman. She violates no legal code by living with a man not her husband. "The only ones who condemn her," Levine says wryly, "are the biblical scholars."

When we bring that kind of reading to it, we miss the playful innuendo that actually makes the story fun and reveals both Jesus and the Samaritan woman to be more interesting than we've allowed them to be. Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet at a well which brings to mind the place where Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for his son, the place where Jacob meets his future wife Rachel, the place where Moses meets his wife, Zipporah. The language is filled with sexually suggestive references - wells and cisterns, fountains and living water - the "earthy humor," of antiquity as Levine calls it.⁶

When read that way, Jesus is the shameless one in this text - initiating a conversation that evokes this woman's sexual background by asking her to "go call her husband" when he already knows she doesn't have one. He is the one pushing the boundaries in this text - not the boundaries that we've assumed were set up by his Jewish faith - but the prudish ones erected by the later leaders of our Christian one. Here at the well, the place where families have been unified in the bonds of marriage, the possibility of the metaphorical union of Jew and Samaritan - mutual despisers of each other - is playfully posited. Here at the well, the woman, the Samaritan woman - the opposite of the elite insider - sees the possibility of who Jesus is and becomes the first evangelist not because she possesses a seminary degree but because she engaged a fellow human being in the moment. She didn't shrink from an awkward conversation.

⁵ Ibid, 137.

⁶ Ibid, 138.

What is unraveled in this text, then, is not the shame of a marginalized woman, but rather, our own assumptions. The assumptions that we've heaped on her, yes, but also the ones we put on Jesus. The Christ who we say was fully human, fully divine, but really we treat as not fully human - possessing no sense of humor, allowing for no flirtatious impulses, no complexity of spirit, mood, or countenance, leaving us with a solemn, ascetic, dour Savior that we somehow believe is going to lead us to the beloved community of actual human beings. It's no wonder so many Christians feel guilty around him. I'd only want to come hear from him on Christmas and Easter, too.

What is unraveled in this text is not the exclusion of the Samaritan community, or the oppression of restrictive Jewish law, but the sin of our Christian tradition, projecting our prudish sexual mores, our oppressive view of Judaism, our grim views of Jesus onto this Samaritan woman at the well, when we could be celebrating the reality that the first evangelist is, wow, a woman! a Samaritan! someone just minding her own business in the world who finds herself face to face with God-in-the-flesh and gets an assignment that changes her world! We could be celebrating how quickly this kind of good news could spread to people who are hungry for a relationship with the divine that leads to radical human possibilities, overcoming divisions, creating new connections.

And maybe right now a text that unravels our assumptions is exactly what we need if we are going to capitalize on the protests, the apparent awakening of a greater percentage of white Americans over the deep racism in our country and the deep inequalities that perpetuate it and result from it. Because what we're desperate for in this time, pregnant with possibility, is not just reminders of what must be torn down, but visions of what could be built together. We could begin a public process of reconciliation that tells the truth about what enslaved people built in this land and then work together to even out those generations-long playing fields that preserve and promote so much inequality. We could build strategies that attack crime with employment and education instead of police and prisons. We could rethink the growth, growth, growth economy that is destroying so much life on the planet and replace it with one that values the growth of health and knowledge and wellbeing instead.

But to do that, we're going to need some awkward conversations, even between people who have been enemies in the past. We're going to need more of the playful spirit of Jesus and this Samaritan woman, and less of the anxious spirit that is going around if we're going to trust our imaginations to share with us the future that God programmed them to give. We're going to need to relinquish our understanding of God as the one waiting to punish people for breaking rules, to shame them for having pleasure, and meet, instead, the God who shows up in places of division ready to relate, to heal, and to give people what they need - water, community, recognition, possibility, a future.

The Samaritan woman leaves her jar. She's tired of drinking from those same wells that do not satisfy. Jesus is shamelessly offering something different. She left her jar at the well. She was ready for it. Are we?