

A Close Encounter of the Best Kind Rev. Catherine Oxenford-Grant

Wall Street United Church
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“...whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. ...the water I give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. ...Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty...” [John 4:13-14]

When I was studying in seminary – grad school training for ministers – one of my professors always used to say that each reading has many faces. I think of that like facets in a diamond – every time we listen to Scripture, or sit down to study it...the Holy Spirit has something different to teach us, a new side or facet or face to a multi-dimensional story.

And this story from John of the woman at the well is no different. I have done an entire Lenten series on this one passage of Scripture, because it is so rich and full of meaning. Today, I could preach on how this passage legitimizes women in ministry, preaching and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus ... but I won't. I could reflect on how this scripture is about building community by crossing gender, racial, and social boundaries to share the love of God with everyone...but not today! Rather, I would like to spend some time leaning into the story of the unnamed woman of Samaria.

In the story told in John's gospel, Jesus has just had his secret night meeting with Nicodemus (the wealthy educated Jew who could not understand) and he and his disciples have left Jerusalem, traveling on their way to Galilee. In the verse right before this, most translations read, *he had to travel* through Samaria. But the Greek reads, *it was necessary*. Samaria is not exactly on the way to Galilee. And yet, it was necessary for Jesus to travel into Samaria, though perhaps not for a geographical purpose.

Now, what of Samaria? Not a Jewish place — Jesus and his disciples are foreigners here, both religiously and racially. Not only that, these are rival people. That is why the story of the good Samaritan is such a scandal — to Jews, people of Samaria were on the wrong side of everything, they were outcast and despised.

And this anonymous woman? She is likely unnamed to focus our attention on the fact that she is a Samaritan, not a Jew. The women who are named in this Gospel are all Jewish (Mary, Jesus' mother, and Mary Magdalene). And we know that she has had five

husbands, plus the partner she is currently living with. For many years, mostly beginning with the Puritans, this has been understood to mean that she has a scandalous past – and perhaps she does. But this ‘five-husbands’ business is likely not pointing to a sexually provocative past. What is more socially probable is that she was barren. Women who didn’t bear children were divorced, cast aside, abandoned. Maybe she is a widow as well. We don’t know exactly, but what we do know, is that *never* in this story does Jesus give her a lesson in morality or even offer her his forgiveness for her past. She doesn’t need it. Instead, he sees her real need, and that need is to belong.

The truth of her situation is that she is marginalized, ostracized, holding deeply the pain of abandonment and barrenness. She is isolated, disconnected... and likely not because of anything she had control over.

This woman could not make herself into what society told her she should be. She was alone.

And we know this story from our own lives, don’t we? We wear labels, each one of us. Labels of how we should be as a man or a woman, as a Mum or a Dad, as a teacher, a carpenter, a grandparent, a preacher, an adult, a spouse, a professional; we could go on and on.

There are a lot of “shoulds,” weighing heavily on each one of us. And “should” pushes us further away from one another, further away from the healing that comes through connection, relationship, community. We feel the weight of the should – *you should eat less chocolate; you should save more money; you should get off your phone; you should spend more time with your family; you should get more exercise; you should yell less; you should should should!*

And when we aren’t living up to the *shoulds*? We pull away – or are pushed away – and we either put on a perfect outside or we lose our connection with community.

The Samaritan woman was alone. Until. She was alone *until* she met a new friend who asked a different question.

Jesus didn’t try to fix or change her, but invited her into relationship. They engage in this back and forth about living water: is she naïve, or playing along with him as a part of her sense of humour? She is perceptive, bright – the conversation moves quickly from the everyday, step-by-step, over the barriers she had created to protect her inner self, until she is in a rather intimate conversation with Jesus. As it turns out, Jesus is not some stranger who knows his theology and is accosting her at Jacob’s well. He knows her intimately, and accepts her as someone worth talking to.

The woman is a quick study, and we see Jesus bring her to a new level of understanding of who he is: from thirsty Jew to strange water source to prophet! From there, she pushes forward into this theological conversation with Jesus regarding the acceptable place for worship – something Jews and Samaritans had disagreed over for forever. This back and forth brings her to yet another level of understanding ... could he be, *Messiah*?

And Jesus makes himself fully known to her with the words, “*I am.*” He reveals that the presence of God is before her. It is the first “*I am*” statement in this Gospel. Jesus makes God known to this woman at the well and, as a result, makes her a new witness to his work in the world.

Jesus sees and validates her! Then what happens? She drops her pot – leaves behind her water jar to run off, in joy, to share this revelation! She leaves behind a key piece of her old identity.

This new-found relationship with Jesus makes room for her identity to evolve. She sheds the labels of marginalization and abandonment and assumes a new identity, as preacher and centre-point of a brand-new movement in the Samaritan community.

In John’s Gospel, salvation means restored relationship, it means belonging. When Jesus meets and shares with people, when Jesus heals them, it is so they can get back to their place of belonging in the community.

And because of this unnamed woman of Samaria, we know that we too have a place to belong. Because of her we know that no matter who we are, no matter our place in society, no matter the boxes we have been put into or the corners we have been assigned to, God, as revealed in Jesus, is *for us too*. No more ‘shoulds,’ no more labels.

Except the one that matters the most: beloved child of God.

The Samaritan woman was alone. There are times when we too feel alone – isolated by others or by our own shame or fear of what we have done or not done, or by who we are or what we think or have been told we “should” be....

But Jesus sees us. Really sees us. Jesus calls us into relationship, stripping off the false or harmful tags that we ourselves and others put on us. Jesus claims us as his own, making room for us to put down the pots of our old selves.

The Woman at the Well could not have done it on her own. This is not a ‘*pull yourself up by your bootstraps!*’ situation. It isn’t even “*redefine your identity and get on with your life.*”

Jesus goes out of his way on his travels, to sit down at the well and wait for us. He knows us. He wants us. And he is ready to engage in creating a closeness with us that unbinds us from the labels or wrappers that constrict who we think we are or should be. Instead, Jesus makes wide the path to freedom for the person he knows we are. And loves us for it.

Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me: We thank you, O God for close encounters – of the best kind – that reinforce love, acceptance and freedom to be your beloved children. Amen.