

A Woman, A Well, A Witness

Luke Bushman March 19th 2022. John 4:1-26

This morning our gospel text is found in John chapter 4, where Jesus meets and interacts with a Samaritan woman. This morning I want to acknowledge that I am entering into this text as a man. I will try my best to highlight the importance of this text in regards to how women were treated, versus how they deserve to be treated, but my perspective obviously has large holes in it. That said, I am really excited to get to talk about a passage that pushes for equality and is key for a feminist interpretation of the Bible.

The text begins with a very clear reference to the Old Testament. Specifically the account where Jacob meets Rachel, by going to a local well. This setting is popular throughout the Bible, where a man encounters a woman at the well, Isaac's servant finds a spouse for Isaac, Moses meets his spouse at a well, and the aforementioned Jacob. It seems like the Old Testament equivalent to Bridal College. While Jesus does meet a woman at the well, he does not meet a wife at the well. The clear reference to marriage and patriarchal practices is important later on in the story.

Jesus asks for some water, and the woman is astonished. It was inappropriate for Jewish men to interact with any unknown woman, or any women in public. In addition Jewish people did not initiate interaction with Samaritans.

Jesus then begins another one of his confusing discussions, very similar to the story of Nicodemus. Jesus begins to talk about living water, and like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman struggles to grasp Jesus' spiritual concepts, thinking in logical- real world terms. Like most people would. She does have faith in what Jesus is saying however, and is eager to experience this eternally refreshing water. Some scholars think that the Samaritan woman is written as a direct contrast to Nicodemus. Nicodemus approached Jesus secretly at night, as a powerful Jewish man, who had some prior understanding of the miraculous nature of Jesus' ministry. The Samaritan woman interacts with

Jesus in the middle of the day, and with no prior experience, and yet is open to the concepts and miracles he is talking about. This contrast is not necessarily to put down Nicodemus. He makes two other appearances in John's gospel, and we see him slowly come around fully to Jesus. This contrast highlights the faith of the Samaritan woman. Her receptiveness as a foreigner and a woman illustrates the nature of the Kingdom of God. Power, gender, wealth and education may get you far on earth, but these things have no connection to your status in front of Jesus.

Now we get to talk about the thing that I was most excited about when given this passage. Debunking a long held interpretation of this story, popularized by many years of male scholars. These next verses have been inaccurately used by men to reinforce their patriarchal bias.

So in the text Jesus tells the woman to go get her husband. She replies I don't have one, and Jesus says **"You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"**

Since scholars over history have been largely male due to misogyny, this line from Jesus has often been interpreted as him pointing out that this woman lacks morality, and has taken many lovers, and is living with someone while unwed. They have even pointed to the fact that she is getting water in the heat of the day, as evidence that she is shamed in her community for her promiscuity. This interpretation is very popular despite some clear holes in this theory. I simply googled John 4 explained and most of the sermons (written mostly by men) used this interpretation.

To be honest, I have heard this in various circles before having people tell me a more accurate interpretation of this text. It sounded like an intelligent interpretation of the text to me, but my own male bias at the time, clearly led to some blindspots.

For starters, Jesus makes no mention of morality, or improper practices when he as a prophet is able to tell her her life story without knowing her. Jesus is simply prophesying. Any statement on morality is not present in the text, but read into it by commentators.

Secondly, women were not able to initiate divorce in this time period except in extreme cases of abuse. They were not given equal rights. It is impossible for this woman to be bouncing from husband to husband willingly. Most likely this woman is a victim of the Levirate marriage system. In this system, if a husband died, his next brother in line would marry his wife. This repeats over and over. This woman has likely experienced loss after loss, and is currently living with someone she is not married to just to survive and make ends meet. Some have even theorized that the current man she is connected with, is a man who refuses to take her as his wife, despite the Levirate marriage system encouraging him to do so.

All of this is to say that even when the Bible focuses on women, that focus has often been tainted by a historically male-centered interpretation of the text. This text looks a lot different depending on if we view this woman as a horrible sinner, or view her as someone who has experienced loss. While Jesus drastically changing the perspectives and actions of sinners is a common theme, this is not one of those instances. In this instance a woman who has experienced great loss, has the resolve and the faith to believe Jesus, and become one of his first witnesses. After another lengthy and rather confusing dialogue, the woman accepts Jesus' revelation as the Messiah, and goes to spread the good news. By all accounts, this text does not encourage us to see the Samaritan woman as a horrible person that needs to be redeemed. This text shows us the faith in this woman, who after a chance encounter with Jesus, chooses to accept his claim as Messiah, and become a partner in his ministry. Instead of finding a wife at the well, Jesus finds a witness. If you want to learn more about the unique role of women in John's gospel come talk to me after the service, and I can direct you to a great essay about it.

The story of the Samaritan woman and the history of how her story has been interpreted is unfortunately indicative of Christian history at times. The early church was actually acclaimed for its treatment of marginalized people groups, including women. It was moving forward in regards to equal treatment and value, but for us 2000 years later, these writings are no longer progressive. Strange how something progressive 2000 years ago is now old fashioned. Instead of continuing this progress joyfully, following in the footsteps of Jesus, the church has oftentimes used its power to hinder the progress of women's rights.

The legacy of the Samaritan woman overcomes many obstacles. Women who are church leaders, and women in general, continue to have to overcome different obstacles. We have an obligation as followers of Jesus to not only acknowledge how biases have affected women, but also listen and work together to remove obstacles. I want to read an excerpt that Patty sent me, about progress being made elsewhere in the world in regards to women in church ministry.

The first Palestinian, female pastor was ordained in the Holy Land. The Rev. Sally Azar, a Palestinian, will lead the English-speaking Lutheran congregation in the Old City, Jerusalem and in Beit Sahour, West Bank. Ms. Azar joins four other female pastors ordained in the Middle East - one in Syria and three in Lebanon. As of 2017, 45,000 Christians lived in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Many are part of the Greek Orthodox and Latin Catholic Churches, where women cannot serve as priests. Ms. Azar says she knows it will take time to normalize her role. "I hope that many girls and women will know this is possible and that other women in other churches will join us."

In lent we acknowledge our brokenness and our need for a savior. We celebrate what Jesus did during his time on earth. Jesus was about equality and justice, and in our brokenness we have often not followed his example. Let us acknowledge our broken past, and ask Jesus to help us create a better future.

