

The Woman at the Well: John 4.1-43

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I come this evening to praise the unnamed woman at the well and to draw from her story lessons for women in the church today.

I praise her because she knows who she is and what she believes. She knows how to protect herself through repartee and how to concede a point when it matches her experience. She is a woman of heart and head, spontaneity and caution, earthy savvy and spiritual longing. She has much to teach us.

First, this woman is faced with a request from a stranger. He is a man and she a woman; of course he might expect her to give him a drink. But, like Mary of Nazareth, she neither complies with the request nor refuses it before asking her own questions. Her willingness to engage the stranger in conversation-- a conversation that she shapes as much as he—leads them deeper and deeper into a relationship. At the end of a series of dizzying exchanges, in which she follows the stranger's logic and counters with some of her own, she finds herself before one who knows her; who, in revealing himself, reveals herself.

In all likelihood, none of this would have transpired had she mutely obeyed or stridently refused the man's initial request. By determining to have her questions satisfied, she finds herself with new questions and unimaginable satisfactions. Women need the same kind of daring today. We must be prepared to ask our own questions of those who expect certain patterns of behavior from us. The Samaritan woman's question could be a leitmotif in our own day: Why do you ask this of me? Why do you, a man, ask this of me, a woman? Why do you, the ordained, ask this of me, the laity?

The second lesson is that the woman at the well allows the relationship to change her. The key to this transformation, as Sandra Schneiders deftly identified it, is the abandoned water jar. The Samaritan woman has gone from being caught up in the daily struggle for water to an existential plane where she could literally forget the vessel that was all important in a woman's life. No less than the disciples who abandoned their fishing nets, this woman has undergone a metanoia—that great shift of imagination-- that turns priorities upside down and inside out.

But, inasmuch as this shift is set in the context of a relationship, there is another side to the story. It is a side to which we have long been blinded by our christology. Once, after hearing a famous scripture scholar lecture on this pericope, I asked him what affect the woman at the well had had on Jesus. His answer was, “absolutely none.” That response is not surprising. But I do think it is to be resisted. If men of the church think they represent a Jesus who is unaffected by those who approach him, those who follow him, those who engage him in conversation, it can deform their self-understanding.

The Johannine text, however, reveals something different, if we have eyes to see. Jesus, who is tired and thirsty at the beginning of the exchange, never receives a drink and never again asks for one. Jesus, who was also presumably hungry—since the disciples had gone off in search of food—declines their offer of it after his conversation with this woman, claiming that he has food they know not of. Jesus, who at the beginning of the story is merely passing through Samaria, says after meeting this representative of her people, “these Samaritans fields are ripe. It's harvest time!” In allowing herself to be changed, this marvelous woman has also changed the stranger. Conversation with her

slakes his thirst and eases his hunger. Her openness to truth brings him to recognize the broader scope of his mission.

The third and final lesson I want to draw out is this. The Samaritan woman takes responsibility for her own people. Once she has tasted the truth of the stranger's words, she runs to her townspeople to share it. However we interpret the famous line about the five husbands, she does not think herself unworthy to be the one to tell the good news. And she is fearless in claiming her own power to recognize the one to come, in letting her own experience be the criterion for inviting others to come and see: he told me all about myself, he knows me inside and out.

There is no doubt that the church is in great trouble these days and that many of us long to be able to do more. Even if those in authority will not recognize and sanction women in official roles of teaching, sanctifying and governing, it is still our duty to take responsibility for the church where we are. Many of us here know people who think they are not orthodox enough, not straight enough, not married enough, not certain enough, not regular enough, not whole enough to approach God. Let the story of this Samaritan woman inspire us to share with them the results of our own ongoing conversation with the one who knows us inside and out. Like the woman at the well, may we ask our own questions, risk being changed and being agents of change, and take responsibility for the Samarias of our day.

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