

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

John 4:5-21, 28-29, 39

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 12, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

So [Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her,

'Give me a drink'.

[His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.]

The Samaritan woman said to him,

'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'

[Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.]

Jesus answered her,

'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'

The woman said to him,

'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'

Jesus said to her,

'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'

The woman said to him,

'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her,

'Go, call your husband, and come back.'

The woman answered him,

'I have no husband.'

Jesus said to her,

'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'

The woman said to him,

'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.'

Jesus said to her,

'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.'

Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' ...

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony,

'He told me everything I have ever done.'

One of my favorite contemporary American poets is Stephen Dunn, who passed away last year in Frostburg, Maryland, after teaching for many years at Stockton State University in New Jersey.¹ His poetry is most often grounded in the ordinary lives of people, in their day-to-day concerns over work, family, finances. A poem that has stayed with me for many years is entitled "A Secret Life."² I want to share parts of it that are appropriate for our setting and which speak to the text is before us today.

...The secret life
begins early, is kept alive
by all that's unpopular
in you, all that you know...
[someone religious] would object to.

It becomes what you'd most protect
if the government said you can protect
one thing, all else is ours.

When you write late at night
it's like a small fire
in a clearing, it's what
radiates and what can hurt
if you get too close to it.

It's why your silence is a kind of truth.

¹ Neil Genzlinger, "Stephen Dunn, Poet Who Celebrated the Ordinary, Dies at 82," *New York Times* obituary, June 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/25/books/stephen-dunn-poet-dead.html>.

² Stephen Dunn, "A Secret Life," *Landscape at the End of a Century* (1991), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/stephen-dunn>.

Even when you speak to your best friend,
the one who'll never betray you,
you always leave out one thing;
a secret life is that important.

II

Since 1947, over twenty artists have recorded a spiritual entitled “Jesus Met the Woman at the Well.”³ It is based on a Samaritan Woman in John’s Gospel whom Jesus encounters after he turns water into wine at a wedding,⁴ drives money changers out of the Temple,⁵ and has a nighttime conversation with an established leader of the Jewish community named Nicodemus, who interprets what Jesus is saying about following him as being like a “second birth,” while Jesus compares it to a birth “from above.”⁶

Probably the most familiar recording of the spiritual is by Mahalia Jackson;⁷ other familiar artists like Peter, Paul, and Mary,⁸ and Bob Dylan⁹ have recorded the spiritual as well. If you have any familiarity with African American worship, you have probably encountered this song:

Jesus met the woman at the well, (x3)
And He told her everything she'd ever done.

He said, "Woman, woman, where is your husband?" (x3)
"I know everything you've ever done."

She said, "Jesus, Jesus, I ain't got no husband" (x3)
"And You don't know everything I've ever done."

He said, "Woman, woman, you've got five husbands" (x3)
"And the one you have now, he's not your own."

She said, "This man, this man, He must be the prophet" (x3)
"He done told me everything I've ever done."

Jesus met the woman at the well, (x3)
And He told her everything she'd ever done.

If you watch Mahalia Jackson on YouTube, or see this spiritual performed by any number of black choirs in churches large or small, you see the *anguish* on the faces of the women who sing these words move to *joy* when they sense Jesus *knows* them and *understands* them and *accepts* them, leading them to become in the Bible what the Samaritan Woman became – the first person in the Gospel of John to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. All because “He told me everything I’ve ever done.”

It is hardly surprising – given our human tendency to be drawn to scandal and our propensity of inventing, re-inventing, telling, re-telling, and even patenting the salacious – particularly if it involves women or girls – that

³ “Jesus Met the Woman at the Well,” *Wikipedia*, accessed March 8, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Met_the_Woman_at_the_Well.

⁴ John 2:1-12.

⁵ John 2:13-25.

⁶ John 3:1-21.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDTCCX-GpYY>.

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NM_1v6_BoB4.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76i-bSc07Y>.

this spiritual would focus on one somewhat mysterious aspect of the woman's life: the five marriages she has had and the unmarried relationship in which she currently lives. Less important in our mind – and therefore less memorable to us – is the fact that

- She is Samaritan and Jesus is Jewish, and that though the text says, “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans,”¹⁰ we overlook this *racial* divide in favor of what may be a *marital* irregularity.
- In addition, even though the text points out that it is forbidden for *males* to speak to *females* alone at a well in the middle of the day, we overlook that aspect of the human division that this act of conversation breaks through.¹¹

Neither we nor the spiritual are alone in this tendency to focus on the potential for sexual scandal in this story. From Day One, established Biblical scholars and commentators focus more on the woman's personal history than other matters in the text. Some even assume she is a harlot.

The truth is: We cannot fully know the nature of the woman's life, her marital history, her moral action. Women did not control their marriage decisions; divorce could only be initiated by men. It is possible she was widowed several times and by the law and custom of “levirate marriage” in force at the time was passed on to her late husband's brother – in this case, several times – in hopes that she might bear a child to continue the family line of her original husband. We simply don't know the specific shape or form or reasons for her marital history.¹²

But we do know *this* about the text:

- Neither in the conversation nor at any later point in the story does Jesus call her a sinner.
- Nor does Jesus say, as he does at other times “Go and sin no more.”
- Nor does he explicitly ask her to repent.
- Jesus simply talks to a Samaritan woman at a well in the middle of the day, when the two are alone, violating taboos preventing Jews and Samaritans, men and women, from talking.
- And he talks with her longer than he talks with his accusers, members of his own family, or, with the exception of the Last Supper,¹³ even his own disciples.
- He reveals that he knows everything about her life – its joys and sorrows, its burdens and blessings, its hopes and heartaches, things she may have *done* wrong, things she may have *gotten* wrong, things that may have *gone* wrong, wrong and ugly things that may have been *done to her*.
- “He told me everything I've ever done,” without condemning her.

Rather than that knowledge being a *threat* to her, it *sets her free* to believe that Jesus is the *Messiah* and to share that belief with others. Whatever she has done in her secret life or whatever has been done to her, it is

¹⁰ This is the more explicit translation of John 4:9 in the RSV.

¹¹ Debie Thomas, “The Woman at the Well,” *Medium*, <https://dancleend.medium.com/the-woman-at-the-well-3c47f3601188>.

¹² Asnath Niwa Natar, “Prostitute or First Apostle? Critical Feminist Interpretation of John 4:1-42 Over the Figure of the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well,” *Walisongo: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 27, No. 1 (2019), 99-124, <https://journal.walisongo.ac.id/index.php/walisongo/article/view/3891>.

¹³ John 14-16.

comforting – indeed *liberating* – for her to know that the Messiah knows. Her knowing *that* God knows is sufficient and beautiful.¹⁴

III.

Many of us grow up with an image of God being like Santa Claus – a white-haired, bearded man in the sky, more than likely in gray robes than a bright, red suit, on whose lap we can sit once a year and receive hope that our greatest desires – often material – will be met around the corner. But along with this warm and inviting image of God as Santa, a part of the package, reinforced regularly in and out of season by our parents and others with authority over us, comes the warning that this kindly figure is “making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out whose naughty and nice.”

To the extent we have this more foreboding image of God, it may make us *uncomfortable* around God, *fearful* of God, and may lead us to *avoid* or even *reject* God altogether if we think God *does* actually *know* everything we do or think, say or feel. Because of who we are, or what we have done or what has been done to us, this image of God may make us feel *dirty*, *unclean*, *unacceptable* to God, *unqualified* to come to God’s Table.

It may lead also lead us to think that we can – like the first man and first woman – hide from God.¹⁵ We may devote considerable energy to keeping part of our lives secret from God, which usually means we are trying to keep it secret *from ourselves*. This secret life we seek to construct can contain things we have done and for which we feel guilty, or it may contain things that have been done to us about which we are angry with God for allowing to happen, or which may lead us to wonder if God really exists any more or ever existed in the first place.

But I have a question: If we really think we have the power to keep certain things *from God*, is a God who *doesn’t* know everything about us a God worth worshipping? Why bother?

IV.

The experience of the Samaritan Woman at the well teaches us that *Christ* knows. *God* knows. The *Holy Spirit* knows.

And *our* knowledge of *that* knowledge *can* – as it did for her – *set us free* to leave our jar sitting on the side of the well or spilling out into the desert dust and to run into the village and begin a new life knowing that we no longer need to invest energy in trying to keep *anything* from God, and knowing we can share with others *what* we choose *with whom* we choose *when* we choose and in *what circumstances* we choose. And when we share with others, we share out of *confidence* that Holy One higher and greater than us all already knows.

God knows. Christ knows. The Holy Spirit knows.

That is *all* we need to know.

Amen.

¹⁴ There is a well-done depiction of this scene in the popular television series *The Chosen* available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ordhsDeAt60>.

¹⁵ Genesis 3:8-10.