



HE SAID, SHE SAID
SCRIPTURE: EXODUS 17:1-7; JOHN 4: 5-29, 39-42
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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John 4: 5-29, 39-42

4:5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar (su-char), near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

4:6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

4:7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 4:8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

4:9 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.)

4:10 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."

4:11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

4:12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

4:13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,

4:14 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."

4:15 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."

4:16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back."

4:17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';

4:18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

4:19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet.

4:20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

4:21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

4:22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

4:23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.

4:24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

4:25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

4:26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

4:27 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"

4:28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

4:29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

4:39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done."

4:40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

4:41 And many more believed because of his word. 4:42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

He said what is most important before he even said a word.

He let his body do the talking. He put his body in a place it was not supposed to be and in proximity to someone he should never have acknowledged in public.

Jesus is in dangerous territory when he walks into Samaria. John's Gospel tells us he had to go that way—it was an expedient way to go from Judea to Galilee. But most Jews didn't go that way—they did not want to go to Samaria. They did not want to expose themselves to people they despised so much that they believed they were unclean.

So, it's not geography that mandated Jesus go through Samaria. It is theology—Jesus' influence was opening into all sorts of forbidden territory by the time John's Gospel was written. And Samaritans were becoming Jesus followers.

So this encounter at the well crosses a deep and old boundary between Jews and Samaritans—long enemies, long people who saw the world very differently from each other.

Jesus' dangerous territory is about much more than this religious and ethnic bridge he builds. He places his body in forbidden proximity to a woman. Jewish men didn't talk to unknown women. And definitely Jewish teachers did not engage in any public discourse with women, whether they knew them or not.

Jesus' body does the talking by just being at the well that day—he says it loud and clear. “I want to be here with you. I want you to know me and I want you to know that I know you.”

She said a lot. In fact, she said more directly to Jesus in one sitting than anyone else in John's Gospel. And that's saying something because Jesus has a lot of conversations in John. And most of them quickly turn into monologues for Jesus. “Wordy is the Lamb” scholars like to say about Jesus in the Gospel of John.

The power of this substantive encounter has been distorted for us. The story twisted and poorly told.

We need to listen to what she actually said, and to what he actually said.

This unnamed woman makes a name for herself in our salvation story. She is not afraid to ask big questions and her faith grows and profoundly changes her community right in front of our eyes.

She is shocked that Jesus asks her for a drink—for all the reasons she should have been as a Samaritan woman.

When he shows her that he truly knows her, that he knows all she's been through, and that he has something to give her that can change her life, she hears him.

But instead of hearing him like she did, we have received this passage from the convoluted interpretations of misogyny and patriarchy. And we've been distracted from the power of what this woman did and what she still can do for us today.

He said she was a “disobedient wife who ‘constrained her husbands to divorce her.’” That’s John Calvin talking, the theological father of Presbyterians, one of the heroes of the Reformation who stood up to the institutional idolatries of the Roman Catholic church in the 16th century. He stood up to abusive power only to be a carrier of it in his views on women and others who did not conform to his way of seeing things.

Calvin went on to say about the woman at the well—as if scolding her directly: “Though God joined thee to lawful husbands, thou didst not cease to sin, until, rendered infamous by numerous divorces, thou prostituted thyself to fornication.” (Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel to John*)¹

Calvin maintained in his commentary on John’s Gospel that Jesus brings up the woman’s marriages as a way to silence her, as a way to quiet her jabbering on.

There is no evidence of judgment in this passage on Jesus’ part. And there is no evidence of shame on the woman’s part either. But, the distortions of patriarchy twisted this into a very different story—and not just in the 16th century, but even today.

For a long time biblical scholarship and theology, and ministry for that matter, was a male-only club. And pivotal figures like the woman at the well and Mary Magdalene had to be put in their place. So they were sexualized and demonized, and contorted into promiscuous women, even prostitutes. When there is absolutely no biblical evidence to support that way of understanding them.

And even beyond these claims of sexual immorality, scholars have questioned the intelligence and efficacy of these foremothers of our faith. Even contemporary scholars have widely held that the woman at the well probably didn’t understand the question she asked Jesus about Jews and Samaritans.

And so, the power of this woman’s encounter with Jesus is obscured in the murky waters of patriarchy’s anxiety about women becoming too powerful, too intelligent, and too close to God.

He said he knew things about her.

She heard. How did he know? How did Jesus know everything about me? He knows and he understands.

There are lots of reasons why this woman could have had multiple husbands, and almost none of them point to any kind of moral lapse on her part. The best guess is that she had been passed from brother to brother in a family because of the laws of Levirate marriage. Women were property. When a man died, the next brother in line inherited his property and so he was to marry the widow to secure the property.

This woman was very probably passed around like livestock. And perhaps the final brother in line refused to marry her.

Women had no ability to secure a divorce for themselves. Divorce was something only men could put into motion. In pretty much every scenario we can extrapolate from her social location, she is not an immoral woman, she is a woman who has seen more heart ache than anyone deserves.

He said I know what you've been through. I know who you are. I see you. I value you. And I am here to change your life.

Congregation Sing:

*Ho, all who thirst, come now to the water,
and all whose souls are parched
and weary, come and drink!
Ho, all who thirst, come now to the water,
and from your heart will flow
a never-failing spring!*

What about all the other he's that have said—not what Jesus said, not I know you and I know your truth can change a whole village, your truth can nourish a whole faith.

Instead those other he's, the big "he," the Patriarchy, have said over and over again, you are nobody. No one will listen to you. You only speak on my terms, his terms.

All those he's said these things to silence generations of she's, to control, to keep too many of us from the living water, the gushing water of eternal life. Instead, those he's had too many she's, and other he's, and so many we's drink from water

poisoned with words that have spun the tales of abusive power—stories that have normalized hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and body-ability.

Those he's told so many she's and other he's and plenty of us to keep quiet. And over time, it's easy to start believing the lies.

Too many of us have lived this story. The story of the He who said what he would do if she didn't stay quiet. He would ruin her reputation. No one would listen to her. She would never be believed.

She was afraid of what he would do, what he would say. So she kept the secrets.

And we have, too. So deeply that the secrets are a part of us and how we live in this world.

We live as if the woman never came to the well, as if she never said the things she said, and trusted Jesus the way she did.

We, those of us who have internalized the lies of patriarchy and white supremacy, we have silenced this woman's wisdom, we have obscured her strong witness to us.

We have let ourselves obstruct how she shows us the way to Jesus. We live as if there is no such thing as the gushing, living water, the water that gushes up through us to eternal life that washes away the things that divide us from people who we don't understand.

She said...

One day she decided she was ready, ready to leave behind what he said. She was ready to leave behind the burdens of living a lie. And she said, I am ready to stop being so thirsty all the time.

He said...

Give me a drink.

She said...

I want that living water. I don't want to keep carrying this water that never quenches my thirst—this task that ties me to a demoralizing, dehumanizing life.

I want the water that becomes a living stream in me, gushing up through me to eternal life.

Congregation Sing:

*Ho, all who thirst, come now to the water,
and all whose souls are parched
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Ho, all who thirst, come now to the water,
and from your heart will flow
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Brothers and sisters, are you tired of being so thirsty? Are you tired of living in such parched places—places where our souls languish and our spirits hunger for something more? Are you tired of carrying the weight of things that do not truly give you what you need?

The lies we've lived with all these years have depleted us. They have trivialized our ability to know living water when we see it, when we taste it. We've gotten use to the taste of stagnant water, even waters poisoned by the lies that tell us the way things are is the way things have to be.

When the woman at the well realized who she was talking to—that he was a prophet at the very least, and maybe the Messiah—"I am he" Jesus told her.

Once she realized who she was talking to, she asked him a question on behalf of her people, her people who suffered in a divided world. The Jews and Samaritans had a violent past—fueled by different sacred places, different views of scripture, and different religious practices. They hated each other.

She asks him to tell her the truth—who is right? The Jews or the Samaritans? And Jesus tells her, the time is coming, in fact it is here, now, in this moment, this moment when the Messiah abides with a forbidden one and tells her of the promises that are hers, even in that moment.

The time is coming, the time is here, when those sacred places that divide, those sacred writings that divide, those practices that divide will be dissolved, washed away into true worship—worship in spirit and truth.

If we believe this story, then we believe that Jesus washes away our thirst for things that don't really meet our needs, our jockeying for ways to dominate and differentiate.

If we listen to what HE said and what SHE said, we may just start to feel the sensations of that living water now, washing away hatred, washing away hierarchies that harm, and power that abuses and uses people for its own gain. If we receive the gift of this witness, this woman at the well, we can feel the tide turning, flowing in the direction of a justice that repairs and a love that regenerates.

Jesus comes into forbidden places, despised places and says I see you, I know you, I hear you, and I promise that all the things that have depleted and divided you will wash away when you drink in this love that God has for you.

And you will be my witnesses to your people—you will call them closer to me so that they can drink in my love just like you. And they can know for themselves.

Can we let our bodies do the talking, like Jesus did—and abide in the parched places that are brittle with deprivation and deceit? Can we let the woman at the well lead us to come closer to Jesus and see for ourselves? Can we see him, even now, abiding with us where we least expect to see him? And can we hear what he says to us again and again?

We are people of this living, loving, gushing stream. That's what he said, and what she said. Now the important question is what will we say?

Thanks be to God.

¹ As quoted in Frances Taylor Gench, Encounters with Jesus, 34.