

“Revival in Samaria”  
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John 4:5-42  
San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

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In the Bible important events happen at water wells. In particular, they are places where people become engaged. Rachel and Jacob, Moses and Zipporah became betrothed at wells. Here in today’s text from John another important commitment occurs at a well.

This story has been a favorite among women, and I’ve heard it highlighted at gatherings of women perhaps because in this story clearly and vividly, Jesus notices, Jesus sees, and Jesus engages a woman in conversation. Against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, this would mean that Jesus affirms women in an extraordinary manner. Jesus is honoring a woman by simply talking with her, and the result is that through this unnamed woman a revival in Samaria happens!

The first thing that I sense from this story is that with Jesus the woman can share her authentic self. She is in the very presence of God and in that presence she does not need to portray any pretense. She can be honest about all she is; indeed, there is no point to try to hide, because Jesus knows her completely. Many people search a lifetime to be known and loved for their authentic selves. She was not a perfect person; the text says she’d had five husbands. Jewish law would permit, in fact, insist, that if a woman’s husband died, his next male of kin would marry and assume responsibility for the wife who otherwise would be destitute. But this was permitted only three times; here she is said to have had five husbands which implied that she was living in an immoral state. Yet, perhaps the fact that Jesus recognizes this means he also understands that women could be vulnerable through no fault of their own since life expectancy was short in those days. What was immoral to society might have been survival for this woman. But whatever the actual specific situation, Jesus sees this woman. To be seen is affirming and life-giving. I remember when Allison was about 12 years old, she told me that when we went shopping, the clerks never spoke to her; they only looked at her as a child that might mess things up or even worse shoplift. She didn’t understand why they would speak to me and ignore her.

One day when a good friend of mine whose great passion is children ran into us in the mall, she immediately spoke to Allison. I knew what that meant to my child, and it is why I try very hard to see, notice, and speak to children. To be ignored is to be negated. But Jesus does NOT negate this woman!

The second thing I learn from this story is the way in which Jesus broke down boundaries. He was a radical in breaking down walls that divide. Think about all the boundaries that are broken in this text: Jews verses Samaritans, men verses women, pure verses impure, mountain worship verses Jerusalem worship. Jesus doesn’t just put his toe over the line; Jesus immerses himself in the breaking of boundaries that caused pain, hardship, and alienation to people in his world. I confess that it is hard for me to place myself in an immersion experience; I am naturally introverted and shy; I have difficulty hearing the intonations of foreign languages or accents. Also, because as a child I was often laughed at as an outsider, I don’t want to be an outsider anymore. So to place myself in an immersion experience with people who are different than I is a very scary thing for me to do. Yet Jesus models courage in confronting those things that often make us uncomfortable.

When we think about what Jesus is teaching for us, what specifically might he model if he were within our social context today. I thought we might try some audience participation today. I need two volunteers to start with: each will hold one of these signs: [ Jesus : ] [the Samaritan woman]. Now I need volunteers (and this is where it gets a little scary for me because

I have no idea what you're going to write, but at least they are your words, not mine) to come up and write on these blank signs the correlations that come to your minds. What lessons are we to hear from this boundary breaking Jesus in the year 2008?

(Examples might be: Jews: Palestinians, men:women, Euro-Americans: other Americans, thin: fat, educated:non-educated, rich:poor, legal:illegal, those with homes:homeless, insiders:outsiders.)

Boundaries are not all bad; sometimes they are very important; not all boundaries should be broken. Pastors spend time learning how important boundary issues are and how harmful it can be when boundaries are not honored. But sometimes boundaries are meant to be broken, and in this text, Jesus models this appropriately for us.

The final theme in this text and in last week's text which I didn't have time to talk about was the theme of spirit and truth. If I understand Jesus' words correctly, there is a truth that is spirit and that transcends other truths that we may take for granted.

When I first became a mother of a toddler, a very wise friend told me that you have to decide what battles are worth fighting and let the others go. What's worth going to the mat over? I think that the spirit that Jesus was referring to was ultimate truth that transcends some of the legalism that we hold near and dear.

Spirit truth is truth that is ultimate and transcendent not only something held in one context of time. Not long ago in the course of human history, people actually believed that some races were innately inferior; now we know this is not true.

Spirit truth transcends any momentary prejudices or misinformation that is part of a particular culture's time. Notice Jesus does NOT condemn this woman for having more than three marriages though the Jews of his day would have condemned her. Jesus understood Spirit truth that is always God's truth and always a little out of human reach. We try for it, we aspire to it, but we don't take for granted that our little brains have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Spirit truth belongs to God!

In the movie *The Kite Runner*, there is a beautiful scene when the sky is filled with colorful kites lifted high and sustained by the buoyancy of the wind. This image envisioned for me God's Spirit lifting and sustaining me, making it possible to move through air, space, life, death, eternity kept afloat by the Spirit, the divine breath.

This Samaritan woman was so lifted by her encounter with Jesus, that she leaves her jar of water because she knows she's only going to be gone for a moment. And she runs back to town to get her Samaritan friends and bring them to the well where a revival is going to happen. And not only do they come, but they employ Jesus to come back and stay with them for two days to keep the revival going. I imagine this was an immersion experience that the disciples didn't enjoy very much. And the Samaritans believe.

In the only place in the Gospel of John, they declared their belief that Jesus is the Savior of the world. They believe because a woman shared with them the joy of being known for her authentic self; they believe because Jesus dared to break boundaries; they believe because the Spirit breathed into them new life, and now they could soar on the wings of eagles, held forever in the presence of God. May this belief be ours today and in all the days to come. AMEN