

Scandalous Encounter

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John 4:16-29 — 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 worshiped 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. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 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. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 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." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." 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?" 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?"

For the next three weeks, leading up to Palm Sunday, both of our scripture readings will be a story from the Gospel of John (which, as I've said before, is my favorite gospel). Each of these three stories isn't found anywhere else in the Bible, except in John. And, admittedly, each of these stories is rather long, so fair warning: we'll be reading a lot of verses these next few weeks. But they're all fascinating stories, worthy of our prolonged attention. We've got social norms transgressed, religious controversies incited, sickness and healing, death and resurrection — all the makings of a juicy Bible story.

Now, this morning's story, featuring Jesus and a Samaritan woman, is about a scandalous encounter. But unfortunately, the scandal is mostly lost on many modern audiences. Of course, in our culture today, the public mingling of the sexes is unremarkable. But historically, in many cultures, men and women who were not married to each other simply did not interact. This is why, at the end of our text, all of the disciples are shocked to see Jesus speaking with a woman — regardless of what the two of them are speaking about, the mere fact that they are speaking to each other all alone seems scandalous to the disciples. In general, though, Jesus doesn't seem to mind shocking our social sensibilities — at least those sensibilities that put up barriers between people.

And besides the scandal of gender, there's the scandal of ethnicity and religion. We've talked about Samaritans before: this people group had their own territory just north of Judea, where Jerusalem is, and they claimed to be the rightful inheritors of Israelite faith. So, Samaritans

worshiped at their own temple, on their own mountain, 30 miles or so north of Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans had been constant enemies for several hundred years. They had desecrated each others' temples and murdered each others' pilgrims. Typically, Jews would not step foot in Samaritan territory, so the fact that Jesus is taking his disciples through Samaria in the first place is unexpected. So, we're talking about two people groups, and their two faiths, who are distant relatives, bitterly estranged from each other. If you want a modern parallel, I'd say that the relationship between Christians and Mormons and the relationship between Christians and Muslims are in some ways comparable to the relationship between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day. All of that goes to say: even before the conversation between Jesus and this woman gets going, our story is transgressing gender, ethnic, and religious norms. It's meant to raise our eyebrows.

Now, although it's easy for us today to miss all of this, to miss what makes this encounter inherently scandalous, we immediately see a scandal in the conversation that follows. In vv. 17-18, in response to the woman's statement that she does not have a husband, Jesus says to her, "You're right. You've had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" Seems like the makings of a juicy story, right? Like a line from a soap opera just before the commercial break.

But let's look closely and notice what the text does *not* say: it does not say that the woman has been divorced five times, it does not say that the woman is constantly sleeping around, and it does not say that Jesus looked down on her or shamed her. And yet, throughout history, many interpreters of this text have said *all* of these things with utmost confidence. None of those things is necessarily true, however. In ancient Israelite law, there was a practice called levirate marriage, which dictated that if a man and a woman were married, and the man died, then the man's next-oldest unmarried brother was obligated to marry the widow. We see evidence of this practice in both the Old and New Testaments, and furthermore we see evidence of this happening with multiple brothers — that is, a woman finds herself bound to marry multiple brothers of her initial husband. So, it's possible that the Samaritan woman in our passage is bound up in a levirate marriage, has been wedded to five brothers, and the sixth one has refused to marry her. It's also possible that the woman has been married five times, to non-related men, but each of these husbands has died, and now she is being supported by a sixth man who does not want to marry her, for fear that he himself might die as a result. (This is actually a narrative trope in parts of the ancient world: a woman gets married multiple times, and each time her husband dies.) It's also possible that the woman has never given birth to a child, and so she has been divorced by multiple husbands who are eager for offspring. Whatever the case, it is pretty much *impossible* that this woman has herself divorced five different men, because in this culture — as in many cultures throughout history — women were legally denied that choice.

So, we don't actually know what's going on here. The text leaves out a lot of details about this woman's history, and we the readers have been quick to fill them in. As is often the case, our interpretations of a text can say more about us than about the text itself. The text doesn't tell us that this woman was sexually loose and morally lax, but we the readers tend to jump to that

conclusion, based on our common judgments about women who have had multiple partners. It's about *us* — not the woman. Likewise, the text doesn't tell us that Jesus was subtly shaming this woman. It just tells us that Jesus, through his divine power, knew about this woman's background, and that he revealed this to her as he was inviting her into deeper faith. It's not that Jesus condemns her; it's that we the readers condemn her.

Here's my point this morning, friends: we think we know this woman in our story, but we don't. You think you know that woman over there, or that man over there, or those people over there, but you don't. You, me, all of us have made judgments about others with partial knowledge and without due empathy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor who died in resistance to the Nazi regime, once said that, in general, our posture towards people is dictated by how their actions affect us — in other words, we feel warmly towards someone whose actions are convenient or beneficial for us, and we feel coldly towards someone whose actions are inconvenient or detrimental for us. Well, that sounds normal, doesn't it? But maybe, Bonhoeffer suggests, as Christians, we should view others not in light of whether their actions are good or bad for me, but instead view others in light of what they have suffered. What if, whenever I am tempted to think negatively about someone, I trained myself to think first, and perhaps to think foremost, about what all they've been through?

Many of you know that I was in Texas last Sunday, preaching at Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, where I was raised. There are a few more white people in the congregation now, but when I was growing up, I was the only white boy in that church. From age 6 or 7 until age 15 or 16, I was regularly bullied there. It came close to ruining church for me. Even now, as an adult, I can still feel those wounds, if I let myself go to that place. And it would be very easy for me to feel not just bitterness and anger, but — frankly — hatred towards those kids. But things have played themselves out quite differently in my emotional life. Because in recent years, I've learned more about what life was like for my black peers. I've learned more about how those kids felt — in myriad ways, every day — felt pushed to the bottom of their world. And what I came to realize — slowly but surely, as an adult — was that when those kids were bullying me, they were rebelling against that push as best they knew how.

Now, don't get me wrong. The very last thing I want to do is excuse bullying. But what I do want to do — and what I think God wants to do — is ask us to take another look at those we have judged, those we fear, and to ponder afresh their wounds. We don't know the Samaritan woman's story, but we can safely assume that she's had her own share of pain. Whatever her story is, Jesus clearly doesn't see it as a barrier to faith. Rather, he invites her, pain and all, to worship God in spirit and in truth. Friends, we too are invited — not just to worship God, but to talk with the Samaritan woman and see what happens. Amen.