

Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apartⁱ ~ 4th of 5:

The Samaritan Woman at the Well: Unraveled Shame

John 4:3-29

14th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ August 29, 2021

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Introduction to Scripture

You are about to hear the longest conversation between Jesus and another human being recorded in any of the four gospels. It is found in the fourth chapter of John's Gospel. You may notice once again, the threads of *surprise*, *impossibility* and *self-emptying* woven in this story, now the fourth one we have looked at in our Unraveled series. Like the story of Zacchaeus that we encountered last Sunday, again we will see how one person's life changing encounter with Jesus spirals out into the community. You will see how Jesus' unraveling of Samaritan Woman's shame sends her running into town, eagerly sharing her experience with the very people she had been avoiding. Unlike Zacchaeus, the Samaritan Woman is neither rich nor powerful. But she has a bucket and Jesus is thirsty.

That's where the unraveling begins. Like this woman, we may also be thirsty and weary. We may have come to our service today wondering, "Where do you get that Living Water?" I invite you to come to the well and let your Spirit partake in the answer Jesus has for you this day.

Sermon

It all started out so normal. So, every day. Me, going to the well again, to draw water just like I'd done a thousand times before. Like usual, I went to the well at noon, when no one else was likely to be there. I prefer the heat of the sun to the looks of scorn and muttering. It's lonely, going alone. But it's better than being shamed. So honestly, I was barely getting through each day. Some days, it was hour to hour. Thinking there had to be some other way to live. Some other way to get water. But we all get thirsty. So, there I was. Another day, another trip to the well at noon.

But then there he was. He seemed like all the rest, at first. Another man who was thirsty. Another man who wanted something from me. Who goes to the well without a bucket? I could tell right away that he was a Jew and my heart started pounding. You may not realize it, but we Samaritans and those Jews: well, we despise each other. It has to do with really old stuff. Kind of stupid, if you think about it.

We started out as all one covenant people: the twelve tribes of Israel. We are all descended from Jacob who gave us this well. But when things started falling apart politically, we started hating each other. When the Northern Kingdom fell, we Samaritans were the ones who stayed and were not deported. Then after the Babylonian exile and the people of Judah returned, we did not want to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. We believed Mt. Gerazim was the central place to worship, not Jerusalem. It's really kind of crazy how much we despise each other, given all the history and blood we actually share. Same God, same covenant. So much hate. But that's the truth.

What about you: Surely you don't have those kinds of divisions and hatred between those who share your faith, your Lord, do you?

Around here, Jews on their way between Galilee and Jerusalem go all the way down the mountains to the river Jordan, miles out of their way, just to avoid us. But this Jew was different. He had walked over the mountains straight through Samaria. What kind of a Jew was he, anyway? Obviously a thirsty one. And as it turned out, a talkative one too. The strange thing was, from the moment he started talking, it felt completely different.

He wasn't talking down to me, or talking at me. He actually listened to me, like I had something worthwhile to say. It was like he could see me for me: not someone's wife, or servant. Even though he knew my status and awful marital history. I didn't feel judged or cornered. Or diminished. I felt seen and heard, for the first time since I could remember.

No one ever asks me why I had five husbands. Most just assume I must be a harlot or worse. What you may not realize, is that husbands in my culture can divorce their wives if we are not able to conceive and bear children. Men can also divorce us for something as trivial as spoiling a dish of food. Or for speaking loudly enough to be heard by the neighbors. Really! Men can legally divorce us for just about any reason. Or maybe I had five husbands because I had been widowed that many times. You might be surprised at how many families have plenty of elderly relatives wanting a wife.

No one asks. They just assume. Which has more to do with them, than me. What about you: When you see a woman with a troubled history or questionable reputation, what do you assume about her? I see a lot of you wearing masks out there. What goes through your mind when you see a person you don't know wearing a mask, what do you assume about that person?

Yes, this man at the well, whom I came to realize is the Messiah, he knew the man I was living with was not my husband. It seemed like he also understood the hard choices we make just to survive. For women here in my town, that can mean living as a servant in a man's household. That's better than living on the street, isn't it? But there we were at the well, and the next thing I know, he's offering me something I've never heard of: "Living Water." Water that would quench my thirst once and for all?

Course I wanted some. But I am just a poor, Samaritan woman. How could I ever pay for that? He said it was a gift. I know about gifts. They always come with a price. Somebody wanting something from you, or somebody trying to pay you back. But this was a different kind of gift. A gift from God. A true, genuine gift with no strings attached. I'd never had one of those before.

This gift, from this man was different. Somehow, he knew the truth about me. And yet he saw more in me than I saw in myself. He was looking at me from the inside, and what he saw was good. He wasn't judging me. He wasn't flirting with me. He wasn't trying to get something from me. He was giving me something I'd never experienced before. It was almost like he was thirsty for my friendship, my trust. Could that be? He was opening my eyes to a new way, a better way to live

where Jews would not have to walk around Samaria to get from Galilee to Jerusalem. Maybe, just maybe, this "Living Water" could wash away the hate and the shame that was killing me and other people too.

Could it possibly be true that I am not a problem to be solved, or just a mistake or a misfit. That I am a part of God's plan exactly as I am. Maybe that's why I left my jar and shed my longing to be invisible or to disappear. What about you? Did you know, you are a part of God's plan, exactly as you are?

Friends, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman gives us hope. Surely, we have all done and said things we are ashamed of. Stupid things we wish we could un-say and un-do. The Living Water does not rewind the clock. Instead, the Living Water washes us clean and reveals that we are and always will be God's Beloved child. We have been given grace upon grace, a pure gift we are called to extend to others. But we can't stop there with just us. That's not what happens in the story of Zacchaeus. Or in the story of the Samaritan Woman. Having our own expectations, our own shame be unraveled also pushes us to look at those who seem different and difficult to understand. If God loves and claims them, then so must we. Yes, even those we despise, God embraces.

If you and I belong to God, so do those other people. I want to add one more voice to this sermon, the voice of Alexie-Torres-Fleming who asks, "What are the implications of the Universal Christ for those at the margins of our society: the poor, the suffering, those that are othered and oppressed in our world? What I see is a radical level of belonging and a recognition of the absolute holiness of the asylum seekers and refugees at our borders, the Black young man in America, the transgender person... the gay person... the incarcerated person, the Muslim person, the Black and brown woman. What I understand is that we are loved, we belong, and that we are not a mistake or a problem to be solved or a public policy to be fixed, but a holy part of the Divine Mystery that is the Universal Christ."ⁱⁱ

Just a few moments ago, with the baptismal Living Water still dripping from her head, I made the sign of the cross on Haven's forehead, saying "Haven, Child of the Covenant you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." In doing this we are all saying "yes" to this truth for Haven and for all of us: we belong to the Universal Christ. Jesus who came to claim us, not to shame us. Jesus is inviting us to drink deeply of this radical belonging that is our birthright--and our calling.

ⁱ This sermon theme series, "Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart," was created by Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ Alexie Torres-Fleming, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0o1sk9ek3KY> on *The Universal Christ* by Richard Rohr