

Shame Unraveled:
The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at Jacob's Well
A sermon preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church
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John 4:1-30
Rev. Peter J. Blank

Jesus comes to unravel our shame, to love us as we are without condemnation.

Jesus and the woman at the well. Most of us have heard this story multiple times. It doesn't make us squirm. We don't pick up on the cues that would have raised the tension and made first century readers uncomfortable. Let's see if we can raise the ante on that.

Jesus and the woman from Samaria whose name we do not know meet at a well. In fact, this is the well where Jacob met Rachel who would become his wife. Meetings at wells led to marriages between Jacob and Rachel, between Isaac and Rebecca, between Moses and Zipporah. The first readers of John's gospel knew that pattern. They would wonder if it was about to be repeated.

They are from two different genders, male and female. They are from different races, Jews and Samaritans have a history of animosity. Men and women who are not married are not to associate in public. We have heard this before, but I don't think we feel it like they would have. I hope we can catch the gravity of the situation. If we imagine this scene taking place on an elevator? A white woman and a black man, alone on an elevator. Or it could be a black woman and a white man. Neither of them might intend harm to the other, but because of the history of men and women, the history of black and white people, each of them might be suspicious. They might be afraid of each other, afraid of assault, afraid of false accusations. They might be concerned that the other person might be afraid and uncertain how to set them at ease. If you are one of the people on the elevator, what do you do? Do you initiate conversation or just stand quietly in your corner?

Jesus decides to initiate conversation. He asks her for a drink.

The woman from Samaria whose name we do not know went to the well at noon, in the heat of the day. That was not the usual time to fetch water. Women were the primary water fetchers. They still are in many places. They went early, when it was cool. This was the habit of so many women that the well became the place to meet and greet, to catch up on the news and the gossip ("this is the water cooler"). But this woman was there at noon, fetching water alone, when none of the others were there. Biblical readers often take that scrap of information along with the tantalizing morsel that she has been married 5 times . . . then decide we know who this woman is. She is someone we can cluck our tongues and shake our heads at. Or maybe, if we are feeling kind, someone we might pity.

The text doesn't say that she always gets water at noon. Maybe there's a reason that she's there at that time today. Maybe she has company coming and has already used the morning's water for extra cleaning. Maybe her household water jar sprang a leak. Maybe the job takes less time if she comes when there's no line. Most of us have been told that she came at noon to avoid the other

women because she was an outcast, shunned by the others because of her assumed immoral lifestyle, but the Bible doesn't say that she does this every day. It doesn't say that she is shunned. Maybe she is there solely to meet Jesus. Maybe it's serendipity.

Biblical interpreters have not been kind to the woman from Samaria whose name we do not know. The translation from The Message has some derision in its reading. The wonderful preacher Fred Craddock said, "Evangelists aplenty have assumed that the brighter her nails, the darker her mascara and the shorter her skirt, the greater the testimony to the power of the converting word. [And] Moralizers . . . have painted her as dangerous: beware her seductive ways, her mincing walk, her eyes waiting in ambush." (Fred Craddock, "The Witness at the Well", The Christian Century, March 7, 1990 <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-witness-at-the-well-jn-45-42/>)

Believing her to be shameful, the scholars and preachers have heaped more shame upon her, which is how shame works. Something happens to us or we do something which seems out of boundaries of normal or good, and then those things get stuck onto us as part of our identity from that point forward.

Brene Brown is a sociologist at the University of Houston and a best-selling author. Her work on shame and courage and vulnerability has helped many people. She makes an important distinction between shame and guilt. Guilt, she says, can be helpful. Guilt holds up our behavior against our values and creates psychological discomfort when there's a gap between them. Guilt recognizes that we did something wrong. But shame goes deeper than that. Shame, she says, is the intensely painful feeling of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.

"Shame is a focus on self; guilt is a focus on behavior. Guilt is "I did something bad." Shame is "I am bad." (Brene Brown, TED Talk: Listening to Shame March 16, 2012, <https://youtu.be/psN1DORYYV0>)

Guilt says I'm sorry. I made a mistake.

Shame says I'm sorry. I am a mistake.

Do you hear the difference?

Shame is the intensely painful feeling of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.

Traditional interpreters say that the woman at the well is ashamed, that she practices social distancing because she has been told that she is not pure enough, not whole enough, not beautiful or lovable or good enough to be worthy of participating in the community.

Maybe that interpretation is so compelling because we all carry some shame. We all have memories of things we did or failed to do that bring us pain, things we want to bury down deep so that no one else knows or has a chance to judge us for.

Shame is such a powerful force.

This woman of Samaria whose name we do not know is viewed with suspicion. We don't know why she has had five husbands. Has she been widowed multiple times? Have some of her husbands divorced her? She didn't have the legal power to initiate divorce herself. Whatever the details are, they must be painful. And it is certainly possible that other people avoid her because they don't want to suffer the same pain – as if it is contagious. It is entirely plausible that they hold her responsible for her own misfortunes. Blaming the victim is not a new thing. If she has been treated that way long enough by enough people, she may have internalized a sense of shame and unworthiness. Not necessarily because she is guilty of any wrong-doing, but because shame comes from messages we receive from others.

She may be ashamed, but Jesus is without shame. He is shameless about breaking convention, about ignoring the gender and racial barriers between them. Jesus knows that she has had five husbands, but he doesn't seem to care why. He makes no moral judgments about her. He never says, "Go and sin no more." Instead he engages in the conversation that she wants and needs. It is Jesus' longest-recorded conversation with anyone.

In the blazing noon sun, out in front of everyone, the Jewish rabbi and the Samaritan woman break all the rules. They share a drink from the same dipper and they talk personally, meaningfully about life and faith, relationships and religion. Jesus seems to know her, to accept her without condemnation. He sees her as she really is, everything she has ever done, everything she tried to be, everything she has had to do to survive. He gives her his attention, his insight, his knowledge of himself and of God as if he has all the time in the world and she is worthy of it. Their deep and long conversation is life-changing for her and ultimately, for her village.

That sounds lovely to me, like a gift of living water. My faith, unfortunately, has been shaped more by a focus on the supposed shameful of the woman in Samaria than by Jesus' invitation to relax and enjoy the conversation.

In the book *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug have a long talk about God. Celie has been abused by life. She tried to be what she was taught was a good Christian for a long time, but now she has given up. Shug asks Celie to describe the God she doesn't believe in. Celie says "He big and old and tall and grey-bearded and white."

Shug replies "If you wait to find God in the white folks' church, that's the one who is bound to show up. When I found out God was white and a man, I lost interest."

Shug is the Samaritan woman. She hears a new voice and learns to worship in Spirit and truth. She says, "God love everything you love and a mess of stuff you don't. Praise God by liking what you like. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see God always trying please us back. Once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please God." (Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, (New York: Pocket, 1982), pp 199-204)

Where once we lived closed fist, as if, if we were to relax our grip, life would slip away. Now,

because of meeting with Jesus, we can relax and open our clenched fist.

Jesus comes to unravel our shame, and to weave us together in new ways; to love us as we are without condemnation. When we feel loved by God, when we relax into total trust, we do the best we can to please God. Shame is unraveled at the well. Shame is unraveled for Shug. Shame is unraveled for you and me.