

REFLECTION JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

JOHN 4, 12TH MARCH 2023

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Many of us can relate to either a time or a context where they have felt discriminated against. Whether it was an incident regarding your race or ethnicity or your language or even your gender. Can you help being born male or female or intersex? I wonder how different your life would have been if you had been born in the opposite gender. As I mentioned in my E News this week, Samoan women have had an uphill battle trying to reclaim their rights as the Feagaiga or sisterhood which was usurped by the missionaries and given to the men to become the new priests or Faafeagaiga. they as God's messengers should be the only ones to have that power, so they took feagaiga title from the sisterhood and named themselves the new Fa'afeagaiga (ministers are known by this title) whilst the sisterhood faded into obscurity. By becoming a minister of the word and sacrament whether that be here in Aotearoa NZ or Samoa, we as women are reclaiming the Feagaiga (sisterhood) and our rightful place as priestesses.

Over time things have changed if ever so slightly for women of the Western world they have almost equal recognition although there is still pay disparity over the same jobs done by men. However, women from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, Africa, India, and many other nations continue to struggle under male oppression and domination.

Instead of walking the long way around the region of Samaria as most "upright" Jews would have done, out of an intense dislike of the

Samaritans, Jesus elected to journey directly through that very region. Jesus arrived at the town of Sychar at about noon, when the heat of the day would have been most unbearable, and most people would have been taking refuge under a tree or in their homes. He came upon a part of town, not too far from the very plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph (Genesis 33:19). It was here that a thirsty Jesus sat by Jacob's Well, in need of rest.

Now, it probably would have made more sense for Jesus to wait at the well closer to sunset, when the women of the town normally drew their water. But Jesus, as always, was a Man on a mission, and He chose His own time and place. He found Himself awaiting a visit from a woman when the sun was at its zenith.

A Samaritan woman went to draw water at noon because she was not welcomed at the local well where the women in her community went for water. In Jewish culture, Rabbis did not speak to women in public not even their own female relatives, including their wives, sisters, and daughters, so what Jesus did was radical and broke down barriers. We never do learn her name came along to draw some water. The time of day is worthy of note, as women usually came to draw water when it was cooler. This woman is probably aware of her tarnished reputation and deliberately chooses the least popular time of day to draw water, careful to avoid the whispers, jeers, and clear disgust of her "neighbours." What a sad way to have to go through one's life, tried and convicted in the eyes of one's own people - not deemed worthy of their love or consideration.

Jewish society frowned upon conversation between male and female. This was particularly true of Samaritan women, who were deemed

perpetually unclean. The Jewish culture forbade a Jew to eat or drink from the vessel of an unclean person such as a Samaritan, and especially a Samaritan woman whom they considered a perpetual menstruant. The Samaritan woman's shock is understandable as Jesus requests a drink from her vessel.

When the disciples return, they are shocked to see Jesus and the Samaritan woman in conversation. Jewish tradition dictates that "One does not speak with a woman on the street, not even his own wife, and certainly not with another woman, on account of gossip" (Haenchen,).

Traditional exegesis has made much of the Samaritan woman's sinful marital situation but has largely neglected her role as the first person in John's Gospel to whom Jesus clearly revealed himself as Messiah and who acted on that recognition. The fact that Jesus revealed himself to the Samaritan woman is remarkable when one considers that she led a highly irregular life, that she was from a rejected minority group, and that she was in fact a woman. Jesus revealed the truth about himself to a person considered unworthy of hearing such truths and incapable of understanding them. He was not limited by the customs of his day but addressed her as an equal with men and a potential sharer in the kingdom. He gave the Samaritan woman important theological teaching, treated her seriously and responded to her comments. John's Jesus did not require her to cease being a woman or a Samaritan but viewed her primarily as a person in need of the revelatory truth of Jesus as Messiah.

Jesus calmly told her that if she knew "the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." [John 4:10] She must have been quite puzzled. Jesus had no bucket or rope and Jacob's Well was probably 100 feet deep at this

time, there was no way He was going to be able to offer her water. Besides, a Jew would have never offered anything to a Samaritan, and the feeling was quite mutual. She may well have thought He was playing some sort of cruel trick on her.

While the woman mistakes Jesus offer as one of truly unique physical water Jesus is of course speaking of "eternal life", or the promised Holy Spirit, but this is not understood at the time. In the Old Testament, God is referred to as the "fountain of Life" and as the "spring of living water." By telling this woman that he could bring living water, Jesus was in effect claiming that he could quench a person's thirst for God. Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah!

When she asked Jesus for this special living water, He tells her to go and to return with her husband. She had no current husband, but five had come and gone, and she was not married to the man she was now living with. According to Jewish law, a woman could be married two, or maybe even three times without losing face, and it is likely that Samaritan law was similar. When Jesus tells her of her five husbands and current lover, she calls him a prophet and then tries to steer the conversation away from this rather uncomfortable subject to "this mountain" [Mount Gerizim] [You see, Jews and Samaritans had long debated whether it was Mount Gerizim or Mount Ebal from which Moses had blessed his people so many centuries before.]. It is likely that this woman hoped to get Jesus' attention on debating this matter and not her current sinful state.

Most of us would do likewise, would we not?

What was it that drew Jesus to her? Jesus sat at Jacob's Well and waited for her to come for water, knowing that she would. Her human

neighbours did not want to be seen near her, but Jesus went out of his way (literally) to spend time with her. Not only that, but He told her that He was the Messiah [John 4:26], the only time He admits this to anyone before His appearance before Pilate upon His arrest.

Where others would have avoided contact with the Samaritan Woman, Jesus intentionally sought her out. Jesus was a women's rights advocate! Think about it. He talked to them and listened to what they had to say. He taught others by His own example that women were to be valued as individuals, as equals. He reached out and touched lepers, healing them of their disease, while all others scurried off in the other direction.

Jesus never thought of society's outcasts as worthless, but as important members of the family of God.

The Samaritan woman immediately believes in Jesus as Messiah. She leaves her water jar and heads toward the village to give witness to this great revelation. Significance can be attached to the woman leaving her water jar when one considers the call of other disciples which involved leaving fishing boats and tax booths. We have here “a feminine version of the standard Gospel formula for responding to the call to apostleship, namely to ‘leave behind all things’” (Schneiders, 40).

This wonderful piece of drama has many levels of meaning. As always in John its central character is God and God's gift of life through the invitation to live in holy love. That love, cuts across racial and cultural prejudice, affirms women, engages, and loves sinners. It also cuts across a prejudice of perfectionism with which we often plague ourselves with. The fruit of such faithfulness is the setting free of others from what binds them (including us).

Prayer: Gracious God, you provide for our lives. You supply us with water to satisfy our spirit's thirst. You gift us with words that speak peace and make whole. Even when we question if you are with us, you are there – with life, with welcome. We witness to your grace. Amen.