

Stanford Memorial Church
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HELPING SAMARITANS
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Old Testament: Exodus 17.1-7
Gospel: John 4. 5-42

For as long as I can remember, this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, found in the 4th chapter of the Gospel of John, has been one of my absolute favorite New Testament stories. With its 37 verses, it has to be the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and another individual to be found in any of the four gospels. However, if you were to ask someone if they had heard of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan, in all probability this is not the one that would most likely come to mind for them. The most probable answer would be, "Oh, you must be referring to the well-known story about the Good Samaritan found in the Gospel of Luke . . . having to do with a man, presumably Jewish, who was robbed and beaten . . . as he lay by the road, various individuals—a religious leader, a community leader, a man of some wealth all passed on the other side. The only one to stop and help, and secure a room for the night for the victim, was a Samaritan . . . which was totally unexpected as the Jews and Samaritans of that time, though they came from the same ancestors, detested and assiduously avoided one another.

It's a story so familiar that you find it depicted in countless works of religious art over the centuries. Well if that's the story of the so-called Good Samaritan, then the one read today might, with tongue in check, be called the story of the Bad Samaritan. Maybe that's why it appealed to me so much in my younger days.

The whole thing starts out in such a disarmingly mundane fashion. Jesus and his disciples had gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, where Jesus had created quite a furor by chasing the money changers out of the temple. Now, as they are returning to their homes in Galilee, they have the dismal task of passing through, what they consider, the abominable land of Samaria, whose residents they treated as obviously inferior. As they stop by a well, in the heat of the day, their prejudices became less pronounced as they experienced pangs of hunger and they realize they have no choice but to make their way to a nearby village in order to obtain some food. After agreeing to leave Jesus to rest by the well, they go into the village to secure food. Shortly after the disciples left, a lone Samaritan woman arrives with her jug to secure some water from the well, and thus begins one of the most intriguing conversations with Jesus found in the gospels . . . a conversation which never should have occurred and an interaction which takes one unexpected turn after another.

The conversation should never have occurred because at that time and place it was totally unacceptable for a man to talk to a strange woman in public. This restriction is not entirely strange to us as we have become more acquainted with the practices of our Muslim neighbors who still adhere to some of the customs of their middle east roots. We have a very active group of Muslim volunteer chaplains in our Spiritual Care department at Stanford Hospital. Early on I learned that the proper way for a man to meet a Muslim woman is to let the woman take the lead. The general rule is "no touching," unless the woman extends her hand. Then it is acceptable to shake hands. Unfortunately, this knowledge was ignored a few months ago when I unexpectedly ran into a former colleague with whom I had worked in the hospital for several years. Upon seeing her, I, spontaneously and unthinking, greeted her with a hug. Less than two seconds later I heard an inner voice reprimanding me, "You jerk, you just flunked Islam 101A!" When I started to apologize, she laughed and proceeded to inform me that it was not an issue for her; she was from Iran and had become quite Americanized.

But there was no such ambiguity at the time of Jesus and he knew full well that it would be totally inappropriate for a man within his culture to initiate a conversation with a woman—unless she was a woman of dubious reputation. Quite likely this possibility crossed Jesus' mind, since she came to the well alone in the heat of the day, when the common practice was for women to come in a group to the well early in the morning to obtain water and to escape the heat of the day. So she had obviously been excluded from the women of her village.

When Jesus says to the woman, "Give me a drink," it is hardly a simple request. Each knows that a basic social taboo is being broken. The woman's somewhat sarcastic response is a moving example of the pain of the disenfranchised who are not about to be put down one more time—if they can help it. So when she exclaims, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" You can almost hear her inner voice mocking, "You Jews think you are so superior, constantly putting us down, so why should I do a favor for you?"

But Jesus is not about to be drawn into a fruitless discussion over who is superior and who is inferior as he answers her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." Now the woman is confused and has to be thinking, "where is this guy coming from? He doesn't seem to want to put me down or take advantage of me, like all the other men." Confused, but still apprehensive and suspicious, she makes another attempt to put Jesus in his place, by taking him at his word and exclaiming, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep." Then adding somewhat sarcastically, "Where do you get that living water. Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Having been rejected so often, she is not about to be put down one more time, saying in effect to Jesus, "Listen buddy, Jacob is our ancestor too and we Samaritans are just as good as you Jews."

Once again Jesus refuses to be drawn into the fruitless discussion of who is better and who is worse, who is up and who is down. Instead, he recognizes behind the sarcastic and belittling façade the pain, anguish and loneliness of an abused woman as he softly says to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Now the woman is getting increasingly confused and curious, "this guy is definitely not like any of the others." But she has been taken advantage of too frequently to let down her guard and she counters Jesus by saying, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

At this point the conversation appears to have come to something of an impasse. As observers, we have the distinct sense that Jesus and the Samaritan are talking on two different wave lengths. The woman is talking on a literal level, with an ironic edge of suspicion. We can pretty much imagine what might be going through her mind. Something like, "What is this guy up to? . . . is he trying to hit on me like all the other men who bother to talk to me? But there is something about him that is a little different; I try to discount him, to let him know he is not going to take advantage of me. Yet he seems to be taking me seriously rather than trying to put me in my place, like so many others have." For Jesus as well there must have been a sense of frustration. He is trying to convey a message of God's care, to help her see that in spite of the abuse and rejection she has experienced and suffered, she is a child of God, she is special. But getting through to her proves to be challenging, with her tendency to get bogged down in details.

Jesus then decides to take a totally different approach, something that we today might refer to as a little reality therapy. Pausing for a moment, taking a deep breath, he says to the woman, "Go call you husband, and come back." Talk about a direct confrontation! At first glance he appears to be shaming her—the last thing she needs. He could hardly have been surprised when the woman somewhat indignantly and dismissively responds, "I have no husband." Not only did this NOT come as a

surprise to Jesus, but he proceeds by saying to the woman, "You are right in saying, 'I have not husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not our husband. What you have said is true!" This had to set the woman reeling, but she is not about to give up, as she utters what is probably the greatest understatement of the entire conversation, when she said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." Inside she may well have been thinking, "Now this man is getting too close for comfort . . . and what in the world is he up to?" On the inside she must have been reeling, but she attempts to keep up her guard. In effect, she is still caught in the old, endless debate who -is -right- and -who- is- wrong, by continuing to say, "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you (Jews) say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." While still caught up in the fruitless who is right and who is wrong debate, she has, significantly, moved to more of a more spiritual level. Jesus confirms her progress, she is moving beyond her hurt and pain, as he says to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . But the hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spiritual and truth, for God seeks such worship. . God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." These words strike the woman as almost too good to be true. Within the words of Jesus she hears a message too good to be true: "Forget the distinctions, you are a child of God, in spite of the abuse and pain and rejection you have experienced." Jesus came not to condemn nor to be condescending, but to confirm that she was precious in God's sight. But for the woman, the words sound too good to be true. No longer arguing or debating, she wistfully proclaims, "I know the Messiah is coming (who is called the Christ). When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." To which Jesus immediately responds, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." And she knows it is true. She has just experienced that acceptance and love. Now in her heart she knows: she is not an outcast; she is special and cared for by God; and that is all that matters. So great was her experience of God's love through Jesus, and sense of gratitude, that she immediately runs off to her village to tell her friends and neighbors that they need to come and meet Jesus as well.

Over the centuries the story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria has had an abiding appeal, because it so engagingly conveys the message that everyone is precious and cared for in God's sight. For centuries, unfortunately, this has not been the experience of most women, who often felt there were being treated as outcasts or, at best, as second class citizens. Perhaps no one embodies the transformation that has taken place, in approximately the last 100 years, than our Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who has been described as *advocate in chief for women worldwide*. In 1995 at the fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, she declared, "If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that women's rights are human rights once and for all." Two years into her tenure as America's 67th secretary of state, she has out-traveled every one of her predecessors, with 465,000 air miles and 79 countries already behind her. As she recently stated in an interview in *Newsweek*, "I believe that the rights of women and girls in the unfinished business of the 21st century." In the United States we have been fitted greatly, as more women than men are now graduating from college, in 2005 there were more women than men in medical school, 51% of seminary students are women and, even in law schools the women 47% of the student body. But that is essentially the United States and Western Europe. In many, many part of the world, the status of women is more like that of the Samaritan woman at the well.

The Samaritan woman is a representation, a symbol, of those who are treated as outcasts. They do not receive the same rights and privileges as the mainstream. This has been a reality that many gays and lesbians have endured for years. It has been true for many military veterans unable to make the re-entry into society and finding themselves on the street. Or the discharged psychiatric patients for who find themselves overwhelmed in trying to live a normal lives. Samaritans are always with us. Needing to be helped and told, "You are special and cared for by God." And Jesus is saying to us as well,

If you want to know what you should be doing, you should be helping Samaritans, the ancestor of that woman I met at the well. Amen