

The Gospel Challenges Conventions and Culture Rev Terrance Jacob on John 4:5-42 at SALC 3/8/26

Jesus was not supposed to be a woman in public, especially a stranger. It was against their culture and social conventions at the time.

Jesus was not supposed to have social conversation with a Samaritan. The Jews considered the Samaritans as an inferior race and as pagans in their religious beliefs. In fact, they would even choose to take longer routes from Judea to Galilee so they wouldn't pass through Samaria and encounter those people.

However, Jesus chooses to engage her in spite of his own people's social conventions. This is not uncommon in the New Testament narrative - Jesus and His Good News challenges the society of the time, as it does ours today, but I'll come back to today soon.

Let's take a step back to look at the ministry of Jesus more broadly. He chose to come through Samaria, and he and his disciples even supported their economy by shopping for food there. When Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbor?", He chooses to bring a Samaritan into the story, but listen to what he did: he introduces the man from the so-called "inferior race" as the hero, not the object of need. When he heals the 10 lepers, he takes note that is only the one who was a Samaritan, a foreigner, says Jesus, who came back to thank him. And here he does not offer a Samaritan water or even a counselling service - marriage or life skills training - but he offers relationship; to a so-called inferior village. Go and call your people too. I want a relationship with all y'all. (And people say I'm too political).

Let's look at this text through the lenses of gender now. Jesus lived in a patriarchal society where women were treated as

less-than. People often look at the Samaritan woman at the well as show her disdain for having had so many husbands. Based on that culture, Jesus saw her as another abused woman. Women were not allowed to divorce or leave a man, even if he was abusive or unfaithful. Only a man could divorce a woman, and then she would be free to marry, if she so wished. So that means 5 men abused her, more than likely.

Okay if you think I'm stretching it, I'll not go into gender based violence against women at the time. I'll drop that and just say, "No one had any right to judge her." They should be going after the men who abandoned her. She's the victim, not the perpetrator. But even as it is today, the victim is often blamed, particularly in gender based abuse. And the victim is manipulated into believing that and accepting blame. I recently learned that that is what GenZs and Millennials call "gaslighting", the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's word of year in 2022. Gaslighting had the woman at the well respond apologetically to Jesus. Here was a woman owning her shaming. Women did not normally come to the well for water in the middle of the day, but commentators say she probably came then, because she would be away from the judging eyes and gossip of the community.

Okay, let's leave her Samaritanness out. Let's look at another story, no real life incident in the gospel. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought a Jewish woman to him while he was teaching in the temple courts. They wanted to stone her because they say they had caught in the act of adultery. The religious authorities of the time stoned only the woman, even though the law stipulated that the man should also be stoned. Jesus disarms them by saying, "Let any of you who is without sin throw the first stone at her." Then while sitting in the dust looked up at the woman and forgave her and saved her life, denouncing the conventions of society!

I can go on to talking about how Jesus rebuked the disciples for dismissing the mothers who brought their children to meet Jesus. But then some of you will say the text in Matthew 19 didn't say mothers, it said people, even though the culture of the time would indicate mothers did that when a rabbi was around, to get their children blessed. Let's not argue. Let Scripture speak for itself. Jesus stops in the crowd to engage the woman with persistent bleeding. Menstruating women were treated even more badly than other women. They were named as unclean, almost the same as lepers - the same word for unclean is used: tuu-mah (written tumah). She had touched his clothes. Instead of rebuking her, he calls her "daughter", a term of endearment. Not just no judgement, but a relationship. Not just calling out injustice but embodying that justice with the bleeding woman, with the woman caught in adultery, with the woman at the well, to name just a few. Jesus was simply challenging and even more, violating social conventions that were unjust and put cultural and religious order over people and relationship.

So what does all this have to do with us in the 21st century, especially in our country of equal opportunity. Women's suffrage in Tennessee was in effect from 1919 (107 yrs ago). But while the equal pay act of 1963 is 63 yrs old, we are still advocating for equal pay to men and women. I was astounded but joined the cry, about 14 years ago when Hope Solo and other women from the US Women's National Soccer Team campaigned for equal pay. In 2015, the USWNT received \$2 million for winning, while the USMNT received \$9 million for losing in the round of 16. While a battle was won in 2022, there is still disparity, especially at league levels. I'm a fan and was sorry our women's national team played Argentina last weekend right here in Nashville and I couldn't go; and it's not just about Trinity Rodman as it was about Alex Morgan in the past.

Jesus encountered strangers and joined their fight, not just to help them, or because they respected him. In fact, the woman at the well certainly didn't at first. He encountered wrong and met it with truth, right there along the way. The disciples returned and saw him violating all social norms, but they said nothing. They knew better. They knew he was right, but they were so used to "going along to get along" that they gave their tacit support of the abuse and oppression of women. There's other oppressions too, but I'm sticking with this today, International Women's Day, March 8th. But that's not my motivation, it's the Word, the text and the Holy Spirit. Theologian Karl Barth said something about preachers needing to read the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Seriously, is this not relevant? Not just in the reports of abuse and trafficking of girls and women - reports indicate that it is prolific in the USA, found in every state. Then finally, there is the hidden-in-plain-sight scourge of domestic abuse. According to National Coalition against domestic violence, 4 in 10 women in TN have experienced partner physical violence. That's besides emotional and psychological abuse, like gaslighting.

So what are we to do? Jesus said that he did not come to condemn the world. So this word today is not to shame our society but to move us to do better. In the process of spreading the Gospel Jesus addresses social injustice by embodying it. By showing up alright, but by living it. What are we teaching our children? How are we products of a sick society and exhibiting the sickness unwittingly? Jesus prepared the way and the whole Samaritan village was saved by the witness of one of the first Christian evangelists. Jesus didn't just show grace to her. He showed grace to the perpetrators, his very own disciples by embodying justice. Let us carry that grace to those people, institutions and conventions we do not agree with and be about bringing the good news to the world as we are called to. Amen.