

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN (Jn 4:4-42)

By Jim Seghers

John's narrative about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman captures my attention. Therefore, I offer the following reflection in the hope that the Holy Spirit will give you insights that apply to your life.

John strategically places the story between Nicodemus' visit with Jesus at night in chapter 3 and the religious leader's hostility to Jesus in chapter 5. Nicodemus struggled to understand Jesus because he found it difficult to think beyond his rigid paradigms. Israel's religious leaders persecuted Jesus and plotted to kill him because he performed a healing miracle on the sabbath and claimed to be equal to God. In Samaria Jesus' reception was quite different.

Most English translations say Jesus was "tired from his journey" or the equivalent, but the Greek text is much stronger. It describes Jesus as "exhausted with the labor of wayfaring" (Jn 4:6). This is the same language Jesus used when he invited those who "labor and are burdened" to come to him (Mt 11:28). Jesus can lighten our exhaustion because he endured the labor of his mission to the end. Who could recognize in the sweaty, weary, thirsty Jesus the promised Husband-Messiah?

As Jesus approached Jacob's well in Samaria, two thirsty people meet. Jesus sees a woman who has a parched soul. The fact that she came to draw water at noon, the hottest time of the day, is a clue that she was an outcast from the "respectable" women. She was a public sinner.

Breaking all conventions, Jesus speaks to a strange woman, and a Samaritan at that. Love only seeks to be loved in return, so Jesus humbles himself as a beggar: "Give me a drink" (Jn 4:7). The Lord of heaven and earth makes the first move to capture the heart of his sinful creature. Even the woman is surprised that Jesus spoke to her. The Jews despised Samaritans as half-breed pagans.

After the fierce Assyrians crushed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. they dispersed most of the ten tribes to other areas in their vast empire. Then five pagan peoples were herded into the land of Israel. The intermarriages between these Gentiles and the remaining Hebrews produced the people known as the Samaritans. Even today there are about a thousand descendants of the first-century Samaritans. They live on Mt. Gerizim and continue to offer animal sacrifices.

Jesus addressed 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" (Jn 4:10). By identifying himself with the "gift of God" Jesus implies that he is the Messiah. In order to further expand her thinking Jesus used a double meaning word that can signify either "flowing" or "living" water. "Flowing" or "running" water is contrasted to still water that easily becomes

stagnant. “Living” water refers to a entirely new reality. The prophets spoke of God’s blessing as life-giving water (Is 12:3; 44:3; Ezek 47:1-12; Zech 14:8).

Subsequently, Jesus clarified his meaning, “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). The woman is intrigued by Jesus’ words, but she doesn’t yet grasp their prophetic meaning. Therefore Jesus shifted the focus to her inner life: “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly” (Jn 4:16-18)

These verses reveal a meaning that is not apparent on the surface. “Husband” is another of the double meaning words used in this passage. The word Baal can mean God, Lord or Master, but it can also mean husband. This distinction is expressed when God addressed the rebellious northern tribes about the future Messianic age through the prophet Hosea.

“And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal.’ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. And I will make for you a covenant on that day ... And I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord” (Hos 2:16-20).

This woman may have had five husbands, and she may now be living with a man outside of marriage. However, Jesus focused on a more vital relationship. The “five husbands” was an allusion to the five pagan peoples, mentioned in 2 Kgs 17:24, who had come to Samaria with their false gods. The one who “is not your husband,” therefore, refers to Jesus, the Husband-Messiah, with whom she is not yet in a covenantal or martial relationship. No wonder she replied, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (Jn 4:19).

In her search for a true love, the Samaritan woman settled for too many false lovers. The frantic search for love drives many people into shallow relationships and the worship of false gods: power, sex, money, and self. This leads to idolatry, self-indulgence, and the abandonment of God’s law. As a result the Ten Commandments are often reduced to the Ten Suggestions. This always leads to a great void in the depth of one’s soul. St. Augustine drank deeply of this bitter emptiness. After his conversion he wrote: “Our heart is made for you, O Lord, and in you only can it find rest.”

After so many false hopes and bad choices, the Samaritan woman found herself desperately alone. She invested much of her life in the fools gold of false love, only to fall deeper and deeper into loneliness. At that terrible and wonderful moment she came face to face with the faithful lover of souls, Jesus Christ. At last, true love! Her life would never be the same. Jesus woos her as the heavenly Bridegroom, because she had the qualities that made her irresistible to Jesus: the acknowledgement of her helplessness and her trust in him.

Now she lives! Her whole being comes alive. Revivified, she abandoned her water jar, which now signifies the earthen vessels to which she was formerly attached. Her child-like enthusiasm bubbles over because she has found the Messiah. She is no longer afraid of what others think. Christ's love can't be bottled up; it must be shared. She is no longer an outcast, but a bride of the king of kings. Her love and sincerity gives force to her missionary activity. She hurries into the city with the good news: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ" (Jn 4:29)?

There is a fascinating epilogue to the narrative. Neither Jesus nor the woman drinks a drop of water. They were completely refreshed by their dialogue of love.

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