

## ***At the Crossroads ... where brokenness meets reconciliation***

Lesson: **John 4:5-42**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%204:5-42>

My husband Bran and I live walking distance from a Peet's coffee store. Each morning, our neighborhood gathers at Peet's. On weekday mornings, various constituencies arrive on self-selected shifts. The working stiffs show up around 7:30 for very strong coffee, no milk, or a triple mocha, with whipped cream. Around 9, the stay-at-home moms arrive trailing toddlers and golden retrievers, gamely trying to keep their littlest ones in their strollers. There's a devoted group of retired men who sit on one particular bench outside, two or three dogs sleeping at their feet. They animatedly discuss the politics of the day, and whether San Francisco's professional sports teams have any hope of returning to former glory.

On Saturdays, Peet's is the gathering place for a certain economic slice of the neighborhood, and occasionally for an elected or two. It's where folks gather to exchange pleasantries, enquire after each other's families, and catch up on the local news before they hit the farmer's market.

If you want to go to buy a pound of coffee, or take time with your paper and latte, it's best to go at 6 a.m., before the neighborhood arrives. 6 a.m. is also the time to go to Peet's if you don't want to be seen. At 6 a.m., the staff is too sleepy to really notice you, and anyone else who happens to be there is too absorbed in his own needs. By 8 or 9 people are noticing each other, and engaging (or avoiding) conversation. So if you're homeless, or need a shower, or just can't face talking to anyone, you go at 6, and avoid the curious or scornful looks. You avoid *being seen*. Those who are unseen by our community — the ones with mental illness, the ones who speak Spanish, the ones whose lives have been fractured — come early in the morning to get their coffee, when no one else is there.

In today's lesson, Jesus had left Judea for Galilee, and the Spirit drew him through Samaria. The Scripture says "he had to go through Samaria." There's no necessary topographical reason to go through the town of Sychar — it's not like Sychar was on the one road or something — we just know "he had to go" there. He was drawn there for a reason. Jesus arrives at the well of his ancestor Jacob around noon, and stops to rest and to get a drink of water.

Now, the Jews and the Samaritans came from the same ancestral and religious roots, but had suffered division and separation long before the time Jesus showed up. Their enmity was great, and ancient, and each thought the other to be unclean and immoral. About 230 years before Jesus, in a time when the world did not change all that quickly, the Samaritans had built a shrine at Mt. Gerazim and claimed that the shrine, not the temple of Jerusalem, was the proper place to worship the One God. But about 70 years later, in 128 BCE, Jewish troops destroyed the shrine, and for the 150 years following, debate over the proper place for worship was the main theological distinction between the two. After all, if you truly revere God and believe that God resides in a specific place, worshipping at that specific place matters.

On that morning, Jesus arrives at the well of Jacob, who was ancestor to both Samaritans and Jews. In the first century, there were two real gathering places for the women of a village: the communal ovens and the well. The well was a lot like the first century version of my local coffee store. The women would go to the well early in the morning to fetch the water they would need for the day. They would do it early, before the sun got too hot and the jars too heavy to carry. There they would exchange pleasantries, enquire after each other's families, catch up on the local news, and be gone in time to avoid the heat and hit the market.

When Jesus arrives at the well around noon, it should have been deserted. But along comes a woman to get water. We are given no details about her as she approaches: she lives in the pages of the scripture, undescribed. She is unseen by her community, and should have remained unseen at noon at the communal well. If she came at noon, at the heat of the day, she was trying not to be seen, not to be noticed. She didn't want conversation; she didn't feel part of her community. When she arrives, there, at the deserted gathering place is another outsider, a Jewish man, asking her for a drink of water.

There is nothing right about this for the Samaritan woman. I want to make this moment clear. Imagine that you are at your wit's end. You haven't slept in your own bed in a couple days. You're wearing sweats that haven't seen the inside of a washing machine in a couple weeks. You're carrying a little money and a lot of shame. Maybe you're dealing with a horrible grief — loss of a child, loss of a job. Maybe some biochemical problem makes life more difficult for you than for many others. You go to Peet's at 6 in the morning, hoping that you won't have to do more than grunt out your order, hoping that no one will even remember you've been there. Imagine that when you get to the door, someone completely outside your social circle, someone who would ordinarily sneer at you — a Princeton-educated diplomat wearing designer clothes — imagine that this stranger sees you, stops you, looks you in the eye, and asks you for a cup of coffee.

Would you be conscious of your appearance — the filthy sweats, the tired face? Or of your lostness? Or of this stranger's boldness? Would you just think he was clueless, and wish you could slink away?

Whatever you're feeling, that's what this woman is feeling. Embarrassment, confusion, disdain. And then, Jesus speaks to her, and they wind up talking. They are standing at the well that supplies water for her and her entire village, the well that she has come to in the middle of a desert day in order to avoid seeing anyone. She's got to really want that water to come to the well. Then Jesus speaks to her of living water — not just fresh running water, but water that never has to be fetched, that satisfies thirst forever. What would living water mean to a woman whose shame compels her to come to the well in the heat of a desert day? Could she even take in such a promise?

Of course, she hears "water" — the liquid stuff. Water that quenched thirst forever would mean she would never have to come to the well, or face her community again. So she demands, "Sir, give me this water, so that I won't have to keep coming here."

And then, Jesus sees her. I imagine him looking her squarely in the eyes, and seeing her beyond the veil. He sees her, and says, "Go tell your husband, and come back." She replies quickly, and truthfully, "I have no husband." Jesus sees her, and more important, he makes her see herself by naming her painful truth: "You are right when you say you have no husband. You have had five, and the man you have now is not your husband."

Now, Jesus doesn't shame her. He doesn't condemn her. We don't know why she has had five husbands, whether she was trapped in the marriage codes of the day that forced women to marry successive brothers.

We don't know whether she made foolish mistakes. And it doesn't matter to Jesus why she is a pariah. It doesn't matter whether she is a fool, or a victim. In this moment, Jesus truly sees the woman at the well, for all of who she is. He sees her pain, sees her shame. And he makes her see it, too. Jesus forces her to acknowledge this painful part of her self.

Jesus could have done what we do most of the time: ignore her or been ashamed to witness her pain. He could have done what we do in our better moments: Jesus could have simply seen her truth and known it and been quiet about it and loved her in it. But instead, the God in Jesus stepped into the intersection of her pain and her purpose, and Jesus held up a mirror to her life. She's tried to gracefully avoid this

conversation, but Jesus won't let her slip out of it. For one moment, she has to get real with Jesus, and be honest about what's going on in her life that would make her come to the well by herself.

The woman not only meets Jesus at the well. Having met Jesus, having been seen by Jesus, having had Jesus reflect her life back to her for her to acknowledge and see, the woman meets herself at the well. She meets herself, confronts her self, recognizes herself, in all her brokenness and in all her belovedness. She suddenly sees herself as broken and sinful, and as a child of God.

So, with new trust, she asks the most important, most meaningful theological question of her day: where shall we worship? And Jesus responds, not with a place — not with a town or a temple or a shrine — but with two words that have been the name of the One God since beyond time and temper: I Am.

I Am. The unspeakable name of God, heard, recognized, and seen. I Am. She has met God in Jesus, and in meeting God the Samaritan woman has found the possibility of reconciliation, not just for Jews and Samaritans who might be able to worship together if they weren't hung up on temples and shrines. The woman finds reconciliation for herself. In Jesus who is God she discovers the possibility of reconciliation of her brokenness and her belovedness. The humanity and the divinity, met at the crossroads, and at the well.

When the disciples return, they arrive and wonder at the scene, but are uncharacteristically silent. Perhaps they realize they have stumbled into a holy moment of recognition. The woman leaves her water jar and goes back to her town, where she tells the very people she has avoided what she has seen.

And at the crossroads between brokenness and reconciliation, her community listens to her. Unlike the women who met Jesus after the resurrection, and no one believed them, this woman — who has been shamed and done everything in her power to go unseen — this woman is believed. Her truth, her story, her experience is listened to, acknowledged, and believed. The unseen woman is seen, and regathered into the community. And when she says, come and see, they do. Together, they go to meet Jesus.

My brothers and my sisters, so often we think we want healing when what we **really** want is avoidance. We want to avoid our pain, or blame it on others, or leave it behind. We may pray for relief. We may pray for the physical healing of others, and not ourselves. But we have depression, or mental illness, or physical illness, or self-hatred, it is not just our bodies or minds that are broken — our connection with our community gets broken too. How many of us want physical relief, but never move to mend the isolation that our physical illness causes? How many of us work to understand ourselves, or why our lives aren't what we expected, but never surrender to God, asking to be healed into connectedness? How many of us give money to homeless people, but do not link them to our shared humanity with a handshake or a hug?

Marianne Williamson, in her book, *The Gift of Change*, says this: "At a certain point, it doesn't really matter so much how we got to be a certain way. Until we *admit* our character defects — and take responsibility for the fact that regardless of where we got them, *they are ours now* — God Himself has no power to heal them. We can talk to a therapist for hours about how our relationship with Mom or Dad made us develop a certain behavior characteristic, but that of itself will not make it go away. Naming it, surrendering it to God, and asking Him to remove it — *that's* the miracle of personal transformation..."<sup>1</sup>

You cannot be transformed until you surrender your brokenness to God. And you cannot surrender your brokenness until you allow yourself to see it, to face it, and to offer it up to the One, the only One who

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne Williamson, *The Gift of Change: Spiritual Guidance for Living Your Best Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), pg. 90.

created you, who loved you, who sees you completely, and who wants nothing else than for you to be the whole and connected human being you were created to be.

Here's the real blessing in reconciliation with yourself and your community: you can be a blessing to others. You can reach out to a soul in need, not with money or gifts, but with yourself. You can see someone, acknowledge both her brokenness and her belovedness. When you come across the person with mental illness, you can look him straight in the eye, and smile, and say hello.

Today I want to challenge you to take steps to living in reconciliation with yourself, God, and community. Would you be willing to look for one opportunity this week to reach out to someone you have something against, or who challenges your self-containment? Maybe it is a loved one and you were really hurt. Perhaps it is a colleague or a classmate who disrespected you. Would you admit the grudge, surrender it to God, and seek reconciliation? Or, would you be willing to look for that time you will be wrong this week, admit it and tell someone about it? Or, when you see your own brokenness and want to avoid it, would you stop and pray and surrender it to God? Just say, "God, I am controlled by this brokenness; this emptiness is bigger than I am. I surrender it and myself to you. Fill me up; give me peace."

When you see someone in Worship alone, you can get up and go sit next to her. When you see grief on a stranger's face, you can risk a little embarrassment and ask, "you look sad; may I listen?"

We'll be honest: living into reconciliation, into connectedness, costs you: you have to give up a little piece of your self – your own interpretation, your own judgment, your own self-protected isolation. But when you drink from the living water, when you meet Jesus over and over again and know that you are both a broken and beloved child of God, there is enough of God in you to give a little away.

And my brothers and my sisters, we need to be those people who have enough of Jesus' living water to give a little of ourselves away. God needs us to drink from the living water and be those people. And we can be those people in God's world.

Let us pray: Holy Jesus, we thank you for making us uncomfortable. We thank you for showing us who we authentically are – gifted, called, blessed and purposed, and broken, flawed, and in need of reconciliation. We surrender our brokenness and our pain to you. Bring us into honest relationship with you and with ourselves. Help us to be the gentle light in the darkness, the hand reached out in friendship, the steady and loving gaze. Let them see you in us. Amen.