

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

March 12, 2023

Shame

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week we heard about Nicodemus' encounter with the Word of God. We witnessed in that scene how Nicodemus was hampered by his intellect. He wanted to figure Jesus out...to utilize logic and reason to peg Jesus. He wanted to logic his way into faith, into relationship with God. Jesus responded to this by comparing the Holy Spirit to the wind. He was trying to teach Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit isn't predictable or knowable or logical. She can be those things, but the Spirit is always greater than we can comprehend. It does not do to try and tame or domesticate God!

In my sermon last week, I shared my understanding that Jesus was trying to get Nicodemus to see that God wants to be in relationship with our whole selves. God loves every aspect and part of us. Not just our reason and intellect! Jesus was inviting Nicodemus into a relationship built on something far more encompassing than just reason or logic, he was inviting Nicodemus into a relationship based on *agape* love. That unconditional, steadfast, durable love that God has for the cosmos.¹

We find ourselves now reading about another encounter between the Word of God and a human, a Samaritan woman this time. And this is no coincidence! I am convinced that the author of John's Gospel placed these two scenes back-to-back quite intentionally. They describe two remarkably similar scenes, but with a handful of very important differences. We are meant to compare and contrast these two encounters.

On the one hand we have Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a "leader of the Jews."² And on the other we have an unnamed (don't think that's an unimportant detail!), Samaritan woman who seems to have a bit of an unusual personal history. From the point of view of the culture of the time,

¹ John 3:16-17 (NRSVUE)

² John 3:1b

one of these two is worthy and one is not; one of these two is important and requiring respect and the other simply is...not.

The comparing and contrasting need not stop at the characters either! Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, the woman encounters him in the heat of the day. John's Gospel has already established the theme of light and dark several times, and here it is again! Then there's the most important contrast... while we have a similar **initial** misunderstanding based on literalism; ultimately, we find two drastically different responses to an encounter with the Word of God.

To understand this woman's response to Jesus we first need to ask ourselves why on earth this Samaritan woman is at the well at noontime. If you've lived anywhere really hot, you'll quickly learn that from about 11AM until 2PM or so (depending on the time of year), not much happens. In these parts of the world, it can simply be too dangerous to expend energy during the hottest parts of the day. So why on earth is this woman going to the well at noon? Drawing and hauling water takes a LOT of energy, most women in this Samaritan village would be dealing with that chore in the early hours of the morning when it's relatively cool.

And there's the most likely answer! Most women of the village are at the well in the morning; given what we will discover about this woman, we can safely infer that she is at the well at noontime in order to avoid the others. She has had five husbands and she is not married to her current partner. No wonder she's trying to avoid the other women! She was likely a source of great gossip and frequently judged and looked down on by her community.

While she initially gets tripped up similarly to Nicodemus, taking Jesus' words about "living water" a bit too literally. We find in her follow up comment that it isn't intellect and reason that are hindering her relationship to God. No, for this woman it is her emotions...primarily shame, that has gotten between her and the divine. Why else would she specifically state her desire to "never...have to keep coming here to draw water."³ She is trapped in a pattern of shame, one that is reemphasized for her every day when she heads to the well at the hottest part of the day in order to avoid the eyes and tongues of her neighbors. Can you imagine the pain of returning to the well at noon, day after day after day, each hot step a reminder that your neighbors look down on you and gossip about you. My heart hurts for this woman!

³ John 4:15c

John's audience could reasonably expect Jesus to chastise this woman (Actually, John's original audience would have expected Jesus to completely ignore this foreign woman!). Perhaps reminding her of the cultural and religious expectations of women in that time and place. But he doesn't. In fact, he simply states the truth of her situation in a rather matter of fact way, fairly devoid of judgement or reproach: ""You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!""⁴

John's Gospel is very concerned with truth.⁵ And the truth of this woman's circumstance is that there are any number of reasons she could have had so many husbands: perhaps she was widowed as a young woman and then passed among her dead husband's brothers (what's known as "Levirate marriage"⁶), or perhaps her husbands left her because she was infertile or had a disability, or perhaps she was a victim of abuse, or perhaps they all cheated on her! But the personal truths of people are often too messy for others to want to deal with...far easier to judge and look down on them than to pursue truth out of compassion and love for them.

And so, this woman returns to the well at noontime, day after day, living in shame; in part because her neighbors didn't care about the truth of her. And along comes Jesus who leads with human vulnerability, asking her for a drink. Interacting with this woman who he has every reason to look down on and ignore. And what does he do? He centers the truth for her; he acknowledges her chains of shame without binding them tighter around her and then he invites her into relationship. A relationship centered on truth as opposed to shame.

Grace upon grace! Jesus teaches this woman that the trap of her shame is not the real truth. The judgement of her neighbors is not the truth either. The daily walk to the well in the heat of the day is not the truth. Rather, the truth is a God who frees us from shame. The truth is a God who welcomes and serves those whom the world has judged, mocked, and pushed to the margins. The truth is a God who frees us from having to return to shame over and over again.

⁴ John 4:17b-18

⁵ c.f. John 1:14, 17; John 4:23-24; John 5:33; John 8; John 14:6, 17; John 15:25; John 16:7, 13; John 17:8, 17-19; John 18:37-38; John 19:35

⁶ Deuteronomy 25

Nicodemus leaves Jesus in confusion, “How can this be?”⁷ the last words he utters in John 3. And we don’t really know how his faith journey progresses from that encounter. But here, with this Samaritan woman, we find a far more faithful response. Which should come as no real surprise! Jesus has freed this woman from an incredibly painful cycle of shame. No wonder she cannot wait to tell others about him!

What are you trapped by? What barriers have been erected between you and God? Are you like Nicodemus? Over reliant on intellect and reason. Trying to know the unknowable and predict the unpredictable. Are you like this Samaritan woman? Trapped in shame and burdened under truth that is not truth. Or are you dealing with something else? Some other barrier that keeps you from the life God created you for.

Whatever you might be dealing with, I am hear today to tell you that God’s grace is always more abundant and true than anything that tries to get between us and God. I want you to know that, like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, God sees you...God knows your struggles...God knows you secret shame and your secret pain. And God wants to free you from them. God **does** free you from them. God frees you from them with the truth, the truth that you are loved, always and forever, no matter what.

So let go of the chains God has already broken and step away from your sources of shame. Instead move into the truth of God: you were created for life and love, connection and community. God’s grace upon grace will overcome anything and everything to bring us back to that truth. Amen.

⁷ John 3:9