

John 4: 16-26 “Speaking Her Truth” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/19/23

Professor of Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary says that if one had to pick a biblical story which reveals the most about who Jesus is, this would be the one. The story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well is a passage so rich with revelations that it comes with its own water bucket, ready for the filling. Every time we dip that bucket into the well, we are given a thirst-quenching drink that will not go dry. In this season of Lent, we need this well and the water in it, and the bucket to draw it up, and the man sitting beside us, telling us everything in our lives we’ve tried to keep a secret.

Most of us have something we would rather others did not know, even those closest to us. Back in 2004, Frank Warren started a blog called PostSecret.com as a temporary community art project. He invited people to mail in postcards that had one of their secrets written on it. The rules were that the secret needed to be anonymous, and something you had never shared with anyone else. Still going strong today, PostSecret generates thousands of postcards, many of them decorated by their senders. Warren reads them all and picks 10-20 to post on his blog every Sunday while also publishing several books with them. Secrets, you see, cover the emotional spectrum from humor to heartache: “In high school, I was so desperate for a boyfriend I dated a guy who went to Star Wars conventions... and he dumped me.” “Even vegetarians think of meat from time to time, I know I do.” “I first watched the movie ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ in a mental hospital.” “When things go well for me, I have to wreck my life all over again.” “I’m in love with our marriage counselor.” “I put soda in my free water cup from Chipotle.” “I was 7 when I first attempted suicide.” Like these, the Samaritan woman had secrets, and for her, it was a shameful one.

Jesus says, “Go, get your husband, and come back here.” How do you imagine Jesus saying these words – is it accusatory or is Jesus uttering the words in a caring,

empathetic tone? However you hear Jesus uttering these words, tells a lot about who we think Jesus is and how we think Jesus might interact with us. If Jesus' request of the woman comes from his heart, an understanding heart that is not trying to humiliate, is it any wonder that the woman answers truthfully? She is not evasive or defensive; she doesn't beat around the bush, hemming and hawing about how to explain a complicated situation. Maybe she sensed in Jesus' bidding both concern and compassion. As a result, she speaks her truth. In one of Marianne Williamson's books, she writes, "It takes courage to endure the sharp pains of self-discovery, rather than choose to take the dull pain of unconsciousness that will last the rest of our lives." So she is painfully honest, "I don't have a husband." Do you imagine Jesus response here harsh, "You are speaking the truth, you don't have a husband..." or is it with gentleness and empathy, "You are speaking the truth, you don't have a husband"? Try imagining Jesus to sound something like this, "I know you, I know your plight. I know the indignity and dishonor with which you have had to live so much of your life. I know the sorrow you have had to endure, and I am so very sorry." Jesus is not critical, judgmental, or condemning regarding that she has had five husbands and the one she is currently living with isn't her husband. He knows her truth and he wants her to recognize him as the Truth, and embrace the truth of who she can be.

The woman assumes he is some kind of prophet because he knows her deepest, darkest secret. More than likely, her situation was completely out of her control. A woman in first-century Palestine had little to no choices in her marital life. While a husband could divorce his wife for the smallest of reasons, a woman could not instigate divorce. Scholar Karoline Lewis notes that maybe Jesus' concern for the woman is that men were divorcing women over virtually nothing, thus leaving the woman potentially in a harmful and vulnerable state. Women were dependent on a male provider, therefore, her situation would be because her husbands either died, leaving her widowed, or divorced her. The man she was living with was most likely

the brother of her last deceased husband and she would have been forced to live with him under what is called a “levirate marriage” as outlined in Deuteronomy 25. In this circumstance, the brother, or “levir,” of the man who died, if there were no children to care for the widow, was obligated to marry the widow. Additionally, in marriages that ended in divorce, the number one reason for divorce would have been because the woman didn’t conceive a child. Science has taught us this can be related to either the man or woman’s physiology, but back then, the woman bore all the blame... and the consequences for failing to provide an heir. Imagine the cloud of disgrace the woman at the well must have lived. According to that society, she was incapable of fulfilling the one thing she was put on this earth to do – have children. Too many still live under this shame even today, too many understand the pain and even guilt of infertility. Part of the beauty of this story is that Jesus has compassion for that pain without judgment, and because he does, she can tell him her truth. It is a model we all can follow when relating with those who have been labelled, ostracized, or marginalized. The other beautiful revelation here is that Jesus knows people and is observant which gives him insight into their past and present. Earlier in John chapter 1:48, Nathanael asks Jesus, “Where did you get to know me?” and we get a hint that John’s Gospel is going to be about who this Jesus is in relation to the world. Nathanael concludes, “Rabbi, you are Son of God! You are King of Israel!” The woman’s response to Jesus’ insights is “Sir, I see that you are a prophet,” but it is clear she is far from finished with this conversation.

Having been seen and understood by Jesus, she begins to see and understand him differently and thus has a few questions. Think about it, if a prophet of God stands in front of you, you might have a few questions as well? Her primary question was the most pressing theological issue that separated the Jews and Samaritans for centuries – the proper location for the worship of God. It is also a pressing crisis for Jews because at the time John is writing his Gospel, in about 70 CE, the temple has

been destroyed by the Roman Empire, the center of Judaism is no more. God was believed to dwell in the innermost part of the temple, the Holy of Holies, but what happens if the temple is no more? After the Babylonian captivity, the Jews built the Second Temple in Jerusalem but the Samaritans had already been constructing their temple in Samaria at Mount Gerizim. The woman wonders who is right – she isn't doing a little church shopping, inquiring who has the best programs, the best mission, the most members, but instead she is asking where is God? Her heart truly wants to know where can she find God? For all 4 Gospel writers, the answer to that question is Jesus. Even though they represent it differently, it is their goal to articulate this new presence of God found in Jesus and what that truth means. In this story, Jesus wants the woman at the well to see that he is the temple now, he is the Source upon which God can be found. True worship is not about a proper place or bona fide buildings. True worship means recognizing that in Jesus, God can be found. True worship is embracing the phrase, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," in both spirit and truth. Where is God to be found? John's answer is that God is not in the temple but in the Word made flesh, in Jesus; and God is found in humanity that seeks to imitate the original Word made flesh. In other words, God is found most perfectly in Jesus, but can also be glimpsed in the woman herself, as well as you and I when we follow in Jesus' footsteps.

She is a woman with a secret that isolates and shames her. Do you have such a secret, a moment in time that dries you out, wears you down, or sucks the life out of you? Her truth is for you as well: The One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, despite knowing all our secrets, still offers us a new life, bubbling over with Living Water. Thanks be to God.