

Nourishing Questions

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John 4:5-42

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Who, do you suppose, is the only person in the gospel of John that Jesus reveals his messianic identity to? With whom does Jesus have the longest discussion in any of the gospels? Who becomes the very first evangelist? The answer to all these questions is the Samaritan woman at the well. Now, what sinful person does Jesus rejoice in bringing back into the fold of his salvation? A lot of people, actually. But not the Samaritan woman at the well. As far back as the 2nd century when the theologian Tertullian called her an adulteress, church leaders have painted the Samaritan woman as a promiscuous, sinful woman. The lesson they have drawn from this story has been that Jesus offers forgiveness even to a disgraced, fallen woman. No doubt, this is because Jesus calls attention to her past marriages and current living situation.

But let's nip that erroneous interpretation in the bud right off today. Nowhere in this story is sin mentioned. Nowhere in this story does Jesus judge this woman or imply that she is especially in need of God's grace, no more than the rest of us are anyway. He would know that this woman had no way to initiate a divorce under Jewish or Samaritan law, but a man could divorce his wife for almost any reason. He would know that accepting another marriage proposal was the best way for a widowed or divorced woman to stay safe and cared for. He would know that there were reasons why two people would enter into an unofficial marriage, as was likely the case for this woman who lives with someone who is not her official husband.

No, this text does not suggest that Jesus found a disgraced, sinful woman at the well. What it does suggest is that Jesus found an intelligent woman with whom he could have a theological discussion at the well. And this is a big deal. Jacob Neusner, a scholar of Judaism, notes that to enter into a theological debate is a sign of respect for a rabbi. He writes, "It is my form of respect, the only compliment I crave from others, the only serious tribute I pay to the people I take seriously — and therefore I respect and even love." And let's remember: Jesus, the rabbi, started this conversation. And the Samaritan woman, treated as a theologically intelligent equal, meets him right at his level. She pushes back on his assumption that she would give him water from her jug. Maybe she's surprised that a Jewish man would stoop to ask for water from her, but remember that the animosity between Jews and Samaritans went both ways; maybe she didn't want to share her water jar with this Jew.

When Jesus offers her living water, she looks at him dubiously, but with curiosity, and says, "Sir, you have no bucket. Where are you going to get this water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and flocks drank from it?" It is not

until Jesus proves he knows something about the woman that she hadn't told him, that she says, "I see you are a prophet." And their dialogue goes on. They discuss the differences between Jews and Samaritans in where they worship, and the similarities between Jews and Samaritans in that both are waiting for the Messiah. He reveals to her that he is in fact the Messiah she has been waiting for.

The only thing that brings this discussion to an end is the return of the male disciples. They also have questions, though not questions in good faith: "What do you want?" "Why are you speaking to her?" At least they know better than to ask them out loud. But I'm sure this intelligent woman could pick up on their disdain. She goes back to her village but leaves her jar at the well, a sure sign that she will be back for more.

Meanwhile, the disciples offer food to Jesus. I imagine he has a wistful look in his eyes when he says, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." The male disciples, clueless as ever to the point of being comic relief, look at each other and say, "No one brought him anything to eat, did they?" But we, the readers, know that Jesus is speaking of spiritual food, not physical food, just as he spoke of spiritual water, not physical water. Jesus is nourished by his engaging dialogue with the curious, open-minded woman.

Have you ever been discouraged from asking questions? Perhaps because it was considered disrespectful to authority? Perhaps asking "too many questions" got you labeled as difficult or impudent? Have you ever stifled your curiosity because something in the back of your mind was afraid of what you might find out? After all, curiosity killed the cat. Have you ever gotten the impression that to question God shows a lack of faith?

I wonder if the Samaritan woman was ever called difficult or disrespectful. I wonder if people sighed and rolled their eyes or snapped at her impatiently when she asked yet another question. Have you ever felt irritated or uncomfortably challenged when someone asked you a question about facts you're sure are true or a belief you hold deeply? Questions are hard. It takes courage to ask them and grace to consider them. Cracks may form in the world we took for granted as well as in our reputation. People may think we are difficult. Depending on our faith background people may think we are sinful. Especially if we are women. But Jesus doesn't think our questions make us difficult or sinful. After their discussion, the woman is still not 100% sure (He cannot be the Messiah...can he?), but she wants to know more. She does not demand that her people believe her 100%, but she invites them to come see. And that on its own is enough for Jesus to proclaim that the fields are ripe for harvesting. Likewise, Jesus is nourished by our curiosity, by our desire to learn more about him, even when we are dubious or still full of doubt.

I'm reminded of one of my instructors whose rabbi friend once said to him playfully, "You know what's wrong with you Christians?" (Gotta love a question like that.) "What's wrong with you Christians is that you have a low tolerance for ambiguity." Remember, it is rabbinic tradition to question and debate, and that was the tradition that Jesus came out of. And I tend to agree: we are often told that to have faith is to believe without question. But there is ambiguity even in our sacred text. One of the ambiguous details of our story today is the reputation of the Samaritan woman among her people. The fact that she comes to the well

alone at the hottest part of the day suggests that she has been left out of what is usually a communal chore among women. Perhaps she was an outcast because she couldn't bear children...or asked too many questions. But, as a member of our Bible study group noted, and as many scholars concur, the fact that her people believe her suggests that she had a favorable reputation and good standing in her community.

Either way, we have tended to remember her as the disgraced woman with five husbands, the outcast that Jesus so graciously offered forgiveness to, not because the gospel writer put that in the text, but because it has been interpreted through the lens of our misogynistic society for hundreds of years. And either way, Jesus recognizes her, not as a fallen woman, but a peer worthy of starting a conversation with and a person ripe for becoming an evangelist and disciple.

What other interpretations of biblical stories or assumptions about God might we dare to question? What world-shattering questions might we dare to consider? Can we sit with the questions and not feel pressured to answer, just as the Samaritan woman sat with Jesus? May we meet Jesus at the well, not by discovering definitive truths, but by asking questions that will always lead us to know him better. After all, it is questions asked with authentic curiosity, not certainty, that Jesus finds most nourishing.