

*Lord God, who calms the troubled waters, we bless you for your presence in the midst of all our fears, all our trials, all our worries. We release to you the things we hold too tightly, and we trust your words of peace. Be among us in this hour and may we lean into your everlasting arms of love, secure that we are yours, now and always. ... May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing and of you, who are ROCK, REDEEMER, and COMFORTER of us all. Amen.*

Our theme these next few weeks is UNRAVELING...seeking God when our plans fall apart. Each week we will spend time looking at our lives in partnership with a biblical narrative where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling our plans and our lives... and weaving us into something new.

As we do each week we ask: What's unraveling... what's being separated, sorted or untangled... what mystery is being revealed? How should this inform our lives?

Today we are working with a very familiar narrative from the gospel of John, The Woman Encountering Jesus at the Well. This passage follows immediately after another very well-known face-to-face encounter, Nicodemus and Jesus. There is one other face-to-face encounter that follows immediately after the Well story... with the royal official whose son was sick. This is an interesting story 'sandwich'... two stories of men seeking Jesus, with the middle story about a woman who is not seeking anyone.

Much like a sandwich cookie, we will savor the middle story. But I must share a few contextual points regarding each side story. First, IN MATTERS OF IDENTITY, Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), is the only named person aside from Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader in the Jewish religious authority of the day. Second, Nic's purpose in coming to see Jesus is to SEE for himself who this Jesus is, as his faith...his understanding of God is unraveling. Further, Nicodemus comes at night, likely to avoid being seen by others – to prevent his status from unraveling. Yet, this nighttime visit is also symbolic of the

misunderstanding the religious leaders had about Jesus as 'Light of the World', as presented in John's gospel, v19-21; 1:4-9, 8:12; 9:5.

Looking to the other side story of this sandwich, the identity of the man seeking Jesus is that of an unnamed royal official. The term royal official tells us 1) he is not native to the area... likely a gentile (non-Jewish) and 2) sent to keep order in Capernaum by the ruling Roman authority. This man is unraveling as a parent, and is seeking Jesus to heal his son. In contrast to Nicodemus, the royal official's faith seems to hold as he requests Jesus to come to his son. The unraveled parent throws his 'status' aside as he goes out to Jesus to seek healing. Royals of the day would have sent others to bring Jesus to him.

So the outer layers of this sandwich stories include a Jewish leader, a gentile royal who respond very differently to Jesus, yet share the characteristic of seeking Jesus for who they've heard him to be.

Now, let's turn to the middle of the sandwich to see what is revealed in the unraveling and what new thing is created and what this means for us.

As Dessie read this passage, what details did you hear...location, time of day, and information about both Jesus & his disciples and the woman, as well as the effect of the encounter on the woman. All of these details lead us to discover the unraveling of wounds and shame and reveal the knitting together of a new relationship in Christ.

Location & Time of Day: Samaria (currently known as part of the West Bank) was a region between Judea and Galilee. The well is an important place in the life of a small town. It is the source for water that is needed each day for cleaning, cooking, and survival. Fresh water is essential and, in an arid climate, best gathered in the coolest part of the day...early morning. Yet this woman comes to the well at Noon. There is a reason for that...revealed by Jesus, the woman considers herself a social outcast.

Speaking: Though Jesus was in the area of Samaria, speaking to any woman was not proper. The text implies unjust treatment of Samaritan women by Jewish men (John 4:9). By cultural standards, a woman was not to encounter a man alone, and it was considered indecent for a man to speak to a woman in public

places. Further, Samaritans were an ethnoreligious group descended from those who remained in the Land of Israel during and after the Babylonian Exile. Long-standing animosity existed between Jews and Samaritans, particularly concerning the true and right places to worship: Mt. Gerizim (Samaria) or the temple in Jerusalem. So, this encounter at the well unravels regional, racial, gender, power and religious ties.

Now, let's dig in deeper to the essence of the conversation in the symbolism of water. We certainly understand the need for water. The function of water is to give life. Noting that Jesus has no bucket to draw water to share, the woman wonders where Jesus would get the 'living water', that would spring/bubble up into eternal life'(v14), and expresses desire for this.

No more thirst implies there is no more need to toil, no more need to be exposed to the heat of the day, no more need to avoid the social injustice she endures daily.

Just as flowing water washes away the accumulated soil, dirt, and stuff clinging to the cracks and crevasses in a rock, Jesus pours forth his knowledge in love of this woman. In effect, he unravels the wounds and shame in her life...five husbands, & now sheltering with a man to whom she is not married. These are scabs and scars that are no longer burdens, according to Jesus. Rather, they become threads of her life that are used to weave a new relationship with God and her community.

I want to be clear about these wounds...these five husbands. We don't know why. Why has she had five husbands? Was she seen as a harlot, as traditional interpretations insist? Or was she repeatedly divorced due to perceived infertility or volatile husbands? Or had she been frequently widowed and passed along to marry elderly relatives? What about now...Is this man a family member or the best candidate to become her next husband? Or is she living as a servant in a man's household in order to survive?

J. Ellsworth Kalas remarks in his book, **STRONG WAS HER FAITH: Women of the New Testament** (2012), about first century practices...'in the first-century world a man could get a divorce simply by declaring his intention.... [it] allowed that a man could seek divorce if

his wife spoiled a dish of food, or if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's family in his hearing, or if she spoke loudly enough to be heard in the next house—which is to say, almost any reason sufficed. Perhaps the woman of Samaria was not able to conceive; in a world where children were a kind of measure of immortality and where it was assumed women were at fault if conception didn't occur, it's altogether possible that this woman was repeatedly divorced because of presumed infertility.'

\Kalas continues...to look at her five [husbands] and her live-in arrangement with compassion: the possible divorces, because they weren't necessarily her fault—particularly if infertility was the issue—and her living in an unmarried state because there were virtually no means of lawful employment for a woman in a typical first-century village. To live with a man unmarried was at least preferable to becoming a woman of the street.”

Rev, Nadia Bolz-Weber, writes in a sermon on this passage (2017)... 'We don't know why she was there at noon, but a safe guess is that maybe it's sort of like why I took my kids to playgrounds at weird off hours. Because while I wanted my kids to be able to play I also very much wanted to avoid the other moms. I would never belong to their club – like I could never relax around them so I thought it best to avoid them. Maybe the Samaritan woman wanted to fill her water jar but also very much wanted to avoid the other women who traditionally would have been there at first light to avoid the heat of the day. Perhaps she couldn't relax around them. Perhaps she didn't want to be seen. Because sometimes being seen is painful even if it is also the very thing we really want.'

In a conversation just the other day I was reminded of why I struggled with saying yes, signing the application, and committing to seminary. I was an effective teacher, coach and administrator, but I struggled in so many ways as a student.

I never felt good enough or smart enough to speak up. The risk of being wrong and laughed at by peers in school kept me to myself. I found it easier to say something under my breath, which my neighbor would say aloud. As a teacher I understood the quiet kid, and the need to SEE every student and provide affirmation so that each student knew they were important, valued, and loved.

Entering Seminary put me into a vulnerable place because I couldn't recite chapter & verse...I couldn't find the text to read because I didn't know where the book was located in the bible.

My point is, there are many things that we carry as wounds, scars & shame in our lives, much of which we want to remain unseen.

The blessing of this story is that our God, in Jesus, knows us, knows our hurts and hang-ups, our wounds and our shame... and yet desires to give us life, living water, and fresh experiences in relationship that are brand new.

We, like the woman at the well, just have to say Yes, give me this living water! Pour it over me, pour it within me, cleanse me and make me whole!

What shame (both self-inflicted and/or placed upon you by societal and cultural expectations) do you carry? What might it look like for your shame to unravel?

Maybe it looks like calling or emailing your pastor to say, Can we talk? Maybe it is a prayer request for healing in spirit. Maybe it is in speaking aloud a prayer to God, asking help and guidance to know the words to say.

What I am certain of, is that God, in Jesus, with the Spirit seeks to meet you where you are, and loves you beyond measure.

I love you...but God loves you sooo much more.

May it be so. So be it. Amen.

Go to Prayer of  
Confession led by Liturgist  
Breaking Bread, Lord's Prayer