

“Her Too”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

John 4:3-42

February 4, 2018 -Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

You’re watching an action film, and suddenly four people are in a parked car and then three of them pull on rubber masks, wave their guns, count to three, and dash out of the car. Knowing nothing else, I bet you can deduce that they are parked in front of a bank and that they are about to rob it.

It’s a Western, and the saloon is hopping. Then the doors swing open and the piano playing stops, and you know there’s about to be a fight.

It’s an animated Disney film, and you are introduced to a painfully cute and accident prone talking animal. You know this is the sidekick who will provide comedy and unexpected wisdom at some point.

You’re watching a horror film, and a character is in the bathroom in front of a medicine cabinet. They look in the mirror, and then they open it to get something...and you *know* when they close that cabinet there’s going to be someone behind them.

A man travels to a foreign land and meets a woman at a well in the middle of the day. It’s the oldest trope in the Book. It’s Jacob and Rachel all over again and Rebekah meeting Abraham before them and Moses and Zipporah a bit later. A well scene means somebody’s getting married. A well scene is a big deal.

As hearers of the gospel, we know this story won’t end in marriage, but we also know that the thought had to have crossed the minds of the disciples when they show up and find their rabbi talking to this woman at Jacob’s well. They don’t know what has transpired, but they know that this is a violation of social norms on a bunch of levels, and we can imagine their guts saying “What is he doing?” They manage not to say “What do you want?” John tells us. But they must have been trying to make sense of what they were seeing. I wonder what they assumed about this Samaritan woman.

I wonder that, but I can tell you pretty clearly what the church has assumed about this Samaritan woman: She’s a hussy. A floozy. A sinful, shady lady. Evangelical preacher John Piper called her “a worldly, sensually-minded, unspiritual harlot from Samaria.” (He goes on to call her other names that I won’t repeat here.) We have decided that she’s at the well midday because she’s ostracized for losing husbands repeatedly since she just can’t control herself. She’s one of the nasty women of scripture in need of redemption. Just this week, upon hearing that Bill and Madeline were going to read this story together, a friend asked with astonishment, “Are you really going to have a fifth grader play the role of a such a naughty woman?”

Here is what the text tells us about this woman’s past: She has had five husbands. She has a “husband” now who is not her husband.

Here is what the Bible tells us about *why* she had five husbands and what the deal is with the current guy:

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Perhaps she was unable to have a child, and so all these guys divorced her. It was pretty easy for a man to divorce a woman.

Perhaps she had a bit of Edgewood in her and roused a little rabble and these Samaritan men couldn't handle her.

Perhaps the whole thing is symbolic and her five husbands represent other gods that the Samaritans had worshiped in their past, and the God of Israel is the current husband with whom they are not fully connected.¹ Perhaps she was widowed five times, in a terrible tale of woe.

Being widowed by her last husband could leave her in a Levirate marriage, where a widow who would be otherwise completely vulnerable was married to her deceased husband's brother, though not considered his wife, technically.

Perhaps it's some mix of these and other circumstances that have given her this backstory.

That's a bunch of *perhapses*, but we've still got some more *absolutely clears* to deal with:

Jesus does not speak of sin in this encounter.

Jesus does not invite her to repentance.

Jesus does not forgive her for anything.

Jesus doesn't seem to care much about the five husbands thing.

He really only seems to talk about it to show her who he is.

And yet, we have decided a whole lot about this woman without knowing her name, without having any evidence to back up our assumptions, without considering for a second that her story might be tragic instead of scandalous. In Christianity she is a sinner who found redemption instead of a victim who found new life. We have heard a tiny bit of her story, and we have filled in the blanks and *we know*.²

I need to tattle on the EPC Men's Bible Study to all y'all who have husbands and friends and dads who attend. A few months ago, just as the #metoo movement was spreading like wildfire and Hollywood and D.C. men started dropping like flies, someone in the group connected it all to the chapter in the book we were reading. When stuff like that happens at 7:30 on a Friday morning, my stomach does a flip and my body starts working on a headache. What quickly emerged was a passionate expression of astonishment at the bravery of the women who were coming forward to tell their stories. The fellas talked about power imbalances and evolving corporate cultures and wanting a future different from the one in which they grew up.

A couple of weeks ago, my friend Catherine and I met up with a pair of college students. These two young women are the new student interns for the burgeoning PC(USA) campus ministry, UKirk Birmingham. Catherine and I are members of the UKirk Steering Team, and we were tasked with talking to the interns about their relationship to the organizational structure. We told them we would support them and pray for them and seek their ideas and input. And then we told them that if, at any time, they had a troubling encounter with anyone connected to UKirk, they were to call one of us, day or night, and that they would be listened to and heard and, most importantly, they would be believed.

¹ See 2 Kings 17:29-33

² David Lose, "Misogyny, Moralism, and the Woman at the Well" at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/misogyny-moralism-and-the_b_836753.html

That's not a fun conversation to have, but it's a crucial one, particularly in the church. With less media attention, the #metoos have started to come out of the church. We know what the Roman Catholic church did when children tried to sound the alarm of abuse. But the rest of Christianity in no way has clean hands.

A brave colleague wrote in *The Christian Century* about being an Associate Pastor and trying to ignore, shrug off, and compartmentalize the senior pastor's slightly weird, then kind of inappropriate, then outright creepy behavior. Finally, in her office, he forcibly kissed her. She stood up, pushed him away, and said, "No." When she reported this to the Personnel Committee, they told her she misunderstood the pastor's actions of "pure Christian love." A committee member pointed out the Associate's struggles with the youth program. Another informed the group that she knew the Associate was a rape victim and, therefore, wounded. Another asked, "What can we do to make this go away?"³

What has the church taught us to let such sin happen? Obviously that's complicated — this whole issue is far too complicated to figure out this morning. But here's what we know: this unnamed Samaritan woman has been labeled immoral. Bathsheba has been portrayed as a seductress for, you know, bathing in her own home and being taken from her home to do King David's bidding. Mary Magdalene has her own salacious reputation based on less evidence than we have for the Samaritan woman. The women who witness the resurrection were not believed. The list goes on.

If this woman was ashamed of what Jesus reveals, her next move is curious. After he tells her of her past, she says, "I see that you are a prophet" and then asks a question about worship. Maybe she was just awkwardly trying to change the subject and John simply forgot to tell us that Jesus looked at her with pity and she shuffled in her sandals. But maybe something else is going on. Maybe she's making a confession of faith.

When those first disciples asked Jesus where he was staying, he replied "Come and see." Here, he has seen this woman. He has seen her ups and downs, her struggles and joys. He has seen her worth, her existence. Remember, this is a Samaritan woman. Jews and Samaritans had a real Hatfield and McCoy vibe going on — cousins with hatred and violence in the story. But Jesus doesn't see all that. He sees her. And so she sees him. She sees that he is a prophet, and so she asks the hard question about the things that divide their people, and he answers not with a what about which mountain to worship on, but with a who.⁴

The woman starts to get a Messianic inkling, and Jesus sees what she sees and he confesses: "I am." And she becomes a witness, running around like John the Baptist and pointing toward Jesus and saying, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" She invites everyone she meets to seek the answer to that question. She invites them to hear her story and believe her and to solve the question by walking their own path toward living water. And the Samaritans believe her and they meet Jesus and they see.

All this because Jesus went to the well and found her there and asked her for water. He needed water. She needed his living water. He needs her witness. She needs to be seen. They offer one another confession and humanity and trust. This encounter is not about immorality, but identity — the woman's and Jesus's. She engages him in the longest conversation he has in the Gospels and asks him hard questions and lets her guard down and he listens and he offers her love and compassion and everything that two thousand years of the church

³ "A Pastor's #MeToo Story" at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/pastors-metoo-story>

⁴ David Lose

failed to offer her.

This is one of those rare biblical stories where everyone's a little heroic and nobody is the foil. If you have a story to tell, tell it and ask questions and don't give up until someone is willing to listen to you. And if we meet someone who has a story to tell, at the very least we can do what the disciples did and keep our mouths shut for a minute. And more, we can listen and check our assumptions and offer compassion and humanity and remember that life is not a movie — we don't already know what's about to happen.

There is so much toxicity in our world. So many wells have been poisoned. Drink instead of the living water and offer your bucket to one who is parched. Offer grace in the place of judgment. Offer vulnerability in the place of self-soothing opinions. Offer testimony about what you know about the one who has offered you grace and vulnerability and life and living water: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"