

**Intimate Encounters: Communication for Transformation and
Overcoming Violence:
The First Preacher of the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, John 4: 1-39**

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She lived in brutal solitude; loneliness enforced through guilt, shame, and humiliation. To this day we continue to judge and blame her, rather than recognize her gifts and celebrate her importance and transformation as the first preacher of Jesus, the Christ.

The Woman at the Well was not a well woman; the remarkable detail of the time of day for this narrative from John's Gospel highlights this reality. This was the only explanation for the odd fact of the time of day included in the biblical narrative. To this day, in many parts of the world, it continues to be "women's work" to fetch water from the village well; this is always at the break of day, dawn, and at sunset, when the day is ending. Nary a soul would be found at the well at mid-day, for this would mean having to carry the heavy water jars home with the sun at its maximum strength, blazing directly overhead.

The well was and is, for many parts of the two-thirds world, the center of the community's life. It represented not only the sustenance of life, water, but was the place where women gathered, serving a vital social function. As there were no other forms of mass communication, the well was the source for news and information sharing, and center for recreation, informal education (females were excluded from formal education!) and community life. We recall many biblical texts of matchmaking by the well, and its importance to desert cultures cannot be underestimated. Why was it, then, that this woman arrived there alone, and at such an unusual time of day? Who was she trying to avoid?

We know little of her life and history, only what is said about her to this day. We hear from pulpit to classroom that she was a prostitute, an "easy" woman, though the biblical text says nothing of the sort. Her "five husbands" could have two possible meanings: either that she was widowed five times and lived with a brother or other male relative (there were legends at the time of such cases) or, quite possibly, had been "repudiated" (divorced) by five husbands. Whichever the case, with respect to her life situation, whether widowed or divorced, this was not by the Samaritan woman's choice!

Women at that time did not have the right to divorce. Only the men had that right; by repeating the phrase "I repudiate you" three times, men could "do away with" their wives—literally sending them to the street with nothing—without protection, support or any means to survive. This was the divorce "law" leaving women in a state of total vulnerability.

Historically and through scriptural tradition, women were defined by their biology and ability to produce children. If a woman were sterile, she would be judged as "useless" and could be repudiated. Along with the stigma of infertility, women were judged harshly, as this condition was seen as divine punishment. Many a "medical malfunction" was thought to be caused by the wrath of God, because of some sin in the

person's past. Most possibly, this could have been the case with the Samaritan woman. Unable to "deliver" and thus repudiated by five men, the sixth was "trying his luck" before making a marriage commitment. The stigma, shame and humiliation of the situation, which was and is still the case for many women around the world, goes far beyond words.

Nevertheless, the woman at the well proves to be a most intelligent and skilled debater. With this woman, Jesus reveals who he is for the first time, as well as revealing the very nature of the true God and worship! Jesus discussed and debated theology with her in public, something no Rabbi would have done, and another first—we hear him give an open criticism of his own Jewish culture and tradition. She skillfully articulates the differences between their cultures; it is evident she is well versed in both, albeit trapped by her own cultural constraints regarding women's role and place in society. From her own cultural perspective, she was judged as "useless" and for this reason, perhaps, she shunned the happy, chattering mothers with their children who gathered at the well every dawn and dusk, carefully avoiding their curious gaze and judgment.

Fascinating details fill the text: Jesus' posture in sitting at the well puts him at eye-level with the woman as she stoops to bring the water to the surface. Very few people would ever sit at the well; even fewer men would be able to place themselves on the same level as a woman! It is remarkable that there is no note anywhere of judgment of the woman from Jesus, adding to the interpretation that this woman was not a prostitute, nor in any way a "sinful" or ritually unclean person.

Jesus neither rejects, nor judges, nor blames the woman for her situation; quite the contrary—he praises her for telling the truth! Nor does he intend to "throw the Bible at her" in an attempt to convert or coerce her faith. Rather, Jesus opens a space for intimate dialogue, in which both can be fully open, engaged and share their faith. In this intimate dialogue, in complete trust, both Jesus and the woman are transformed.

There are various "sixes" in the text. It is the sixth hour, or "about noon" when they meet, and she is with her sixth man. Jesus becomes the "seventh" man for the woman at the well, and it is through him she finds transformation and empowerment in realizing her true power and calling. She is no longer "useless" but rather, is transformed into the first preacher of Jesus, the Christ! We read (v.39) that "many... believed in Him because of the woman's testimony..."

Her reaction is striking; she left her water jar, perhaps representing that which had most weighed her down, and returned to the city, to the same people she had been hoping to avoid, to bring her testimony about this intimate encounter with the Messiah. She began with an open invitation... "Come and see..." the rest is history.

Transformation is the purpose of such an intimate encounter. How do we encounter Jesus in the present time? Do we speak "about" Jesus, or do we speak with Jesus, intimately, sharing from the deepest sense of who we are. How do we encounter our companions in the faith community? Do we see in them sources of God's grace, mercy and healing? Companion is a word, in Spanish, that stems from the breaking of bread. (Com, con, "with", and pan, "bread".) The "conversation and mutual consolation" between believers was a sacramental element for Luther and subsequent inheritors of the reformation tradition. Here we witness its transformational power.

How often have we judged, either others, or ourselves, without mercy, seeking to reveal guilty parties rather than reconciliation and healing. Do we experience God's mercy as an every-day reality, or rather "pie in the sky when you die." Our faith communities cry out with the need to be transformational spaces: safe spaces, wells of water and centers in which each person can come as they are, without fear of judgment, rejection or guilt, in order to drink deeply of the living water which is the Christ. Communication and intimate encounters are key to empowering communities as transformational spaces. The conversation and mutual consolation between believers is fundamental to this transformational space.

The Samaritan woman had lived a life of brutal solitude, one in which she believed herself to be useless, punished by God, the community and herself. Through her intimate encounter with the Christ, she was freed to return and witness to the very people she had been avoiding through guilt and shame. How many others live in this way—feeling judged, rejected, alienated from God and the community of faith for reasons both real and imagined.

Communication that intends to transform within the safe spaces of the Christian community can be a well in which all find a place to drink deeply of the living water Jesus freely gives. A space free of judgment, blame, guilt or violence, we drink and invite others to "come and see..." One who has met us where we are, as we are, loves us for who we are, and has the power to transform our lives. Come and see....