

*From Pastor Jeff's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, March 12, 2023 - Lent 3*

Alright... Awkward confession time: I got into a Facebook fight this past week. It's Lent. It's a time of repentance for sin and folly. So, that's what I'm doing here. To be clear, I don't like sharing this with you, but it is true. I squared off over a post that I deemed obviously anti-trans. It was stupid, even if the motives were good. And it was stupid because people don't tend to have their minds changed by Facebook fights. I feel awkward sharing this, but I'm comforted by the fact that I'm going to guess 70-percent of you who are on social media have also found yourself in some sort of flame war at one point or another. If you're not on social media or if you're part of that remaining 30-percent, consider yourself blessed and have mercy on the rest of us. Indeed, pray for the rest of us as your Lenten discipline.

I'm starting here because it's an example of what it means to find ourselves in a confounding relationship. We all have a relationship that is confounding. Maybe it's an adult child who leaves you thinking, "That's not how I raised'em." Maybe it's with your neighbor whose political signs every two years really chaps your... well, you know what gets chapped. Your lips. It really chaps your lips like the winter winds here in Blowing Green. Maybe your confounding relationship is just some dude from high school who proudly labels himself on Facebook as "Anti-Vaxxx" and puts three "Xes" on "vax" in a way that's just creepy and weird. Whatever the case, you have a confounding relationship in your life. Of this, I'm certain. And, if you don't, consider yourself blessed and have mercy on the rest of us. Indeed, pray for the rest of us. It's Lent. It's the least you can do.

More often than not, we are tempted to just ignore the confounding relationships in our life. Life is too short, we tell ourselves, to be dealing with someone else's non-sense. And there's some wisdom to that. Of course, this approach doesn't necessarily pass the Golden Rule test though, now does it? That is to say, if *you* were the person stuck in some folly, would you *really* want people to leave you stuck there; to ignore you in that folly? Or would it be more loving – even if more temporarily fraught – to be called out and called in (as we discussed a few weeks back)? Probably there is a

healthy blending of these two extremes – that is, between checking every piece of folly one encounters and ignoring it all. And it is my hope today that Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well can provide us with guidance necessary for pursuing God's confounding grace in all our confounding relationships.

Some context is necessary to make sense of this story.

First, Samaritans are a sort of half-Jewish/half-Gentile group of people. They are routinely rejected by Israel as too unorthodox to be part of the people of God. Even still, as the woman's words make clear, they maintain some sense of a Jewish identity. I mean, she's talking about Jacob's well, where to worship, and the coming Messiah. Those are very Jewish topics for her day! A Roman Centurion would've given two flips about this conversation. (Roman Centurions, if you're curious, all had the same conversation and it went something like this: "We came here to take over sovereign nations and chew bubble gum.... And we're all out of bubble gum." A fairly boorish lot, those Centurions.)

Second, there were fairly strict social codes that regulated interactions between genders during this time. I don't want to paint things too dystopian, too much like *The Handmaid's Tale*, but suffice it to say, that casual chit-chat between genders was frowned upon. Even if the chit-chat itself was technically okay, it would be viewed with suspicion for all the ways that such chit-chat could blossom into something that was sinful. Basically, paranoia reigned over discussions of gender in ways not too terribly dissimilar to today.

Now, I'm not expecting you to accept either the racism or the sexism that provides the context for this story as normative for us, but we do have to understand this context if we are to witness how God is willing to engage in confounding relationships for the sake of God's confounding grace. This was true for Jesus and the Woman at the Well, and it remains true for God to this day. Again, never forget that we are all Gentiles whom God has confoundingly adopted and grafted into Israel. Don't ever let the commonplace nature of this grace

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lead you to forget just how perpetually confounding it still is.

So, Jesus initiates this conversation across ethnic and gender lines and then, well, the conversation just gets weird. Like, it's okay for me as a pastor to say that, right? I know its scripture and holy, but I can't make heads or tails of the logic of this conversation. Let's try to break it down by focusing just on Jesus' side of the conversation which is where, we have to admit, the most disjointed parts of this interaction appear:

- Jesus asks for water.
- Jesus then says that the woman should have asked *Him* for water so He could give her living water, because – you know – that's a normal human interaction. Like, a neighbor stops by to ask for a cup of sugar and you're like, "Okay, but first let me ask, do you have any living sugar I should be asking you for?"
- Jesus finally achieves His goal of having her ask Him for water, but then switches the topic to her husband. Because, you know, normal conversations involve someone trying to talk about their dog, and then when you finally agree to talk about their dog, they say something like, "You know what I like about green as a color?" What!?!?
- Jesus then just airs all her dirty laundry out there because this woman's domestic situation is... complicated. And, okay, fine, Jesus is going to die for this woman's sins just like everyone else and do so as an act of love, but this still feels like a dirty rhetorical trick. That's like making small talk at a party and saying to someone, "Oh, where did you graduate college from?" And then when they look to the ground and mumble that they didn't go to college being all like, "Ha! I know! And, in fact, you only got your GED two years ago while in county lockup!"
- Jesus then hits us with what might be the first piece of unchecked Good News in this whole story: There will soon be a time where worshipping God will be more a

matter of Spirit and truth than time and location.

This is when the disciples return, and – Whew! – we all breathe a sigh of relief because this conversation had all the awkwardness of an eighth-grade dance to it.

Rather than sort out what this all means – and I'm not convinced every recorded word here is chock full of meaning – I think we should start at the simplest place and acknowledge how odd, or confounding, this conversation is. But of course it is! We started by acknowledging that the whole thing is rather transgressive. Jesus and this woman are working against racial and gender norms that all but guarantee their interactions aren't going to be seamless. It's basically an intro course to cross cultural communication and how tricky that can be. Yet even in the midst of something so confounding, we find the woman being invited into three gifts – perseverance, honesty, and empathy – each of which comes through the power of conversation.

The miracle, if you will, isn't in anything that was said in particular, but that these two persevered in the conversation at all. Jesus could've just stepped away and ignored her. She could've just quickly grabbed her water and quietly walked away. This conversation is not a requirement, which is why when the disciples do return, they are astonished. Perseverance is what is necessary for two parties who know the odds are against them to keep after a relationship anyway. Perseverance, for Christians, involves tuning out who society says you should or shouldn't talk to in favor of listening to the Spirit of God. To be sure, the Spirit may still lead you away from some people – almost certainly from that triple-X anti-vaxxx dude from high school – because the Spirit knows there are others who are called to that conversation. But if we only listen to the talking heads of our favorite media sources, we're very likely to start embodying prejudices that run contrary to perseverance.

The second gift is the gift of honesty, which means that we have to talk about how Jesus and this woman talk about her domestic life. To be sure, any number of feminist theologians have raised issue with this story. Heck, the little feminist theologian inside my otherwise bro-ish frame wants to raise

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some issues. But in deference to this woman, I want to hear how she responds and take her at her word. In verse 29 she says, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Far from embarrassed, offended, or feeling aggressed against, this woman is delightfully surprised. I spent a big part of my time reflecting on this passage wondering if this just wasn't some editor's insertion into this story. But then it hit me: Maybe this woman wanted the truth about her life situation to be known. Because, let's be clear, there's no evidence that Jesus says anything about her relational status in a judgmental way. It *feels* that way because He broaches the topic so awkwardly, but His actual words are the recitation of facts, not necessarily the judgment of them. Furthermore and significantly, we see Jesus in Matthew's gospel – during the Sermon on the Mount – call out Jewish divorce practices of the day, practices that Jesus clearly acknowledges as being exploited by men against the well-being of women. He was honest about the *whole* of her circumstances, not just judgmental about her current situation.

I'm quite certain, given that time (and even our time now), that this woman had little say in the number of relationships she's been part of. She undoubtedly feels shame, but that shame is always a shame devoid of truth, because the people around her won't take the time to consider the big picture; it's much easier to rush to judgment. Jesus, though, speaks the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He, in contemporary parlance, *sees her*. He sees that she has been victimized, but that she's also more than a victim too, which is a fact revealed in His engagement in this transgressive interaction in the first place. No one, of course, wants to be known as a victim, but everyone I've ever known who felt victimized in some way also yearned for others to see and validate their pain as real and reasonable.

I hope this reading is correct because then it takes me to our third piece of Good News for our confounding relationships. To our perseverance and honesty, then, we add empathy. Empathy is not acquiescence. Empathy is not ethics. Empathy is an interpersonal tool to help nurture fully blossoming

relationships. You can be empathetic with someone and still ultimately disagree with them. You do not sacrifice the convictions of your ethics to be empathetic. Indeed, any ethic that doesn't have room for empathy may be no ethic in the first place, but rather a soul-crushing legalism. The role of empathy cannot be understated. For it is empathy – as I believe this woman received and experienced – that is central to transformation.

And that's how this story ends, isn't it? With HUGE transformation. Both Jesus and this woman hang in the conversation with resiliency, honesty, and empathy long enough for this Samaritan woman – two words that are almost transgressive in their very utterances – to become an evangelist. To see not only her own life changed by this interaction, but the lives of so many in her community. To those who yearned for transformation – who wanted better for themselves and their community – the process of staying in a confounding conversation within a confounding relationship become ingredients to God's confounding grace. In fact, empathy is so central to transformation that when we encounter someone who lacks any empathy, what we might be seeing is someone who just terrified of change. Indeed, if you asked me why I thought my former seminary colleague amplified that anti-trans post on Facebook, I would say it precisely that he's so scared of trans-formation (please enjoy that pun!) that he lacked the courage necessary to risk empathy.

Yet the point of this sermon isn't about a wayward pastor in the backwoods of PA, but about our God whose love is so big, so profound, so willing to enter death and come back again that God can't help but be empathetic with us. Jesus' discussion with this woman isn't His first transgressive act. The original transgressive act is that God would become incarnate in Jesus in the first place. Once this transgression occurred, the empathy-as-path-to-transformation has to follow. Indeed, this just might be what Jesus meant about worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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