

**“Living water”, a sermon based on John 4:5-42 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 19 March 2017.**

Nearly two weeks ago I participated in a church-organised event about women in the church. Ten men, twenty women. Among other things we were asked these questions:

- Why was there only one woman in a recent graduating class from our centre for training ministers?
- Why at our national meeting was the overwhelming proportion of people seated at the front of the gathering, men?

At the meeting, I became particularly conscious of what I was saying – was it sexist? Was it stereotyping? Was it putting people into stereotypical roles? What was I instinctively doing?

How is it that a body which has this story in its holy scriptures struggles so much to live it out? How is it that the radical Jesus seems to have so little influence over us?

Part of it is because of how this story is often presented.

It is common to hear her spoken of as immoral because she had had five husbands and the one she now had was not her husband.

Yet Jesus never calls her a prostitute – or for that matter any woman in the gospels. He never suggests she has a shady past. He never invites her to repent.

She easily could have been widowed or abandoned or divorced (which in the ancient world was pretty much the same thing for a woman). Five times would be heartbreaking, but not impossible. Further, she could now be living with someone she was dependent on, or be in a Levirate marriage where a childless woman is married to her deceased husband’s brother (in order to produce an heir).

This woman’s story is tragic, not scandalous. It is not about morality.

What we have here is a remarkable story of breaching convention for the sake of community.

Samaritans and Jews hated each other. After the Assyrian conquest in 721 BC, the tribes that had settled in the northern portion of Canaan were deported and dispersed. By the first century AD these Samaritan tribes worshipped God on Mount Gerizim instead of Jerusalem. The division became deeper than a difference in worship; it was a difference based in blood and identity.

Jesus walked head-on into this hate when he intentionally wandered into the Samaritan city of Sychar and took a seat by a Samaritan well. This thirsty man was waiting for something other than water. He was waiting for a Samaritan. And a Samaritan showed up.

And, it seems, he was waiting for a woman, since drawing water was primarily a woman's job.

He was intent on letting go of the rule that said a man of stature did not converse publicly with a woman and that a Jew did not interact with a Samaritan. He had the will to let go of that rule; he also had the way to do so. He chose a circumstance of division, then instigated community.

The Samaritan woman knew the power of ethnic division. She wondered why Jesus wasn't adhering to the principle that had maintained this distance for so long. "Why does a Jew ask a Samaritan for a drink of water?"

And the woman "sees" Jesus, which in John means believing: "I see you are a prophet." Why? Because Jesus has "seen" her. He has seen her plight — of dependence, not immorality. He has recognized her, spoken with her, offered her something of incomparable worth. He has *seen* her — she exists for him, has worth, value, significance and all of this is treatment to which she is unaccustomed.

And so she risks the central question that has divided Samaritans and Jews for centuries. This is no awkward dodge or academic diversion; this is a heartfelt question that gets to the core of what separates her from Jesus.

And Jesus addresses the question she asks. Hopeful and truthful. So she leaves her water jar behind to tell her neighbours about this man.

Here is a story of the transforming power of love and the capacity to receive and live into a new identity.

God's is leading us away from our drive to divide.

Worship of God is not about division. It crosses boundaries. True worshippers of God commemorate God not in contested spaces segregated for some and against others, but in the location of spirit and truth.

Jesus acts against division, and in collaboration with this woman he succeeds.

While Jesus remained at the well the woman ran into the Samaritan city and proclaimed Jesus to her people. The Samaritans came to see Jesus and his Jewish disciples, and they believed and stayed with them. For two days Jews and Samaritans prayed and worshipped together as an undivided people. Where there had been division there was now community.

Jesus shattered all the taboos that held sway then—gender discrimination, ritual purity, socio-economic poverty, religious hostility.

The Samaritan woman exercised enormous courage to collaborate.

Westboro Baptist Church is renowned. Members turn up at funerals and functions with banners that condemn homosexuality. One of them used to be Megan Phelps Roper. She has given a Ted Talk in which she speaks of this.

*"I was a blue eyed, chubby cheeked five-year-old when I joined my family on the picket line for the first time ... I'd stand on a street corner, in the heavy Kansas humidity, surrounded by a few relatives, with my tiny fists clutching a sign that I couldn't read yet – "Gays Are Worthy of Death." This was the beginning.*

Megan took her church's message to Twitter. She reports that many people mirrored her hatred, but there were a few that genuinely cared about her. She states,

*“The truth is that the care shown to me by these strangers on the Internet was itself a contradiction. It was growing evidence that these people on the other side were not the demons I’d been led to believe. These realizations were life altering.”*

She came to realise how wrong she was. She left the community although her family disowned her. And she married one of the people who had engaged her. She offers these guidelines:

1. Don’t assume bad intent. Instead, assume good or neutral intent.
2. Ask questions. As opposed to accusing, questions help people know they’ve been heard. Quite often, this is all people want.
3. Stay calm. Refuse to escalate. Tell a joke. Recommend a book. Pause for a time and come back later when you’re ready.
4. Make the argument. We sometimes assume that the value of our position is, or should be, obvious and self-evident. That we shouldn’t have to defend our positions. That if someone doesn’t get it, that’s their problem. But without making the argument, it’s hard for anyone to see the world in a different way.

There is no doubt that our own church, the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, has a long way to go in living out this gospel, in living in the new world Jesus embodies. And not just our church. As people who have heard the gospel today, as people who have met Jesus today, as people seeking to live in the new world today, let’s testify that this Jesus way gives life, as Megan says.

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