

The MAN at the WELL

John 4:4-29

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GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

John 4:1-29 is a popular passage that lends itself to many interpretations. I however wish to use it to explore three things: Legal identity, Gender and Water.

In my Father's language (Ateso), the well is feminine and both water and the well take on the feminine genders. "Atan- well; Akipi-water and Akiru-rainfall". It therefore follows that women handle water management. The exceptions are young boys and men who water animals: shepherds and herdsman.

The man at the Samaritan well was not a shepherd. He had no flock and no water container! This "*Man of God*" was certainly a social misfit talking to a woman; a Samaritan woman alone at the well. He violated all social etiquette. He de-toured through Samaria when he could have taken the route through *Perea*.

The Jews and Samaritans shared the same heritage and probably the same biological ancestor. They also shared Torah, they but they differ in religious observances and places of worship: Jews in Jerusalem, Samaritans on Mount Gerazin.

Samaritans did not accept Jewish laws, regulations and observances. They claimed that they were in Palestine before Jews. Bushmen in Kalahari South Africa might say the same! The point here however is: here are two groups with a common ancestry; living very close to each other but divided by minute religious observances and politics; they didn't talk to each other and despised each other.

So avoiding Samaria would have been consistent with the cultural expectations.¹ But this man did not only detour, he literally way-laid a woman at the well at an odd time. In addition he was ready to share a water vessel if the Samaritan woman had given him a drink!

IDENTITY AND GENDER ISSUES AT THE WELL

This well is place people of no social standing like the nameless Samaritan woman derived their identity from. When it seems inadequate to be "just a Samaritan" she includes her connection to the place through a male ancestor of repute and stature that the well is name after; Jacob. It is important therefore to note what is implied here which is the equation of Jacob with Israel (Genesis 32: 22-28)

This was the most up-front identity card she must wave at this strange man: perhaps to pre-empt any possibility of him despising her even beyond what her society had done.

¹ The People's New Testament Commentary: M Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock; WJK Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville Kentucky, 2004.

Since she can not derive her identity from the relay of husbands she had had, at least she could regain her honor through a male ancestor.

This reminds me of a similar occurrence. I used to train rural women using models from my formal educational training. As part of the bonding process or “breaking the ice” it was important to have a good session of self introductions. So I would often start then there would be silence and discomfort before the women would invariably introduce themselves just like the Samaritan woman:

“I am the wife of the Parish priest” literally meaning “I am Mrs. Priest”
“I am Amuge: just a housewife”...“I am ... a peasant farmer”
“I am Apuserut (widow) Loyce”

But one I changed and introduced my self as:

I am “*Totodwe*” Akwii named after my paternal grand mother. A woman whose nomadic ancestors came from Ethiopia; etc.these women would have connected with me immediately and introduced themselves the traditional way I knew them to; with pride and confidence.

In one sentence I would have known who they are, the gifts they have, their totems, family connections, contribution and claim in the community.

This man at the well knew better than to start by introducing himself as “**The man of God**”, “**a Prophet**” or “**Messiah**” which he could have. True as they were, it would not have had the same effect and results as the rural women I asked to identify themselves formally. Besides in this particular case, one did not need to know some one’s name to ask for water.

In some cultures, water is the only thing you can give even an enemy! The woman was not really an enemy but one who would hear this request as an affront on her status and gender all rolled in one. This is why it is not surprising when she says “*How dare you....!*”

The only way he can get away with this and continue with the conversation is to draw her out using something she longed for deeply which was an irresistible offer: **The GIFT of living water.**

The appeal in this GIFT lay in it ability to eliminate the stigma, shame and indignity of social exclusion. It was her escape from a sixth man and round of being “used and abused”. That is why when she was asked to go call her husband this is what I want to believe she heard:

Deep down, you know who you really are. I therefore dare you to rise above the identity your community has given you.

Does your sin define you?

Do you derive your identity derived only from men you sexually relate to?

This man was certainly at home with all sorts of women. The Samaritan woman a fast thinker though this may not have made up for her bad reputation with men. Both passed their History, Religious, Civics and Anthropology exams. So in that sense they were even! But he had an edge over her. He knew that she had within her a deep longing to be herself and use her skills in very productive ways but her community had labeled, judged and condemned her. **He knew that she could rise above** what her society had designated her to be and once set free she was unstoppable. He therefore uses the well and her identity as a point to help her make connection and analysis of broader sacred, social, economic cultural and gender issues. She deserved to live a life in abundance!²

The Well as a FRESH WATER SOURCE

A fresh water source is often protected. This could be by “spirits” taboos that state when and when not to “stir up the water”. Water that flows is “living” and is valued higher than stagnant or “dead” water.

Today however, any fresh water source, spring or well would evoke commercial interests. With commercialization greed, a desire to monopolize and maximize profits is conjured up! This naturally moves fresh water from the public community locale to the private domain. Its value is monetized and rated way beyond the reach of the Samaritan type of people: the rural poor!

The value of water as the foundation of creation and something indispensable for the wellbeing of humans, plants and animals is in danger of only remaining as a metaphor or an idiomatic saying!³ Water may soon be stripped off its sacred character that makes it central in a ritual of Christian initiation through baptism.

This One Billion Dollar industry that is 40% the size of oil and that is fetching more money than Pharmaceutical is attracting International Foreign Investors. Viewed that way, this man at the well could easily have been the investor or “new owner”! That is perhaps why the Samaritan woman was in a hurry to claim ownership of the well.

WELLS AND WATER AND WARS

Even as I talk your minds may be wondering to places remote and near where people have fought over water, died of drought, signed treaties, flooded to death and used water to hide a child in a basket doomed to die by political decree!

My mind wonders when water pollution is mentioned. I do not immediately think of oil spills. I do not even remember the Christian tradition that depicts how human trespass

² The Holy Bible: John 10:10b.

³ Rev Dr Alexei Khamin.

such as greed does damage water; nor the punishment for this as recorded in Revelation 8:10-11; water is into “wormwood”!

I see dead bodies from Rwanda; dumped and floating over the water with babies still strapped on some women’s backs as the bodies floated by! This is the wormwood called “Genocide” that I see.

I also see the woman in talked to in Northern Uganda Concentration Camp: I see her waiting in line for 24 hours only to take home only 20 Liters of water! I see Sudanese women and girls living in fear of being raped on water queues; I remember a Treaty signed in 1829 with Egypt barring all other Nileic states from damming and irrigating out of the Nile: not to mention the Middle East!

“Water promises to be to the 21st century, what oil was to the 20th century: the precious commodity that determines the wealth of nations”⁴ There are debates about the use of water to maintain Golf courses and lawns and for production of **Ethanol**.

So where do we go with this?

Water has been called the mother of all MDGs⁵ **Water has also began to be used as a tool for Religious Reconciliation.**⁶ **No it began at the Well in Samaria.**

An interfaith project to provide clean piped water in eastern Rwanda is one practical way to make amends to Muslims in the east African country who had been marginalized in the past by Christians.⁷ "We Christians see it as one way of saying, 'We are sorry,'" said Kolini.

"This project signifies more than bringing water to those who lacked it before," said Sheikh Yussuf Bizuru, the grand imam of Rwanda's Eastern Province. "It offers to the rest of Africa and the world a model of harmonious interfaith cooperation for development."

The man at the well not only transcends cultural, religious, gender and other stereotypes but he also empowers and inspires the Samaritan woman to transcend the stereotypes her society had long defined and sustained! Viewed that way, the well becomes what Alexei Khamin calls “**A center for social Universe**”. It is a place of reconciliation: the woman was reconciled to herself first. She overcame the male designation of her identity and emerged as the first to break old barriers between two communities! The longstanding “war” between the Jews and Samaritans ended at the well.

As you go out into the world to preach the good news of the GOOD SHEPHERD, Remember that there are many who are thirsty for water of life. It is our duty to address

⁴ Fortune Magazine of May 2000.

⁵ Tibaijuka UN Habitat.

⁶ Ecumenical News International: Gatore, Rwanda; By Fredrick Nzwilli, April 09, 2008

⁷ Archbishop Kolini, Burundi.

- The THIRSTY “Jewish” and “Samaritan” woman at the wells of our communities today
- Our identity, religion, history, roots and culture
- True worship and the place of worship especially for Youths Anglicans in a secular world.

And ensure that ALL people can find

- The “WATER of LIFE” or living water that will quench our desire to consume more than what we really need.
- The one we are expecting:-the one who “when he comes, will tell them all things they ever did.
- “Socio-economic and political Infrastructure” constructed along lines that do not circumvent or marginalize the “Samaritans” as defined by our policies and national/personal and political relations today!
- An effective medium/language and skills for spiritual and socio-economic transformation and empowerment.

**We must meet them at their points of need;
help them regain their identity and empower them to transform their communities
So that**

**ALL MAY LIVE LIVES OF DIGNITY AND ABUNDANCE and NEVER
THIRST AGAIN!**