

Sermon for March 17, 2019

“Jesus Enjoyed the Company of Women (and Men)”

John 4:7-30

Staunton Church of the Brethren

Scott L. Duffey, Pastor

Jesus and the Samaritan woman – incredible story on so many levels – we’ll only address part of them today, but it’s an amazing passage. Jesus was on his way from Judea to Galilee. Even though Samaria lay smack dab in the middle, between these two regions, Jews would often avoid Samaria by crossing the Jordan River and travelling north through Perea. Jews and Samaritans had a long history of hatred for each other, so it wasn’t always safe. Notice, though, in the story that “he had to go through Samaria.” It was a faster route, but “had to”? Jesus had a purpose and a mission here that was intentional.

As he and his disciples travelled, they got tired and hungry, so they stopped by a well near Sychar that was known as Jacob’s well. I don’t think this was unintentional either. Jacob represented the past, the fathers of the faith, and the Torah, Jewish law, the way to God.

It was the middle of the day, noon, and the disciples went off to find food and left Jesus to rest by the well. And a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Now women usually went to the well in the early morning, or in the evening, but rarely in the middle of the day. Was this her time so she could avoid the other women in town, or was this divine providence? And Jesus spoke to her. Whoa! Jesus spoke to a Samaritan and a woman; not something a good Jew would have done. This moment was so weird, but it was meant to be. And she knew it was weird, too.

Jesus said, “Give me a drink.” Jesus asked a Samaritan woman to draw water from Jacob’s well for him. I don’t know which was worse, speaking to a Samaritan or a woman. She asked, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” And by the way, where’s your bucket? You’re not going to drink out of mine, are you?

Let's get some context here. In ancient Greece, a respectable woman was not allowed to leave the house unless she was accompanied by a trustworthy male escort. A wife was not permitted to eat or interact with male guests in her husband's home; she had to retire to her woman's quarters. Men kept their wives under lock and key, and women had the social status of a slave. Girls were not allowed to go to school, and when they grew up they were not allowed to speak in public. Women were considered inferior to men. The Greek poets equated women with evil. Remember Pandora and her box? Woman was responsible for unleashing evil on the world.

The status of Roman women was also very low. Roman law placed a wife under the absolute control of her husband, who had ownership of her and all her possessions. He could divorce her if she went out in public without a veil. A husband had the power of life and death over his wife, just as he did his children. As with the Greeks, women were not allowed to speak in public.

Jewish women, as well, were barred from public speaking. The oral law prohibited women from reading the Torah out loud. Synagogue worship was segregated, with women never allowed to be heard. Women were not eligible to testify in a Jewish court of law. Josephus, the historian, wrote that even the witness of multiple women was not acceptable "because of the levity and boldness of their sex." Whatever that meant.

And yet, Jesus started a conversation with her—a Samaritan, a woman—in public. The rabbinic oral law was quite explicit: "He who talks with a woman [in public] brings evil upon himself." Another rabbinic teaching prominent in Jesus' day taught, "One is not so much as to greet a woman." So we can understand why his disciples were amazed to find him talking to a woman in public when they returned with the food. Can we even imagine how it must have stunned this woman for the Messiah to reach out to her and offer her living water for her thirsty soul?

We know that Jesus went on to have a theological conversation with this woman, and then a personal one, all of which got her very excited and caused her to run to her village to proclaim Jesus. Mission accomplished. But what I want to stick with this morning is Jesus' bad

habit of enjoying the company of women. This wasn't the only woman that Jesus broke the law with.

Among Jesus' closest friends were Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who entertained him at their home. "Martha assumed the traditional female role of preparing a meal for Jesus, her guest, while her sister Mary did what only men would do, namely, learn from Jesus' teachings. Mary was the cultural deviant, but so was Jesus, because he violated the rabbinic law of his day [about speaking to women]." By teaching Mary spiritual truths, he violated another rabbinic law, which said, "Let the words of the Law [Torah] be burned rather than taught to women. . . . If a man teaches his daughter the law, it is as though he taught her lechery."

And then the first people Jesus chose to appear to after his resurrection were women; not only that, but he instructed them to tell his disciples that he was alive ([Matt. 28](#), [John 20](#)). In a culture where a woman's testimony was worthless because she was worthless, Jesus elevated the value of women beyond anything the world had seen. No, it wasn't just women, but the point is that Jesus treated everyone with respect and compassion. But for women, Jesus elevated their status to a level not seen before.

Author Dorothy Sayers, a friend of C.S. Lewis, wrote: "Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious."

Imagine the outrage when Jesus touched an adolescent girl, Jairus' daughter, to heal her; or praised the faith of the hemorrhaging woman. He healed a crippled woman whom he called a "daughter of Abraham." He healed the child of a Syrophenician woman. And he

commended them for their faith. One of his first acts was to heal Peter's mother-in-law, an early sign to Peter about the importance of every person.

Jesus wrote women into so many of his stories. He taught them, he healed them, he touched them, he loved them – and they followed him and funded his ministry, women like Joanna and Susanna, who after being healed became benefactors. Even those he didn't touch directly brought their children to him. Technically, it wasn't a new idea. God has always reached out to women. Leonard Sweet calls to mind how Matthew's genealogy reminds us of five women in Jesus' personal history: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Each woman is a key member of Jesus' birth history in the line of David.

While the rest of the world continued to denigrate the place of women in society, Jesus and his followers insisted on the concept of human dignity and the value of every soul. And yet we still struggle in the world today, as well as in the church. Sweet reminds us, too, that "it took 1,800 years for the majority of Christian theologians to question seriously the morality of slavery. Some, he says, are still fighting over the oppression of women in the church and culture. The first modern Olympic games in 1896 had no female competitors and by the Stockholm Olympics in 1912, there were only 48 women out of 2,407 participants. Not until 1975 were Connecticut women legally allowed to take out loans or open bank accounts without their husbands permission. Change is still taking place in our culture, but what about the church, where Jesus himself paved the way?

Women were granted the privilege of ordination to ministry in the Church of the Brethren in 1958, and subsequent Annual Conference papers have called on the church to grant equal privilege to men and women in regards to local and national church leadership. Yet many people struggle. Jesus' actions seemed to clear. The issue for him was not male or female, slave or free, black or white, Samaritan or Jew, but "follow me;" "come to me;" "faith in life." With faith we are all one in him, on equal terms with him. One day, you may call a woman

pastor. I pray you will work with her on the same level that you have worked with me. We've had female board chairpersons and all the offices in the church. That's good for us.

But there's one more point to address. How we work together and receive each other's leadership and partnership in the church needs to translate into our everyday lives, too. Jesus didn't just elevate women in the church, but in the world. There are no second class citizens; there is no "she's just a woman" commentary. As today's little girls grow up, what kind of world are we giving to them? Is it safe? Is it fair? Is it respectful? Is it full of opportunities, the same that are there for boys? Jesus enjoyed the company of women, and men, and calls us all to love the Lord our God and to work that out in all our relationships in the world. We are one in the Spirit, and in life. Jesus, you were a bad influence.