

From Disgrace to Dignity – A Woman by a Well

The Great Canadian Bible Study, January 2010

Introduction

It is so difficult to read Scripture and not place the understandings of our day and age onto the reading of a passage. When we read of a woman who has been married five times and is now “living in sin” we believe we know her – or know her kind. This woman struggles with commitment. She must have wander-lust problems or some kind of emotional addictions, or she must be terribly hard to live with. Whatever we think, most of us think that this is a woman with problems. She is the problem. She is not well. She is sinful.

I wonder if we are being totally fair to this one that we think we know because of a few words of Scripture. Perhaps it is time that we dig a little deeper into the history behind her story. This woman is from Samaria, not North America and her situation is quite different from the culture to which we are accustomed. She wears a label – divorced. That label is hard enough to bear today in Canada, but what did it mean to a woman in her day?

Last year, we learned about the importance of a name in the one called Tabitha, but in this story, our subject is nameless except for labels. To simply refer to her as “that woman” – places us with the neighbors she would avoid by going for her water at noon when no one was around. If you would forgive my boldness, I would like to name her *Samantha* for the purpose of this study. *Samantha* reminds me that she is from Samaria and also it is a Hebrew derivative that means, “Listener of God” and I believe that is an accurate description of her character. So let me introduce you to *Samantha*, the woman Jesus met, spoke with, listened to, understood and redeemed by the well in Samaria.

Preparation

Begin this study by reading aloud together Psalm 5: 1 – 8. Have another person read it again and ask yourself what word or phrase speaks to your life today. Share your thoughts. Read it a third time and think what word or phrase might speak to *Samantha* and her life situation. Share those ideas with one another. Spend a moment in prayer asking that God would open your mind and heart to the word that he would speak to you in this study.

Read John 4: 1 – 42 as an overview of the story.

1. What are the strikes that *Samantha* has against her that would make it unwise for Jesus to speak with her?
2. Was *Samantha* taking any risks in speaking back to Jesus?
3. **Focus on verses 16 – 18.** Share some ideas of how this woman might have found herself in this situation of having had many husbands.

It is possible that she may have been widowed at some point, but not likely each time. It is important to consider the following concerning the rules surrounding divorce in Jewish and Eastern Culture. Marriage was primarily considered as a legal financial arrangement and obtaining a wife was very similar to obtaining other property. Though a wife was considered a man’s “most valued possession”, she was a possession none the less. There was no provision for a woman to divorce her husband, but it was rather easy for a man to dismiss his wife as unsatisfactory. A wife could never divorce her husband, though possibly she could make his life so miserable it might force him to divorce her but it would be a great financial disadvantage for her to do so. She was a man’s property that he purchased by the bride-price. There was a cost to divorce as the bride price would have to be

returned to the family. The less value the woman held, the less secure she would be. The divorce was always from first to last, in Jewish law, the husband's act." The common term used in the Bible for divorce is shilluach 'ishshah, "the sending away of a wife"

The following was the usual form of a decree:

"On the ____ day of the week ____ in the month ____ in the year ____ from the beginning of the world, according to the common computation in the province of ____ I ____ the son of ____ by whatever name I may be known, of the town of ____ with entire consent of mind, and without any constraint, have divorced, dismissed and expelled thee ____ daughter of ____ by whatever name thou art called, of the town who hast been my wife hitherto; But now I have dismissed thee ____ the daughter of ____ by whatever name thou art called, of the town of ____ so as to be free at thy own disposal, to marry whomsoever thou pleasest, without hindrance from anyone, from this day for ever. Thou art therefore free for anyone (who would marry thee). Let this be thy bill of divorce from me, a writing of separation and expulsion, according to the law of Moses and Israel.

____, the son of ____, witness

All that was needed for a man to dismiss his wife was a written note to say that the husband was no longer pleased. It really didn't matter if the woman was faithful and devoted or not. Perhaps she couldn't bear children; perhaps she didn't cook well enough; perhaps she was simply physically unpleasing in her looks. It is also important to remember that most marriages were arranged and the girls were very young when they were married off for financial, social or political reasons. There are not too many love stories but "mutual arrangements". And then . . . to be dismissed.

4. From this information, consider what happened to Samantha and how she came to be "dismissed" from her husband? What would it do to her sense of self worth and esteem?
5. What would she experience when she was dismissed a second time? A third time?
6. Share a personal example or what some women may have experienced in being "dismissed". Perhaps their ideas or opinions are dismissed. Perhaps you have felt dismissed in a friendship, or ignored when you had something important to contribute. Are there ways that you can think of where women are dismissed as invalid?

Consider this Samaritan woman in a new light. Once she was a young girl with dreams of a bright future. She was married to a man that she wanted to please, but something went wrong, and she was dismissed. She was now "damaged goods". What respectful man would marry a divorced woman? Perhaps he was a man who had another wife already – or someone who had no dowry to offer, or nothing valuable to use for bargaining. She was just second rate merchandise - the price had gone down. And so she is married again – but that does not work out. Through no choice of her own, she is dismissed again – and again – and again. She is used and abused until finally the last man doesn't even bother to marry her, declaring her to be of no value. (Living common-law was not a common practice).

7. In what ways did Jesus NOT dismiss Samantha? How did he validate her as a person of dignity and worth?
8. How do you envision the tone of voice that Jesus used with Samantha? What words or actions or attitudes showed respect to this one who had lost all self-respect and respect from her community?
9. How does Jesus handle her questions? Again, how do his responses show that he takes Samantha seriously?
10. What do Samantha's questions regarding worship reveal about her character? What did Jesus see that others missed?

Focus now on John 4: 27 – 30

1. What happened to Samantha that gave her the courage to face the people that distained her? What part of the conversation made the difference in her life? What words of Jesus would have impacted your life and changed yourself image?
2. What change would the community have noticed that would make them listen to her and want to follow her?

“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him. John 4: 29-30

Samantha lived in a society that also dismissed her, thus she was left alone to gather the daily water in the heat of the day - out of sight and out of mind to those in her community. Somehow her encounter with Jesus gave her the courage to break that social barricade down and she ran to them with an invitation. “Come; see a man who told me everything I ever did!” What did Jesus say to her that gave her the courage to face down those very people that had dismissed and shunned her most of her life?

For some reason, it has been always assumed that when Jesus told her everything she ever did, that he spent the time listing all of her sinful living patterns and errant behaviors. Would that listing of all her “badness” give her the courage to face the very community that already knew that list and called her on it daily????

It has occurred to me that perhaps as Jesus talked to this woman down at the well, he actually told her about her good qualities. Perhaps he reminded her of the hopes and dreams that she had as a child and how full of life and promise she had been. Maybe he mentioned times that she had been truly caring for others and had a giving heart. He may have told her that her longing to worship was a good thing which revealed her desire to know God and love God. Yes, he may also have mentioned the areas of her life that weren't so great – but I don't think he needed to dwell on that. She lived each day with the reminders of her past. I believe it was her infinite value as a woman that Jesus recounted to her at the well.

3. I realize that I am speculating on what the conversation may have been between Jesus and Samantha that is not recorded in Scripture, but how do you respond to the above paragraph? Is there any validity in the thought that Jesus might have talked about her life in positive ways, as well as the struggles?
4. What gifts did Jesus give to Samantha on this day?

5. What gifts does Jesus give to all women through the telling and retelling of this story?
6. Read verses 39 – 42: What is our greatest witness to our world today? What changes in your life bear witness to the power of Christ?
7. Where is your “Samaria”? Samaria is that territory where live those that you don’t really like – the people that you don’t really understand, or agree with, pay much attention to. What is a Samaria that God is calling his believers to where we need to bring dignity to an oppressed people or honor their ways of worship? What is the good news that we can bring?

By sharing in this Great Canadian Bible Study together and contributing a Toonie or more to the Eva Rose York Bible and Technical School in Tuni, India, you are helping young girls find their dignity and worth in a culture that can be very harsh toward women. India still practices arranged marriages and the bride’s family must come up with a dowry that can be as much as six times the family’s yearly income. It is a great burden on most families but particularly harsh on poor, rural families which is the status of most of these girls at the school. By learning a trade and improving their education, their chances are greater for succeeding in life. Thank you for your support of this ministry that gives dignity and hope to beautiful girls like these.

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