

The Alien and the Stranger

The story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:5-42) raises intriguing questions. One of these is substantive: is truth more important than religion? The other seems trivial: why did the Samaritan woman leave her water jar at the well?

We shall get to these questions later.

Reinterpreting Religion

The inner dynamic of this story is interesting. In this dialogue with the unnamed Samaritan woman, Jesus reinterprets religion and Scripture. We might see this clearly if we take these new insights of Jesus in turn. We begin with the reinterpretation of religion.

In six different instances, Jesus calls for a new approach to religion.

First, he tells the woman there are no permanent sacred places. Spirit and truth matter, not geography and architecture. This is radical at a time when Jerusalem and the Temple were paramount and sacrosanct. The woman at the well is told that she is at a sacred place wherever she finds spirit and truth.

Second, structure is disposable. Judaism and Samaria had two competing systems at this time, each with its own set of orthodoxies and denunciations. The woman asks which of the two institutions is the right one. Jesus responds that structures are temporary and are meant to serve the larger realities of spirit and truth.

Third, religions need boundaries but God does not. The woman reminds Jesus that he is in Samaria. Jesus, in effect, says, "So what!" He discounts the boundaries: Jerusalem and Samaria or a man talking to a woman in public. People do not cease being human or needy at any of the boundaries others choose to draw around them.

Fourth. Laws, like boundaries, are arbitrary. The jar the woman would use to give Jesus a drink would be considered unclean to a pious Jew. The uncleanliness was not hygienic but theological. The woman was part of an heretical and traitorous tribe. Everything she touched was unclean. Jesus asks nonetheless: "May I have a drink?"

Fifth. Jesus excludes violence from religion. If we go to Luke 9, we get a context. In that chapter, James and John go to a village in Samaria. They are rejected as they preach. On return to Jesus, they ask if he might help them rain down fire from heaven on the Samaritans and destroy them. Jesus tells them they have missed the spirit of his message. He is not about violence. Spirit and truth do not need violence to prevail, neither the violence of lethal destruction nor the violence of defining a whole people as evil or, indeed, an entire gender as inferior. The Reign of God happens when people gather together, not when some of them are told they do not belong because of who they are.

Sixth. Moral norms bring their own exceptions with them. This woman had five husbands and is now living with a sixth man. She is a scandal in her own village and the women there shun her. This is why she comes for water alone, at noon, rather than early morning. Jesus knows this and tells her he knows it. Yet he does not shun her. He asks her for water and he talks to her about God and salvation, about spirit and truth, about times when religion and boundaries are too small for the human heart.

What kind of religion, then, does Jesus have in mind? A religion with no emphasis on sacred places (because sooner or later people kill for them) or structures (because sooner or later they drift into politics) or laws (so often rigid) or violence (suffering is to be avoided, not inflicted) or moral norms (because when they are unbending they encourage judgmentalism and self-righteousness).

Jesus is talking about a religion of spirit and truth, so different from what most of us still call religion.

We have an answer to the question we raised at the beginning of this conversation. Is truth more important than religion? Jesus says it is. Religions do not manufacture truth; they serve it.

Reinterpreting Scripture

Jesus, we said, reinterprets not only religion but Scripture. It is time to look at that now.

Jesus is not a literalist. He deals with symbols and deeper meanings. I would like to consider four instances.

First, he asks for water. But water is a symbol for something else. The water is never drawn and Jesus does not get a drink. This is not about water as such.

It begins literally and the Samaritan woman takes it at that level. She tells Jesus: "You will never get water from this well because you have no bucket. Jacob once came here and he needed a bucket. Who do you think you are? Are you greater than Jacob?"

Jesus: "The literal water here cannot quench spiritual thirst. That remains no matter how much water you drink. I bring you deeper waters, living waters, waters that are always with you and that do not require you to go back to a well for more."

The woman wants to keep it literal. "I would love to not make this trip every day."

Jesus gives her time to grasp what he is saying. He changes the subject for a moment. "Come back with your husband and we will continue this conversation."

"I have no husband."

"I know. You have had five husbands and your present partner is not your husband. "

The woman is now uncomfortable. How does he know that? Why does he say this?

She does what we often do when we are uncomfortable. She changes the topic. To theology. Something nice and abstract.

"So you are a prophet. Let's talk theology. Jews and Samaritans argue about whether you meet God in Jerusalem or here on Mount Gerizim. Never mind the husband topic. Tell me whether the Jews or the Samaritans are right."

His answer startles her. "Neither really. Mountains and cities do not matter. Spirit and truth do. Just stay where you are and open your heart to spirit and truth. Even this well is a sacred place if you do that. The woman is overwhelmed and does what we often do when we are overwhelmed.

She becomes very concrete and very practical so she can get her bearings.

She looks at him and says, "We started with water. Do you want a drink?"

Jesus does not take a drink.

She asks deeper questions. “Who are you? Are you the Messiah?”

Jesus answers, “I am.”

A second instance of non-literal interpretation comes in the chapter preceding this passage (John 3).

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus by night for help on his spiritual journey.

Jesus: “You must be born again.”

Nicodemus takes this literally: “I cannot get back into my mother’s womb.”

Jesus: “I do not mean this literally. I’m not talking about physical re-birth. I am talking about spirit, a kingdom of the spirit, one with no boundaries and no time limits. The rebirth happens with God’s grace. One may be reborn at any time.”

A third example of moving beyond literalism occurs when the disciples return. They see Jesus talking at some level of intensity with a woman who is alone. They are startled, confused, a little embarrassed.

The woman leaves as they arrive. Without the water jar.

The Gospel flashes forward as the disciples arrive. The woman is in the village and proclaims excitedly.

“I know many of you wonder about me and keep a distance. But I tell you, I just met the Messiah. He spoke with me. He is just outside town, at the well. See for yourself. Don’t miss him. I will take you to him.”

Now, a flash back to present time as the disciples approach.

“Rabbi, you have not eaten all day. We just bought some food. Eat something.”

“I have enough food.”

“Where did you get it? We do not see food here.”

“I am not talking literally. I have deeper nourishment, better bread, the bread of life. The bread you bought stops hunger. But spiritual hunger requires God’s Spirit to end it.”

The last instance of reaching past literalism is evident if you watch the use of titles in this text. The woman begins literally: “You are a Jew. I can see that.”

Not long after she gives Jesus a different title, one not so visible, one with which Samaritans can connect: “Sir, you are a prophet.”

Later: “Are you the Messiah?”

Finally: “You are the Savior of the world.”

Conclusion

And, so, religion has been reinterpreted. Truth is more than religion. And Scripture has been reinterpreted. It is about the spirit of the text, not the letter. Truth and spirit. For everyone. At any time. Everywhere.

The water jar. Why did the woman leave it?

For the first time in her life, something, someone, reached her heart. Five husbands did not. She feels all the disappointments of her life at the beginning of this dialogue.

“You speak to me, a Samaritan, a woman, and such a woman. Why do you think I am alone here when I come for water?”

“Your heart is arid and your life is thirsty for something worthwhile. The water at this well will not help. I do not see a woman or a Samaritan. I see someone who has been looking for God and happiness for her whole life and never found either.”

“Why would the Messiah talk to me? You know what I am. And, yet, you will take water from me, an unclean woman. Sir, would you wait here? Do not go away. I will be back. I am not the only one who has been disappointed with life, with religion.”

She leaves the water jar there. Don't miss that line in the Gospel.

Who cares about water and arid religions when you find spirit and truth? When you find God and see that God is on your side and that God is aware of all the heart-ache, all the missed opportunities, the roads that went nowhere, the marriages that failed, those in your life who see nothing of worth in you.

On such a day, water does not matter and the irrelevancies of institutional religion do not count. On such a day, you come to understand that there is more in life than coping (going to work everyday, drawing water endlessly from a well that leaves you dry). There is more to life than religious observance, especially those observances that take away your heart, your life, your dreams, those observances that never give you God.

The woman runs into town not only to bring people to the well but to let them know she has just met someone who healed all the broken places in her heart and gave her the life she always wanted.

When she realizes she left the well without the water jar, she says in effect:

“I left the water jar behind. It is not important now because I just found the Savior of the world.”

Anthony T. Padovano
Catholic Theologian
Pastor, Inclusive Community
2008