

The Inclusive Good News—All are Valued

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One of the things I love about the Bible is that it's filled with wonderful stories which, if we read them carefully, end up surprising us in wonderful ways. Unfortunately, most of the time, we treat them as little stories with a moral for how we should live. But that's not the purpose of these stories. They are not like Aesop's fables which are intended to teach a life lesson or a moral. They are not rules or commands or doctrine. Rather, these open-ended tales invite us to struggle with their meaning and learn to see a different kind of world in which we might see our lives in new ways.

When we consider these biblical stories in that way, we discover that the Bible is a subversive set of writings. These stories turn our world upside down. We suddenly discern an insight which invites us to change how we've looked at life. We discover new ways of looking at the world, at ourselves, at each other, and the divine force at work in the world.

One such story is found in chapter 4 of John's Gospel. Briefly, Jesus and his disciples are travelling through Samaria, the territory of some ancient enemies of the Jews. Like the Metis people, they were the descendants of intermarriage between the original peoples and foreign conquerors.

Jesus stops at a well at midday, the hottest part of the day. He is surprised to find a woman drawing water, because no one goes to the well at this time of day. He asks her for a drink. It surprises her, because Jews don't talk to Samaritans, and men don't normally speak to women on their own. Jesus is breaking all the rules of polite society!

The two go back and forth; near the end of the conversation, Jesus asks her to bring her husband to the well. She says, "I have no husband." Jesus replies, "That's right. You've had five husbands, and the man you're with now isn't your husband."

Here's a moment to pause and listen carefully. We never find out how Jesus knew this, and we wonder what he will say next. This could have been an opportunity to shame her. In that culture, a woman without a husband risks economic ruin. Divorce would have been a matter of shame. She was deeply vulnerable, one of the lowest among the low.

Had he wanted to, Jesus could have scored some serious points: "I'm a prophet, and you're a sinner." "I'm celibate, and you're promiscuous." "You're living in sin by living with a man who is not your husband."

With compassion, Jesus says none of those things. She was already vulnerable. The other women in the village shunned her since she was at the well alone in the hottest part of the day. She had learned to avoid their gossiping tongues and sly glances. She was burdened by their attitudes, and she has drawn a hard shell around herself so others could no longer wound her.

I can't help but wonder how many others, like this unnamed woman, have learned to stay away from the gossiping tongues and judgmental glances of people. How many people avoid Christians because they are judged? How many people stay away from a church which has hurt them in countless ways too deep for anyone else to see?

Jesus doesn't add to her burdens. He doesn't say, "Go and sin no more." He doesn't send her away. He doesn't shame her. Instead, he sees her and engages with her. His disciples are astonished to find him speaking with this outsider who has three strikes against her: she's a woman, a Samaritan, and a sinner.

But Jesus chooses to treat her as a person of value, a woman who has borne her share of pain, a cherished person who is valued simply because she is a human being. He invites her to become part of a community which “worships in spirit and in truth.”

To the consternation of his disciples, Jesus shares himself with this lowly woman, this outcast, this enemy of his people. He invites her into a community of people who live the good news that was at the heart of his own life. He treats her with dignity and compassion. Indeed, Jesus “suffers with” her, which is the root meaning of compassion. He sees her, enters into her pain, touches her gently, and treats her with such love that she ends up running into the village to proclaim that Jesus is the one for whom they’ve been waiting their whole lives long.

Lots of Christian leaders these days get a lot of attention in the media with their self-righteous grandstanding and self-promotion. Imagine how different the church and the world would be if we who claim to follow Jesus actually lived as Jesus lived, who did what Jesus did. Imagine how different life might be if we showed others in word and deed that all are precious, treasured, valued.

This is the subversive heart of the gospel. It’s not about doing the right things, living the right way, or believing the right things. Rather, it’s about living with the love of God whose love embraces everyone, even those whom our society tries to shame. As one writer states it, “Jesus loves everyone. Get over it!”

This is the radical, subversive heart of the gospel. The good news embraces gay and straight, rich and poor, men and women, the addicted and the ones in recovery. God’s love cradles everyone.

If this story has a lesson in it, it’s a lesson for the church to be this radically inclusive and welcoming. The world may treat some as outsiders; the church which follows Jesus cannot live that way.

Rather, as Jesus does with this woman, we reach out to include all people. Like Jesus, we say to all, “You are known; you are loved.”