

## WORSHIPPING IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

John 4: 5-30, 39-42

Have you ever felt self-conscious, embarrassed, even ashamed? I'm sure you have. We all have. Being human and living with other human beings means that there will be times when we feel self-conscious, embarrassed, even ashamed. How other people see us... how other people think of us... how we think they feel about us... this all plays a much bigger part in our lives than we want to admit. We may feel quite confident about ourselves. We may have a very healthy self-acceptance. We may be surrounded by a lot of people who care about us and love us as we are. But it doesn't take all that much for our confidence to be shaken, our self-acceptance to be questioned, and our positive view of ourselves to be undermined.

Being human is being vulnerable to the opinion and evaluation of others. This also forms our own self-assessment and our own standards. From our morals and ethics, to our style, to our taste in things, we live in a comparative environment. And if we cannot find others who share our values, measures, tastes and styles, we can find ourselves feeling lonely and isolated.

So what happens when people praise us, admire us and follow our opinions and evaluations? We feel on top of the world. What happens when people judge us or put us down? We feel pretty worthless. Those of us who can take criticism and judgement and still hold our ground, are people who have had and continue to have the kind of loving support and acceptance of people we respect and love in return. But when the people close to us judge us and criticize us, we can really feel awful, embarrassed, guilty, humiliated, even ashamed. We need to find our ground again.

Well, all of this reflection helps us understand what is at stake in Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman. Jesus' world is a world of status. Whether you are rich or poor, free or slave, Jew or gentile, male or female, old or young... whether you are a Jew or non-Jew, or even worse, a Samaritan... wherever you fall within such distinctions, you also fit into a hierarchy of value. And on top of that, Jesus' world is a world of moral evaluations. How you live according to the moral rules established by a religious system monitored by religious officials in a religious state, makes all the difference.

Now maybe today we are not in a part of the world where our place is very much inscribed and enforced by religious and political officials. But even in Canada, even within our families, even among friends or colleagues at work or neighbours or what have you... evaluations, judgements, and comparisons are made all the time. People

feel judged, criticized, humiliated, guilty and ashamed often enough if they care. We may be free legally to believe what we want and do what we want if it doesn't hurt anyone else or interfere with their rights, but that doesn't mean we do not feel pressured to conform or isolated and rejected when we choose differently. We can feel guilty by our own standards of judgement or because the people whose opinion we care about judge us as deficient.

Well, Jesus' world is a world of very tightly structured moral standards and a social hierarchy of value. And in this world Jesus says and does some radical things that offend the authorities very deeply. This is why he gets himself into serious trouble. But why does he do it? Is he just wanting to rebel against the system because he's agitated or bored or angry? Well, he is angry, but not because life is meaningless or dead-end. No. Jesus is passionate about God and redefining God according to love. True love tears through hierarchies of evaluations and moral rules to reach a person's true value. God loves each and every one of us because God has made us. Whether we have made mistakes, whether we fail and fall on whatever moral scale we are judged by, God is invested in our flourishing.

Jesus reveals and embodies this in his encounters with specific people. The story in our reading this morning occupies a whole chapter in the gospel. It has to be important. So what does it say?

Well, before we can appreciate what Jesus says, we are given a whole bunch of information about the woman he is talking to. First of all she is a woman. Women have an important place in Jesus' world, but not in the way we may think. Women produce children, they care for and manage the household. But women are not engaged as persons in their own right, with minds and spirits who hunger for genuine conversation and thought about spiritual matters. Second, this woman is a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans hate each other. The source of the conflict goes back centuries. They have rival places of worship. They consider each other as fallen and cursed people. Third, this woman has serious moral failings from a social point of view. She lives with the shame and humiliation of having been divorced or widowed 5 times. Once, maybe it may happen, but 5 times? Now that's cursed. What's wrong with her that she has been rejected so often? Of course, the problem has to be her, no?

And on top of this shame, humiliation and failure, the man she is living with now is not even her legal husband. I guess beggars can't be choosers. If there is a man willing to take care of her, she has little choice but to accept the deal even if it's the last thing she wants. A woman in that world has few options. She can't work outside the home unless

she's willing to sell her body for sex or slavery. Without a man to care for her, she is finished.

So then, for Jesus not only to talk to this woman, but to have a deeply spiritual conversation with her, to take her seriously and to reveal to her deep things about himself.... And for this to occupy a whole chapter in the gospel... This is radical stuff!

And what does Jesus actually say to her? He says that it doesn't matter who you are, what place you occupy on the hierarchy of value, whether you worship the Jewish way or the Samaritan way, whether you have much that is shameful, humiliating, failed or flawed in your life... 'the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth.'

So what does this mean? And what does it do in this woman's life?

Well, what it means is that God is interested in connecting with us spiritually regardless of where we fit on whatever scale of value we or others hold. It means that regardless of what we have done or not done God is not dissuaded from seeking a deep connection with us. It means that we have to clear all the self-imposed or other imposed barriers erected to block our access to God or God's access to us, and God forbid if we are the ones erecting barriers for others... barriers of judgement and condemnation... barriers of our own rules of better and worse... barriers of value and worth... Barriers of our own creedal formulas of what it means to be saved...

Jesus sees something in this woman this woman may not see in herself. Jesus draws it forth from her. He offers her the living water that will quench her spiritual thirst in a way that always gives and gives and gives...

And what does this encounter do for this woman? Clearly she is no passive participant in the encounter. First of all, she engages Jesus. She doesn't just listen to him and take what he has to say at face value. She questions him. But the more she questions Jesus and engages him, the more she is drawn in, the more she receives, the more Jesus reveals who he is...

So then, not only is this woman met by Jesus past all the barriers that would separate them, but she fully engages interactively with him and only by so doing, receives the living water.

Finally, she goes out and tells others. She goes out and lives out of the spiritual water she has received and others begin to drink so that Jesus is met by others. All the shame, humiliation and failure that would have kept her away from talking with others, from going out... all that would keep her under a man she may not even have loved... all of this falls away. This woman goes out boldly, freely, openly and proclaims the gospel of Jesus, the living water.

So then, what does all this mean for you and me?

First of all, we can only receive from God if we engage God. Shame, humiliation, anger, contempt for ourselves or others, judgement... it's all a barrier from honest heart to heart engagement with God. If we've never really questioned God and talked with God, waiting for God to speak to us and tried to discern God speaking through the people around us or situations where our true feelings and inner stirrings come forth... It's all a process and it's all a journey... But the question is always this: Is God a key factor on our journey? Is God a key companion of ours? Are we engaging God all the way? Or do we give up on such engagement because it feels strange, or because we've been disappointed or disillusioned, or because we feel unworthy and ashamed?

So then, unless we engage with the God who is always seeking us, nothing will happen to transform us spiritually into actors rather than those who are simply acted upon within the drama that is our life.

Second, we need to stop blaming others for the barriers erected between us and God, us and a fuller life, us and the call of God on our life. Whether we want to blame Samaritans or Jews, our parents or our ex-friends or lovers or family members... whether we want to blame our boss, our neighbour, our circumstances, our bad luck, God or whatever, life cannot reveal it's open doors if we are stuck within the closed rooms of our own imaginings... Yes bad things happen... yes we make mistakes... yes there is shame and guilt and anger and agony... But resurrection life is the always new possibilities of life breaking new ground in our lives. There is always a new door opening, but we don't always see it because it's not always where we are so fixated in looking for it or hoping it will be. We may discover that it is somewhere else, and only as we walk into this somewhere else will we find a fullness we never imagined.

The Samaritan woman walked into the door Jesus was opening, she drank the water that this Jew who talked like a prophet was giving her... and once she did that, she saw not only a prophet but the Messiah... she saw possibilities for her life she never imagined within the narrow confines of her circumstances and reputation... What about

you and me? Do we see possibilities for our lives beyond the narrow confines of our circumstances or expectations?

Finally, this woman takes a risk and goes out and engages others as she has been engaged. Jesus takes her seriously and gives her the best gift: water that will quench her thirst again and again forever. She then goes out in joy and empowerment to speak in faith, hope and love to the people around her, inviting them to experience and receive the gift rather than hoarding it for herself. What a gamble and a risk! If they made fun of her she would only be further humiliated and put down. But she was emboldened and empowered, and the opposite happened. They all came to see this Jesus for themselves. She took a chance, she was empowered to risk, she was emboldened to go out, and it bore rich fruit. It changed her life.

What about you and me? Where are we stuck? Is it shame or humiliation or a sense of our unworthiness or inadequacy or deficiency?... Is it our anger or resentment or envy of what others have versus what we have, who they are versus who we are?... Is it our fear of risking and trusting an open door and walking through it?... Is it our inability to believe that anything new can come into our lives right now to change them toward joy and fullness given our circumstances in health or relationships or finances, or, or, or?

Let us pray: God... we are here, each of us... Are you with us? Are you above us? Are you beside us? Are you within us?... Give us eyes to see, ears to hear... show us the open door. Give us water to quench our thirst. Help us find the well again and again so that we'll know where to go when we are thirsty. And may we know that your love for us will never change no matter what others think about us or we think about us.... Whether we are deluded by our grandeur or stuck in the pit of our misery, may we know that your love for us is total, infinite, inexhaustible, ready to keep flowing through us, quenching our thirst... Amen.