

April 10 2016

TEXT: John 4:5–24

TITLE: The Truth of Our Stories

What did Jesus do, *really*? Why does this story take up a whole chapter of John's Gospel? What's so important about it anyway? He didn't perform any miracles. He didn't turn water into wine or feed thousands with just a few loaves of bread. He didn't cure leprosy or raise anyone from the dead—but somehow, in this short exchange, Jesus changed a life.

So what did he *do*, really? He had a conversation. He acknowledged another human being. He named the truth of a woman's story in ways no one else had. Jesus spoke aloud the words that often go unspoken—the dynamics that the community in which she lived had just taken for granted. The woman at the well had had five husbands and the man she was with was not her husband. The woman with whom he spoke was an outcast and pariah, barren and unwanted, doomed to draw water alone in the heat of the day.

So often our modern read of this text situates this woman in 20th century America. We easily see Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor standing beside the well speaking with Jesus. We picture a woman about whom many have been known to gossip—she practically *invites it* herself—running through a string of men at whim, convicted by Jesus' words and compelled deep in her heart to change her ways. This unnamed woman has been, in our eyes, a sinner for so long: promiscuous, unfaithful to the core.

We fail to remember that in Jesus' day, this woman would have had no authority to choose her first spouse—let alone her fifth. As a woman, she had no power to make decisions for herself, no power to choose her husband, no power to earn her own money, no power to own her own land. Most likely she was one who was trapped in a process known as Levirate marriage—in which the brother of her first husband would marry her if she had no male children to care for her after her husband's death. If she had no male children with this brother, and her second husband died, she would be passed along to the next brother in line. Marriages were often polygamous and women were property—first of their father and then of their husband. Then, they became the responsibility of their sons.

This woman was a victim of a patriarchal system that robbed her of agency, limited her security, compromised her safety, and left her stigmatized and alone. What's more, she *was blamed* for her dire situation—an outcast on the edge of town resigned to drawing water alone in the heat of the day.

But this encounter with Jesus changed all of that. We read that Jesus did not see her as the labels that had been put upon her—a woman, a widow, a Samaritan. He acknowledged her humanity although others had not. As he told her her story, he was not calling out her sin but rather declaring that she was one of the sinned-

against. Jesus was naming the injustice that had defined her life and which marginalized her from her own community. He was validating her worth.

It was just a conversation. It was just a few simple honest words. But this story tells of a life that was changed. A woman who we meet alone now runs to town to tell a crowd of people all about Jesus' love. She becomes a great evangelist—and in an instant this woman, who had been the village outcast, is the one everyone is following. She who had been ignored is now heard. She who had been left out is now accepted. She who had been discarded is now valued. She who had been snubbed is now loved.

By hearing Jesus tell the truth of her story, the woman was then empowered to tell the truth of Jesus' story. She was transformed and renewed. She had reason to hope. This man who wasn't even supposed to talk with her named the truth of her predicament, and in doing so had somehow disempowered the system that bound her, releasing its hold on her. And in this surprising exchange, he entrusted her with the truth of who he was, what he was here for, and the promise only he could offer.

There is something to this truth telling. There is something important in naming the truth of our stories—of calling out the tough stuff underneath the façade of our lives and boldly speaking out loud what IS. This truth telling somehow disempowers the hold our secrets or our abuses or our wounds have over us. Telling the truth is the first step toward transformation, healing and wholeness.

Truth and reconciliation commissions have been established worldwide, affirming the principle that telling the truth about oppression and harm is the first step in a long journey toward healing. We see them in South Africa, following apartheid; in Canada, following the forced relocation of Aboriginal children; in Liberia, following decades of oppressive regimes—these truth and reconciliation commissions have not shied away from the difficult reality of oppressive systems and their impacts—governmentally and personally—on the lives of others. They affirm the lesson at the heart of our text:

We need to tell the truth.

We need to tell the truth that the woman at the well is no stranger to us. She is our neighbor, our sister, the woman we pass at the bus station on our way to work. She is us.

We need to tell the truth that oppression and marginalization of women and girls worldwide persists to this day, with devastating effects.

We need to tell the truth that sexism lays the groundwork for a global pandemic against women, across every color, every class, every sexual identity, in every

country. Former President Jimmy Carter calls the mistreatment of women worldwide the greatest human rights abuse of our day.

Women worldwide are vulnerable: to government systems that issue legislation impacting women but in which they don't have equal representation; in justice systems that blame victims and make it difficult to adequately prosecute cases of violence against women; in workplaces that do not value their labor or honor their gifts for leadership; in relationships that secure the dominance of men over women. And we must notice the points of intersection behind and within these statistics—that woman of color are more vulnerable than white women; that women who are poor are more vulnerable than those who are rich; that women who are lesbian, bisexual or transgender are more vulnerable than those who are cis and straight.

Sexism—the institutionalized notion that women are inferior to men—creates an environment that is nothing short of lethal for women and girls worldwide. In spite of gains made in our country and throughout the world, we must name the truth that this pandemic persists and change must come.

Statistics paint a terrifying picture, laying out the divide that remains between women and men:

According to the United Nations, in 2015, women worldwide earned between 70-90 cents for every dollar earned by a man, in both developing and developed countries. Compare that to the U.S. where a white woman gets paid 77 cents to every dollar that a man is paid. A black or Latina woman is likely to be paid only 54 cents to every dollar that a man is paid. This means that for white women in the U.S., the earning gap is still proportionally lower below the median for all women world-wide and that black and Latina women in the U.S. have statistically worse earning potential proportionally than women the world over. Women hold less than 20% of all leadership roles in government worldwide; and only 4% of CEOs of the world's largest 500 companies are women.

When it comes to violence:

1 in every 3 women worldwide has been a victim of violence. Of those who have been victimized 2/3 of all women have known their assailant. 800,000 people each year are being sold into sexual slavery, including here in the U.S.—80 percent of whom are women and girls. In the U.S., one in five women will be raped at some point in their lives, and one in two will be sexually assaulted. Women with disabilities are victims of sexual assault at twice the rate of the general population; One in ten Transgender women have been sexually assaulted in a healthcare setting.

The lists of statistics could go on. But our charge is to remember that behind each statistic is the story of an unnamed woman whose reality must be spoken,

whose oppression must be called out, whose value must be named. The stories represent not only the impact of sexism on their lives but also the gifts of women—their courage, strength, and agency within systems that tried to say otherwise.

We could talk about Eman Mohammed, who, at age 19 became the first female reporter in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. She tells of her colleagues who drove her into an open air strike area under the guise of covering a story together, only to leave her in the field, explosions all around her, as they laughed and drove away. She continued to do her work, and says: “As a Palestinian female photographer, the journey of struggle, survival and everyday life has inspired me to overcome the community taboo and see a different side of war and its aftermath. I became a witness with a choice: to run away or stand still.”¹

We can talk about Meera Vijayann, an Indian woman who was the victim of sexual violence. Yet after hearing the news report of a 23-year-old woman who was the victim of a vicious assault on a bus in Delhi December 2012, she began reporting on life in India, what the experience was like on the ground in Bangalore, and serving as an activist to affirm that women’s choice in clothing did not invite assault. She writes:

“You see, no one ever tells you that true empowerment comes from giving yourself the permission to think and act.”²

We can even talk about the U.S. Women’s national soccer team and name the ugly truth that they are being paid a quarter of what the men’s team is receiving in spite of their winning record and revenue. We can speak the names of Hope Solo, Carli Lloyd and Alex Morgan—and tell the story of their fight for equality, as we can likewise tell the stories of their numerous victories—including 3 Women’s World Cup titles and four Olympic Gold Medals.

We must name the oppression that exists—and name that women are not just victims. We are God’s children, gifted, and called to serve.

I can tell that my early life of faith was shaped by sexism even as it was by a love of Christ. As one raised in a denomination that did not permit me to serve as an acolyte, have my feet washed on Maundy Thursday, or approach the altar in certain churches, I was reminded weekly that women were not viewed as authentic disciples and our service to God was subordinate to the call upon men.

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https://www.ted.com/talks/eman_mohammed_the_courage_to_tell_a_hidden_story/transcript?language=en

2

https://www.ted.com/talks/meera_vijayann_find_your_voice_against_gender_violence/transcript?language=en

I *knew* this wasn't true. I knew that I would leave the denomination of my upbringing as a soon as I left home for college, heartbroken that I would no longer share worship with my family in the same way as I had throughout my life. I didn't know then that I would receive a call to Pastoral Ministry and be ordained as a minister in the PC(USA). It is a continual reminder that God can take our broken places and bring new life, just as God gifts, calls and claims us all.

As we gather around the table today, we are reminded that we are called to these sacred encounters— with Jesus and with one another. As we share the bread and the cup, we celebrate that Christ holds together what the world tries to divide. We remember the truth of what Paul wrote to the Galatians: that we are neither slave nor free, Gentile nor Jew, woman nor man, anymore. Our identity is shaped not by the divisive rhetoric of the day, by institutions that segregate or legislation that oppresses. In Christ, divisions fall away, as they did that hot day by Jacob's well. In Christ, each person is claimed as a child of God. In Christ, each person's intrinsic worth is valued. In Christ, we are all empowered and called to serve—in love, in courage and in peace. In Christ, the truth of worldly struggles meets the truth of God's redemptive love in which all that binds, all that harms, all that oppresses, is overcome and new life is won.

As we share this meal, may we be strengthened to tell the truth: the truth of our own stories; the truth of our own fears; the truth of our own gifts; the truth of systems that harm and most importantly...the truth of a love that saves.