

From Bearing Water to Bearing Christ  
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First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC  
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John 4: 5-30, 39-42

In this long reading John shows us several things about Jesus, and about a woman whom he may have known, and certainly knew of. She was pretty famous in the early church, but we get ahead of ourselves.

Jesus sits on the well at noon. He is alone; his disciples have gone to buy food. His people, his handlers, have left him there. He is tired and thirsty. A woman comes along, a woman with a damaged reputation, who comes in the hottest part of the day perhaps to avoid the comments of the other women, who would be there later.

Breaking all the conventions of his time, Jesus asks her for some water. It was unheard of for a Jewish man to talk with a woman who was not his wife, especially if they were unsupervised. And again, if he were a rabbi. He does it anyway, thus bestowing on her a certain acceptance and recognition. She is not a lesser being; she is a person. He treats her as an equal.

She asks him for the Living Water. She thinks he is talking about a well, one that will somehow miraculously spare her the chore of coming to this well. She doesn't get it at all. Jews understood "living water" to mean "running water," but that isn't what Jesus means. He means the Water of Life that he gives; he will give her living water, and she will be changed.

Jesus says, "go get your husband," but she cannot. But Jesus already knows: you have been married five times, and the man you live with now is not your husband. When we talk about Jesus being both God and man, we often stumble over the question, what did he know? I frame it as, "could Jesus fix a Chevrolet?" The Jesus portrayed in the other gospels perhaps could not, but John's Jesus certainly could have! He knows it all, and he knows this woman's marital status.

She asks him about worship. She's deflecting the conversation. She doesn't want to discuss her questionable past so she identifies him as a prophet, and asks where the good people should worship — in Jerusalem, as the Jews say, or in Samaria, as the Samaritans say? This distinction is almost a thousand years old; the two groups hate each other.

He tells her that soon people will worship in spirit and in truth, and that he is the Messiah. Soon, it won't matter which temple you go to. Soon, you can worship God anywhere you happen to be. Soon, you will worship God fully and truly, "in spirit and in truth" because you will know the Messiah. You will know me!

Just then, the disciples find him talking to her, and are scandalized. He's talking to a Samaritan! A woman! A woman who is a Samaritan! Oh no! No self-respecting rabbi would do this; a rabbi wouldn't even talk to his own wife in public, much less to this woman of questionable reputation. What is Jesus doing now? They shake their heads but they have been around enough to see that Jesus breaks down barriers and conventions.

She runs off and tells the townspeople that she has met the Messiah. Not trusting her, they run out to see for themselves. They are all amazed, and many come to believe in Jesus. For his part, Jesus stays there a couple of days, again, unheard of behavior for Jews and Samaritans.

You may not have heard "the rest of the story," as Paul Harvey would say. The woman is a woman of poor reputation, but after this encounter she is highly regarded. She and her siblings and children become vigorous representatives of Christianity, and go to witness to Nero himself.

He tries to tempt them with gold, and sends his daughter in to talk with them. She is converted, baptized, and gives away the gold. This infuriates Nero!

So Nero puts them in prison, and tries to kill them, to no avail. The hagiographers have described her sufferings in exaggerated detail, all the while making the point of the suffering she underwent for the Lord Jesus.

She does eventually die, but not without a lot of suffering and witnessing. The prison she is put in is known as a "house of God," and many come there to hear her preach.

The ancient church remembered her as Photini, which means light or enlightened one. Jesus brought the light into her darkened life. She dared to be known by God, and she was loved by Jesus, just as he loves each and all of us. She is a role model for many people even today.

She certainly went from bearing water to bearing Christ. She told everyone, even the much-feared emperor, about Jesus. Nothing can stop her. This is particularly amazing when you remember the status of women in the ancient world. They were not taken seriously, yet here she is, preaching and proclaiming the Messiah!

So we see that women need not be afraid, be cowed or discouraged from taking on the roles so often assigned to men. Years ago, I asked my friend Najla Kassab if she thought she would ever be ordained — she comes from Beirut, Lebanon, and lives there still. She laughed and said there would need to be a lot of funerals first — meaning all these old men have to die before the world could change that much. Yet now, she is president of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and an active pastor. Women need not be discouraged or afraid of what God is doing!

We see also here that human traditions may fall aside. The Samaritans worshiped God in Samaria for a thousand years, but that ended when the Romans ravaged the country.

Jerusalem was also sacked and burned and destroyed as the rival place of worship for the Jews. The traditions that kept the Jews and Samaritans apart as enemies fell away, and in Christ, have been abolished.

We see in the tradition that we need not be afraid of the powers that be if we follow Jesus. We can be fearless; Photini was. She went before the emperor Nero, one of the most feared and cruelest people ever, and proclaimed that she was there to teach him about Jesus.

Now some of you are thinking, “wait a minute — you can’t treat these old stories, legends even, as equal to scripture!” I agree with you! We can’t, but we can learn from them, and they can help us to see “the rest of the story.” These people who met Jesus didn’t simply vanish — they lived the rest of their lives affected by him, changed by him. It’s no wonder that some of them would be remembered by the church, even if the hagiographers have polished them up quite a bit!

So what do we learn?

Persistence pays off. The woman keeps asking questions, and it is a good thing. From the stories about her later life, we know she was fearless. That was probably in her personality from the beginning. She isn’t afraid to ask questions when she doesn’t know something. And that is good for us to learn: it is not wrong to ask questions, to seek answers, if we don’t understand something.

Don’t give up just because you are in a group that is outcast! Women were treated very badly in the ancient world, and still are, in many ways and places. Don’t give up, though. If you are a part of a group that isn’t white and male and successful, keep the faith and follow Jesus. He will set you free, and you will confront the Emperor.

Jesus is the messiah, who blows away everyone’s expectations. Everyone in those days, and many in our day, have their expectations of what Jesus will say and do. They just know what Jesus is about, what he “should” do. And Jesus comes along doing all sorts of scandalous things, like talking to enemy women!

You see, we all have our expectations of how the Messiah will behave. We all have our notions of who Jesus is and what he does, and what he wants us to do. And in that we find he is constantly breaking down the barriers between us and God, and between us and others.

Photini went from a water bearer to a Christ bearer! Let us do the same!  
Thanks be to God! Amen.