



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS  
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

“FREE FROM SHAME”  
3RD SUNDAY IN LENT

EXODUS 17:1-7

PSALM 95

ROMANS 5:1-11

JOHN 4:5-42

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY  
MARCH 15, 2020

I am sure that the Coronavirus pandemic is on all our minds this morning, and I will have some words to share about that, and about a faith-full response to very valid fears, during the announcements this morning. Spiritual and pastoral resources will continue to be available and these will be updated on our website as these weeks unfold. But first...the gospel.

The woman at the well lives with multiple layers of shame. She is not named. She is identified by her past, which lies exposed to Jesus' searching gaze. Five husbands and not married to her current partner. Her current relationship may be an affair with someone else's husband. Perhaps the Samaritan woman is still legally married to the fifth husband while conducting this relationship? She may truly love her current partner. Perhaps for economic or cultural security she feels she *has* to be in her current relationship. For poor women, these have always been realities. Whatever the nature of her current relationship, it cannot be regularized and receive social affirmation in that time and place. If she is in public either alone or with her partner, there will be knowing glances, heads turned aside to mutter, gossip. In a small village everyone knows everything and what people don't know they often make up.

This was ever small-town life and human nature.

In 1<sup>st</sup> century Samaria, this impacts every aspect of the woman's life. It means the woman either has to run the gossip gauntlet or bear the heat of the noonday sun in getting her water supply. She doesn't have the luxury of coming to the well in the cool dawn or evening hours, when the respectable women come. She fetches her water alone, in the hottest part of the day.

Then one ordinary day, her life changes. Jesus talks to her. He sees her. He dignifies her. The disciples recognize how strange this is. Why would you talk with any woman at any time any longer than you have to? Let alone a serious conversation, let alone with a foreign woman from what the Jerusalem Temple authorities consistently teach is an apostate, impure branch of Judaism. We are reminded four times that the woman is a Samaritan.

Jesus says things to this woman that he hasn't even said to his disciples yet. All of the defining hostilities between "Jerusalem Jews" and "Samaritan Jews" over Holy places and customs and traditions will fade away, and that God will be worshiped in Spirit and Truth unmediated by purity rules. But

meanwhile...there is this woman and her life. Jesus knows everything about her yet doesn't confine this woman to her past. This possibility of getting out from under this weight of shame, and coming out into the light of forgiveness fills the woman with hope and joy. She knows she is forgiven, but not in a condescending way. She is welcomed back into a larger community than she has ever known, and she is raised to a new sense of purpose. *Everyone* has a role in Jesus' economy. *Everyone* has a mission.

She becomes so intrigued by Jesus, so intoxicated by the possibility of new life, she leaves her heavy water jar at the well. I imagine her running back to Sychar in her new lightness of being, back to the neighbors who have surely made her life hell, to say: There is someone here you have to meet. Someone who will change how you see God and how you see yourself. The woman's style of evangelism has a sort of modern feel to it. She evangelizes with shared curiosity, with wondering: *He cannot be the Messiah, can he?* It is an invitation: *Come and see.* In today's cultural context, where Christians are out of the mainstream, shared curiosity feels contemporary and hospitable.

The Samaritan woman is a new Mary, a new God-bearer. Like another Mary – the Magdalene at the empty tomb on Easter morning - the Samaritan woman becomes an evangelist even in her own town. Even to people who have looked down on her. John has a habit of putting “fallen women” center stage in his gospel because the gospel itself has a habit of doing that. The messenger embodies the gospel’s new life. The grave that is empty may be our own. Even the fact that the Samaritan woman is not given a name makes her archetypal, an Everywoman, and Everyman. She is any one of us who does not have a pristine, squeaky clean history. And honestly is there any one of us who does? The newest news of all - which the whole world still longs for - is forgiveness. Freedom from the weight of chains of the past that are now broken. No longer are we defined by what we are most ashamed of, most afraid of coming to light, most afraid of others knowing about us. We may not have had 5 husbands but likely there is some “complexity”, some mess in our past. Those things that keep us up at night, that when you think of them, your face still burns. Or perhaps we have some pockets of profound regret for past choices and actions.

This is another of those Bible stories about our human journey back from shame. The journey back home, returning to community, being welcomed anew to the Table. So many of the most powerful stories in the gospels are versions of this liberation story. The prodigal son. The woman caught in adultery (also found in John's gospel alone) who Jesus protects and saves from stoning with a piercing question for her accusers: What, so you have never committed any sins? Anyone without sin, go ahead and throw the first stone.

Jesus meets our longing for feeling whole and loveable and reconciled to God and neighbor with life-changing forgiveness. The supreme example of this is when the risen Christ appears to the disciples who have just forsaken him, and watched from a safe distance as their Lord is crucified. Jesus meets the lot of them - and all of us - with *Peace be with you*. Not only does Jesus forgive, but as with the Samaritan woman he blesses us and sends us out to be ambassadors of this same gospel of mercy and forgiveness to others. We are ambassadors even - especially - to those who have reviled and slandered and condemned us. Jesus forgives us all. And Jesus forgives us all of it.

AMEN



THE CHURCH OF ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS  
487 HUDSON STREET  
NEW YORK, NY 10014

TEL: 212.924.0562

FAX: 212. 633.2098

WEBSITE: [WWW.STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG](http://WWW.STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG)

EMAIL: [INFO@STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG](mailto:INFO@STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG)