

Nevertheless She Persisted: Listening to Women of the Bible
Part 5: The Samaritan Woman at the Well
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July 16, 2018

1. Three Wells: Or, What makes holy water holy?

Recently a good friend from my high school days and I stood behind a queue of people in the nave of St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle, Washington, waiting to enter the sanctuary for their Sunday evening Compline service of scripture, prayer, and Gregorian chant. Ahead of us people were dipping their fingers into a giant, earthenware vessel full of holy water as they entered. Instinctively, I did too as we passed by it.

Dipping my fingers into the water, I doubted that it held any special powers that ordinary tap water did not. Yet as I saw people placing their wet fingers on their heart, their forehead, or crossing themselves with it, I had little doubt that those waters held special power *for them*. I wanted to claim a bit of that holiness for myself. I figured that if the water did nothing else but remind me that there is holiness in our world, or that we were in the holy presence of God in that church, it would be holy enough for me.

What makes "holy water" holy, anyway? Is there some sort of magic that resides within it once certain holy incantations are made, or is there something about the nature of the water itself that makes it holy – perhaps because it has come from a holy source, like a spring, a stream, or a holy well?

Maybe it is God's *awareness* of the water that makes it holy. Like, because the water exists within God's consciousness, God's awareness is extended to the one who touches it, thereby making both the water and the one touching it holy. Then again, God is already aware of both us and the water. In fact, God is probably aware of everything in our world, from the piece of paper in my pocket, to the pew you're sitting on, to the beautiful music that fills the air this morning, to the breath mint I put in my mouth before entering the sanctuary. If I am aware of these things, surely God is too. Otherwise I would be aware of something that God isn't, which makes little sense to me.

In fact, even with respect to the things I'm not aware of – like the proverbial tree that falls in the forest without anyone there to hear it – these things, too, must fall within God's awareness. Didn't Jesus say that God's eyes are on even the sparrow, and that every hair on our head is numbered (Luke 12:6-7)? No, if something is holy simply because it resides within God's awareness, then *all* things must be holy, in which case calling some water "holy" and some water "not holy" doesn't make much sense.

Coming at the question from another angle, perhaps holy water is holy because God *wills* it to be so. Water presumably has no will of its own, so if God wills it to be holy, it is holy. But then again, God wills all things to be holy, not just water. In Scripture, we find many occasions where God tells us, “Be holy, as I am holy.” (Leviticus, 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:7-8, Deuteronomy 23:14, 1 Peter 1:15-16) So maybe it is total submission to God’s will that makes something holy. If so, then, one can assume that every plant and animal, every rock, bush, and tree is holy, too. For surely, all of God’s Creation must conform completely to God’s will. It’s just *us* who seem pretty adept at denying God’s will.

Now, if every part of all of the created order exists completely within God’s awareness, and everything except us conforms 100% of the time to God’s will, then we are literally surrounded on all sides by that which is “at one” with God. In other words, the world is shot through with holiness. We’re immersed in it!

As I looked around the sanctuary during the Compline service at St. Mark’s imagining every material object, and every sound I was hearing, and every photon of light passing through the windows being holy, I was reminded of Jesus’s words in John’s Gospel that “I and the Father are one”. Some people call Jesus “God” because of this “at oneness” with God. Perhaps then, I considered, we are at all times literally enveloped *in God*. And we wonder if God is near?!

Curiously, all this awareness of holiness was triggered by simply dipping my hand into a vessel of holy water that I doubted was really holy. Perhaps this, then, is what makes “holy water” holy: **Holy water is *any* water that reveals to us, or reminds us, that everything is shot through with holiness; immersed in God’s presence and awareness.**

If this is what makes holy water holy, then holiness is not a one-way street, but a two-way street. Water that provokes a sense of holiness in someone is truly holy *to the person touching it*. But to another person for whom the water evokes no such sense of holiness, the water would not be holy.

The same principle probably applies to holy people, too. A holy person is one who evokes a sense of the holy in others, revealing or reminding them that all things are holy.

Two thousand years ago, it is said, a certain “holy man” named Jesus stood beside a well – Jacob’s Well, to be specific, which for centuries had been considered a “holy well”. He stood there with a woman of Samaria offering her “living water” promising, “those who drink of this water will never be thirsty”. (John 4:14) Surely, Jesus wasn’t offering something physical to the woman but something spiritual – an awareness of the holiness that resides in all water and all things.

My guess is that if we would take to heart the holiness that really exists all around us, and even within us, our souls would never be thirsty again. Since there is still something within us that resists God, we might not be able to claim that we are entirely “at one” with God, but certainly we would be “at one” with the Samaritan woman.

II. Five Husbands

When the Samaritan woman at the well indicated her desire to receive this “living water” – this intimate experience of holiness – from Jesus, he said, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” The woman answered, “I have no husband.” Jesus responded, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

Based on this exchange, the Samaritan woman has forever been seen in the eyes of many to be a “promiscuous woman.” And why not? Five husbands and one live-in boyfriend is a pretty high number!

I want to know how on earth would Jesus know that this woman, whom he has apparently never met before, has had five husbands in the first place, or that she is currently living with another man? Some people believe that Jesus knew because he was God and therefore knew everything. Yet even the Christians who first asserted that Jesus was divine centuries ago also acknowledged Jesus was human and therefore subject to the same limitations you and I have.

In his fascinating commentary on the Gospel of John, Bishop John Shelby Spong offers an intriguing counter-point to those who assume that Jesus was “outing” a promiscuous woman.¹ Pointing to the metaphorical nature of most of the stories in the Gospel of John, in which the truths that are told about Jesus are so mind-blowing and universal that they can only be conveyed or comprehended through the power of symbol, analogy, and allegory, Spong claims that the Samaritan woman at the well is not an actual person but a metaphor for the Samaritan people as a whole.

In the eyes of the ancient Jews, says Spong, the Gospel’s reference to the woman’s five *husbands* would have been an obvious reference to the five *nations* that the king of Assyria imported into the northern kingdom of Israel after sending the majority of the Jews who lived there into exile 721 BCE. Those five nations intermingled with the Jews who remained, thus forming the “Samaritan” people.

Before the exile, the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel were bitter enemies having, in essence, divorced each other two centuries earlier. The southern kingdom, comprised of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, hated their

¹ John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (HarperOne, 2013), 95-106.

northern “ex-wife” for a number of reasons. First and foremost they considered the northern Jews to be apostate. After the split, the north had established its own capital city of Samaria to directly compete with the religious orthodoxy that was centered in the southern capital of Jerusalem. Further, they had imported a great number of characteristics into their faith practices that were associated with the Canaanite fertility god, Baal. So the north wasn’t really Jewish anymore, according to those of the south. You see, America isn’t the only country where southerners assume they are closer to God than northerners!

Once the tribes of the north were exiled, relations between South and North went from bad to worse. When the king of Assyria imported people from five other nations he had conquered – all of whom brought their favorite god or goddess with them – and these people started intermingling and intermarrying with the Jews who remained there, this turned an apostate nation into an out-and-out blasphemous one in the eyes of the South. Making matters worse, these northerners still claimed to be Jews! This drove the southern Jews crazy, so they no longer referred to the people of the north as Jews but *Samaritans*.

The closest analogy to the Samaritans in our day might be those who have adopted the label, “spiritual, but not religious,” who grew up as Christians, but who had differences with either their church or Christianity as a whole, and they left and cobbled together a do-it-yourself faith on their own: a little bit of Christianity here, a little Buddhism there, adding a little New Age philosophy to the mix, along with dabs of astrology, Tarot cards, and perhaps a few healing crystals for a complete package.

In modern times, these people would be the very embodiment of the Samaritan woman at the well in the eyes of many Christians. And what does Jesus do with this woman? He *loves* her. Jesus offers her “living water” that will ensure that her soul will never be thirsty again. In essence, Jesus invites the Samaritan woman to touch holiness, not simply by dipping her hand in holy water, but by figuratively pouring holy water all over her until she is drenched in the awareness that holiness envelops and embraces her as intimately as her own body – and extends beyond her to the ends of the earth itself. How many of God’s faithful would follow Jesus’s example when it comes to those who have left Christianity for some sort of internet-assembled faith today?

III. One People

If you take from this exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman that Jesus was affirming her entire DIY faith, or that of the Samaritan people as a whole, think again. The “living water” that Jesus offers stands in stark contrast to any teaching or belief that denies the holiness of God’s Creation, or claims that any person, community, or nation, is holier than another. In other words, Jesus stands against *most* faiths of the world, including much of Christianity itself. To put it a little differently, Jesus’s teachings – and his very actions – stand in stark

contrast to any belief or action that fails to treat every person, animal, and object of God's Creation as holy. The only unholy thing in Jesus's book is that part of the human soul that is turned against God and therefore fails to affirm these very things.

After encountering Jesus, therefore, the Samaritan woman is not so impressed with whatever faith she or her people have created. Seeing the world with new eyes, sensing the holiness that exists below the surface of all things, the woman makes haste to tell all her friends about this amazing holy man who has come to town, who "knows everything I have ever done" that stands against God's holiness and has opened her eyes to the holiness that resides within her and all things.

Why wouldn't the Samaritan woman – or all of Samaria if the woman is indeed an analogy for the Samaritan people - rush out to share her new-found faith with everyone she knows? If your eyes were as wide open to the holiness that surrounds you as her eyes were, wouldn't you want to tell everyone, too?

If a holy water is that which reveals or reminds you that all things are holy, and a holy person is anyone who reveals or reminds others of the same thing, then perhaps the great Spirit of the Living God is leading all of us to become holy people. The only question is, will we trust God enough to become the people God invites us to be?