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There is a hunger deep in every heart, a deep craving for forgiveness and hope, a sense that our best days are not all behind us, that God has not given up on us even if we have in some ways given up on ourselves. I believe we all crave some token of God's presence in what often seems a godforsaken world.

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well is such a token, I think. It is a familiar text and just as important in John's telling of his Gospel as the story of Nicodemus. The two stories are a couplet, in fact, mirror images of each other, meant to be read side by side.



One cannot help noticing the many similarities and differences too.

Look at the characters of the two stories: "Nicodemus" and "the woman." She is not named, which is significant. If the designation makes her anonymous in one way, it also makes her representative. We cannot excuse ourselves from this story by imagining that what Jesus said or did applies only to her.

In addition, obviously, unlike Nicodemus she is a woman. That Jesus talked to women at all, even taught women, scandalized the Pharisees, who were known to thank God they had been born men. She is a Samaritan, moreover, while Nicodemus was a Jew. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans (think apartheid or Jim Crow). Jews considered Samaritans half-breeds, pagans, heretics, and apostates. Samaritans, like all persecuted peoples, considered themselves the true witnesses to God, the builders of God's true temple on Mount Gerizim. Jews and Samaritans hated each other both racially and religiously.

Nicodemus is a three-time winner and insider: he is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews (meaning an elected official), and he is a teacher of Israel. The woman is as outside as Nicodemus is in: not only because she is a woman, and a Samaritan woman besides, but she is a sinful Samaritan woman at that—married and divorced so many times she doesn't even bother with the ceremony anymore—ostracized by the other women, by the other *Samaritan* women; that's when you know it is bad.

Nicodemus, whatever his reasons, comes to Jesus by night. Jesus comes to the woman by day. She draws her water when no one else does—is she slovenly? Afraid of the other women's reproaches? Jesus had come to Samaria on purpose. Most Jews avoided that part of the world. Jesus sits down at Jacob's well; he is there when the disgraced woman arrives. This could be awkward. Grace, it seems, always is.

One last difference: Nicodemus doesn't get it. He says he knows that

Jesus is a "teacher who has come from God" (John 3:2), but even the way he makes the assertion tells you that he knows little or nothing. The woman, on the other hand, does get it: "Sir, I see that you are a prophet" (4:19). She says that in response to Jesus when he reveals to her the sin and brokenness in her life.

Jesus does not tell her anything she does not know about herself—prophets generally tell people what they already know—but the way Jesus tells her the truth, without the least bit of condescension, and the fact that he is talking to her at all in spite of her sin and shame, reveals to her that he is something special. Something different. Not the typical prejudiced Jew. Not the typical judgmental rabbi. Not the typical self-righteous religious leader. Not the typical man.

No surprise, then, that later, when their conversation turns to the coming of the Messiah—and the woman says, “I know that Messiah is coming” (4:25), and Jesus says, “I am he” (v. 26)—she believes him. She goes back to town, finds the ones who have shunned her, and says, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (v. 29). Even the way she asks the question tells you she believes it to be so.

Nicodemus leaves confused. The woman leaves, what, liberated?

Saved? “[He] told me everything I have ever done,” she says (v. 29).

What an interesting line from the lips of this sinful Samaritan woman.

Despite the culture of affirmation that characterizes our day, most people already know that they are flawed, that their lives are full of misdeeds and missed opportunities, that they have fallen short not only of the glory of God but also of their own expectations. I once heard a sociologist of religion put it this way: Everyone, believer and nonbeliever alike, believes in sin. Not everyone, however, believes in forgiveness. Jesus does. He looks at the woman at the well with compassion and says, in effect, “You are a mess.” She knows she is a mess. Everyone knows she is a mess. If Jesus couldn’t see it, he would be the only one. But to be sure, Jesus sees.

Jesus sees that we are a mess too. Not like her, exactly, but like her in many ways. We need what only Jesus can provide: grace that does not ignore our sin but is greater than our sin, forgiveness that does not pretend what we have done or left undone is any different than what it is—sin—but he forgives us anyway.

That is what Jesus means to the woman at the well, grace greater than her sin. That is why she feels liberated, saved, so excited that she is compelled to share it, to tell someone.

I think we all hunger for the presence of Jesus. Not for false affirmation, but for proof of God’s presence in our lives—forgiveness and hope, bread and wine, the water of life.

“If you had asked me,” Jesus said to the woman, “I would have given you living water.” She said, “Sir, give me this water” (4:15); and Jesus did.

And Jesus will. There are holes in your bucket, but not to worry; the water Jesus gives is healing water, restoring water, more than you can lose in a lifetime, welling up to eternal life.