

**No Shame in That**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Lent 3A  
*John 4:5-42*

During the her last year in seminary a colleague of mine signed up for a class called *Confession and Forgiveness from a Pastoral Perspective*.

The reading list looked great and the 45 slots filled up on the first day of registration – impressive for a 3 hour class that began at 2 in the afternoon.

On the first day of class, the lecture hall was filled 10 minutes before class began.

With everyone on the edge of their seats the professor asked,

“What do YOU think this class is about?”

The most eager students quickly gave their answers:

The importance of forgiveness for everyday people.

God’s love for us.

God’s grace given to us.

God’s assurance of forgiveness.

The professor nodded, and then walked to the chalkboard and wrote the word “shame.”

For the most part, the students were intrigued.

They may not have not quite understood why shame would be such a major part of the curriculum,

seeing as it wasn't even mentioned in the course description,  
but they were on board, until the end of that first three-hour class,  
when the professor dropped a bombshell.

The final exam would be something different, he told them.

Instead of a standard exam, each student would have to write a twenty page,  
autobiographical essay about a *personal experience* of **shame**.

Are you surprised that after that first day,  
one-third of the students dropped out of the class?

What would you do if, right now, I asked you to turn to your neighbor  
and share a personal experience you've had with shame?

Not embarrassment, like the way I felt when, at ten years old,

I went onstage during a church musical with my zipper down.

Not guilt, which we might feel when we make a mistake, but *shame*,

the feeling that I *AM* a *mistake*,

that something is fundamentally **wrong** with me,

that I am **deeply flawed** in some *unfixable* way.

I'm betting if I asked you to share an experience when you truly felt ashamed,

AT LEAST a third of you would flatly refuse.

With that in mind, I hope you won't be disappointed that although

this was supposed to be a sermon about shame, it's not.

And not because I don't think shame is a relevant topic — it absolutely is,

if for no other reason than that we all need to hear the good news  
of the gospel that God made us just as we are,  
God loves us no matter what,  
and this means that every human being is *inherently valued*  
and *worthy* of God's love.

But this isn't a sermon about shame, *because this text isn't about shame*  
— in spite of what many of us have previously been taught.

A long tradition of biblical interpretation concludes that the woman at the well  
must be a prostitute. After all, she is living — so to speak —  
with a man who isn't her husband!

This tradition means that many of us come to this text preconditioned to see  
the shame this woman carries as surely as she carries her water jar.

But is there really shame in this story?

Yes, she has been married five times, but there are perfectly acceptable reasons  
in the ancient near east that this might happen.

Yes, the man she lives with now isn't her husband,  
but there is nothing in the text to suggest this is so awful.

Yes, she comes to the well at the hottest, brightest time of the day,  
which is perhaps ill-advised,  
but there's nothing that indicates she is trying to avoid being seen.

So although from time to time it is worthwhile to reflect theologically about shame,

today is not that day.

Today, as we navigate a season of profound division —  
politically, racially, socioeconomically, religiously —  
this text — both the story itself and the history of its interpretation —  
reveals the deeply human tendency to pass judgment and  
create boundaries that divide us from those we classify as **different**.

And this story teaches us how those judgements and divisions and boundaries  
might **unravel** if we engage one another  
as human beings created by God,  
inherently **valuable** and **worthy** of love and respect.

Sister Helen Prejean is the Catholic nun who wrote the book *Dead Man Walking*,  
the story of her experience as a spiritual advisor to a man on death row.

We might assume that Sister Helen ended up in this position because,  
well, she is a nun, and don't nuns often end up serving  
the people no one else will?

But Sister Helen's story is much more complicated than that.

She grew up in a warm, loving Catholic family and decided at an early age  
she would become a nun. When she joined an order,  
she was determined to be the most pious, most obedient,  
most prayerful nun — she was seeking perfection...  
until the church and the world around her began to change.

During the civil rights movement, many nuns from the US went to Latin America

to work with those who were living in poverty, and eventually,  
Sister Helen decided that a cloistered life of prayer wasn't her calling.  
She developed a passion for working with the poor.

She moved into the housing projects in New Orleans and began  
to engage the people who live there, to really get to know them.  
And from these people whose backgrounds and lives were so different from hers,  
she learned about what she describes as the other America  
where people navigate the world without connections  
that offer a layer of protection from consequences,  
where people don't trust the police  
and where the police don't trust the people.  
And for the first time, she realized, she wasn't so virtuous,  
she was protected, and cushioned, and resourced.

One day, she walked out of an adult learning center in her neighborhood,  
and a man called out to her. "Hey, Sister Helen!"

He carried a clipboard and was approaching everyone on the street.

"You want to be a pen pal to someone on death row?" he asked.

She didn't know much about the death penalty, but she knew if someone  
was on death row, then that someone was poor,  
and she was called to serve the poor.

Besides, how hard could it be to write a letter?

She'd been an English major after all!

She now describes this as her first encounter with “Sneaky Jesus,”  
the Jesus who sneaks up on you and draws you in with something that seems  
harmless enough. I’m only writing a few letters, she thought,  
but then she got a letter from her pen pal on Death Row,  
a man named Pat Sonnier, saying he never had any visitors,  
so she went to visit him.  
And then Sonnier asked her to be his spiritual advisor,  
and she said yes, not knowing that when he was put to death,  
the only person who could be with him all the way to the end  
was his spiritual advisor.

Sneaky Jesus meets us where we are and draws us to places  
we never thought we’d go.

That day on the street, signing her name to that clipboard,  
Sister Helen could not have foreseen that she would be the face of love  
that Pat Sonnier saw as he was put to death,  
or that his life and death would ignite in her a calling  
to speak out against the death penalty  
and for the love and forgiveness of all God’s children.<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus and this unnamed woman meet at a well in Samaria,  
they are understandably wary of one another.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sister Helen Prejean interview with Kate Bowler on the “Everything Happens” podcast,  
<https://katebowler.com/podcasts/sister-helen-prejean-the-face-of-love/>

Jesus has walked a long way on a hot, dry day, and, being human,  
he is tired and thirsty.

This woman is by herself with a jar at a well —

the ancient near east equivalent of a singles bar —

and she is naturally suspicious of the man who asks her for a drink.

She is especially suspicious because she can tell he's Jewish.

And Jews and Samaritans were deeply mistrustful of one another, even though,

to us, the differences between them seem pretty trivial —

mostly, it was a disagreement over where they should worship God —

a particular mountain or the temple in Jerusalem.

But, as we know all too well, even a seemingly trivial difference

can create major boundaries and mistrust between people.

Fortunately, Jesus fails to follow the culturally acceptable script.

Instead of refusing to interact with the woman simply because

she is a **Samaritan** and a **woman**, he *engages* her.

He *speaks* to her, he *listens* to her, he *sees* her as **more** than her labels.

All of which allows her to see beyond that Jesus is Jewish and a man.

As they talk, she discovers that this tired and thirsty Jew

is not just hanging out by a well waiting for someone to give him water.

He *knows* things.

He speaks in metaphors.

He offers her water — but not the usual kind.

He speaks about God in ways she has never heard before.

Most remarkably, he is **unafraid** to talk with her,

**utterly unashamed** by their encounter.

He welcomes the opportunity to engage her, to converse with her,

in spite of the things that should *divide* them from each other.

In the end, their conversation is the *longest recorded conversation*

between Jesus and any other person in the New Testament.

The woman leaves transformed — inspired to share

the good news of this unlikely encounter with her community,

the news that there is more to God than worshiping God in the right spot,

the news that God might just be bigger than they thought,

big enough, in fact, to hold together Jews and Samaritans

and Gentiles and Romans and Presbyterians and Methodists

and Baptists and Catholics and Muslims and

Buddhists and black and white and native and

immigrant and laborer and even Democrat and Republican!

***God can hold us together*** —

and if we are willing to engage one another

beyond all that divides us, ***we will be transformed.***

The author Rachel Held Evans died last year at thirty-seven years old,

and her death led to a remarkable outpouring of the diverse communities



who had been affected by her work.

This included the conservative evangelical Christian community in which she was raised, as well as the progressive, inclusive Christian community that her books and blog posts and social media accounts brought together.

The writer of her New York Times obituary wrote, “Ms. Evans was known to challenge traditional — and largely male and conservative — authority structures. She would spar with evangelical men on Twitter, debating them on everything from human sexuality to politics to biblical inerrancy.

“One of those men, Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said that he was her theological opposite in almost every way, but that she had always treated him with kindness and humor.

“I was on the other side of her Twitter indignation many times, but I respected her because she was never a phony,” Mr. Moore said.

“Even in her dissent, she made all of us think, and helped those of us who are theological conservatives to be better because of the way she would challenge us.”<sup>2</sup>

In her book *Inspired*, Evans charts her journey from reading the Bible as literal truth

---

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Dies and Sam Roberts, “Rachel Held Evans, Voice of the Wandering Evangelical, Dies at 37.” The New York *Times*, May 4, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/04/us/rachel-held-evans.html>

to understanding it as the Spirit-infused Word of God that emerged  
from specific cultural contexts and often reflects  
deep-seated human biases, and yet still has much to teach us.  
Evans writes, “With scripture, we’ve not been invited to an academic fraternity;  
we’ve been invited to a **wrestling match**. We’ve been invited to a dynamic,  
centuries-long **conversation** with God and God’s people  
that has been unfolding ever since, *one story at a time*.”<sup>3</sup>

Near the end of the book, Evans retells this story we heard today.

In her account, you can hear the echoes of some of the old interpretation —  
the woman carries with her some shame —  
but after she arrives at the well and begins to talk with Jesus,  
Evans imagines the two of them, these unlikely water-sharers,  
**delighting** in one another.

Their conversation is playful, intelligent, and peppered with laughter.

And the woman leaves, refreshed, *restored*, **renewed** by something  
more quenching and more life-giving than  
the usual water from a well.

The woman leaves *inspired* to go back to her city,  
to round up all the people whose differences have caused them to be divided  
from one another,  
to set a table and with bread and wine and flowers,

---

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*. Nelson Books, 2018.

to gather around it and sing and pray and talk and laugh and eat,  
to celebrate, **together**, the life-giving, shame-shattering,  
boundary-unraveling love of God.

Amen.

—Amy Starr Redwine © 2020