

Tracy Daub
3/15/20--University Presbyterian Church
John 4:5-42

COMPLEX STORIES

Children's stories are among the simplest of all stories. Think about Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Or Little Red Riding Hood. Or Goodnight Moon. The plots in these stories are straightforward. The characters in these stories are one dimensional.

Real life, however, is far from simple. Real life is complex. Real people are multifaceted. And yet, many of us cling to simple stories. We want simple solutions to complicated problems. And we often make quick assessments about other people. Notice how often we tend to craft a single simple story about other people. He's a jerk. She's haughty. He's irresponsible. She's uneducated. Sometimes there is only one story we allow to be told about the people around us.

That is what we have done to this story about the woman who meets Jesus at the well. For centuries, the Christian church has told just one story about her. Jesus reveals in this passage from John's gospel that the woman has had five husbands in her life and the man she is living with now is not even her husband. And so the Christian Church has fashioned its single story about the woman: she is a woman of loose morals. But that is not the real story. The real story about this woman is more complex--just as is for all of us.

For women living at the time of Jesus, marriage was never a choice. Marriage was always something that was done *to* women, not something they had a choice in making. According the customs of that era, if a woman's husband died or divorced her, it was the responsibility of the man's closest male relative to marry the woman. There was a compassionate side to this custom. Since women had no means of supporting themselves in that time in history, this custom ensured that a widow was not left completely destitute. But there

was also no getting around the fact that the custom also treated women like a piece of property-- like a piece of furniture that is passed down to the next of kin.

The fact that this woman had five husbands speaks volumes about her tragic life. Either she was married and repeatedly widowed, or she was married and repeatedly discarded in divorce. And now the man she is living with won't even show her the respect of marrying her. This woman's story is not the simple tale of an immoral woman. That is the story *we've* laid upon it. The Christian Church has passed this off as a story of a loose woman to whom Jesus shows forgiveness. The simple message has been: Isn't that super kind of Jesus to be so good to a woman who was so bad!

But nowhere in this passage do we hear Jesus speak one word of judgment. We don't hear him say to this woman, "Go and sin no more," as he said to another woman caught in adultery. We never hear Jesus encourage the woman to change her life.

Instead, this woman's story is really a tragic and socially complicated story of sorrow and abandonment. And even though the woman had no say in her five marriages, she also endured the social stigma of a society that still held her in some kind of contempt. How do we know this? Well, the passage tells us that it was noon when the woman came to draw water from the well. High noon. When the sun would be at its hottest.

High noon was not the time of day women went to draw water. Village women would come to get water in the cool of the morning. And then they would also do what people have always done at cafes and pubs and the office water cooler and wherever beverages are available-- the women would have socialized. As they took turns drawing water from the well, they would have enjoyed visiting with one another, sharing stories, telling jokes, laughing and enjoying one another's company.

But in our passage about this Samaritan woman, we find her coming to the well all alone at the hottest time of the day. Perhaps she was not made welcome by the others. Perhaps the other women excluded her, gossiped about her in ways she could overhear. And so she came at a time of the day when she would not have to encounter anyone else. And so her story becomes more tragic and more complex. Her story now includes the plot of social rejection.

The story gets more complicated when we understand the dynamics between Jews and Samaritans. Even though Jews and Samaritans were ethnically related, there was great racial and religious animosity between the two groups. Jewish people regarded Samaritans as unclean and would never eat with them, or associate with them, or, as suggested by Jesus in our scripture today, drink from the same drinking vessel. And the story gets further complicated when we understand that in that era, men did not have conversations with women with whom they were not related. And they certainly would never have a conversation of great theological meaning with a woman.

But all of this happens in our passage. Jesus deliberately leads his disciples into enemy territory. They cross into Samaria on their way to Galilee. Jesus could have taken the long way around. But he didn't. And then he asks for a drink of water from this Samaritan woman knowing it would mean drinking from her vessel. And then, he and this woman have the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in the Bible. And it is not about small matters either. This is a meaningful theological conversation.

And what most impresses the woman at the well about Jesus is that he knows her whole story. She tells the other villagers, "He told me everything I had ever done." He knows her story of pain, her story of rejection, her story of feeling worthless. And he responded to her with respect and understanding.

And then, this woman whom others regarded as worthless and unclean, who people in her lifetime and people down through the centuries regarded as having but one single simple story, this woman becomes the first evangelist. In a way that is reminiscent of the women at the Resurrection, this Samaritan woman leaves behind her water jug and goes back to her village and tells everyone she can find all about Jesus. And based on this woman's testimony, on her story, the villagers go to find Jesus for themselves. And they believe.

You see, there is never just *one* story about a person. The class clown. The surly neighbor. The lazy student. The success-driven in-law. People are always more complex than just one story. We think we know the story behind people we meet and people we interact with. We think we know the story behind people of a certain skin color, or hair style, or head covering, or from the car they drive or the neighborhood they live in. We think we know the story behind those who belong to a certain political party or behind those living in certain parts of the country. We won't associate with some people because we think we know their story. We won't enter certain neighborhoods because we think we know their story. This country is divided because people think they know one another's stories. But there is never just one story.

Jesus sees that people are more than just one story. Jesus sees the complex story of this woman's life and then he crosses a whole slew of social boundaries to enter into her story with respect and compassion. And it is a life-changing experience for this woman.

Jesus knows your story as well. And he knows my story. Jesus knows all about the complex realities of your life: your pain and struggle and heartbreak. He knows all about your goodness, your potential, your beauty. He knows you and loves you.

Maybe you think today is just another ordinary day in the story of your life. Maybe you have low expectations for what will take place in your life today or tomorrow beyond just

meeting the demands of the day. That's all the woman at the well expected. She was just going to go draw some water.

But instead, Jesus walked into her life and changed the very nature of her story. And that is what happens to us today. Jesus walks into the story of your life right here, right today with love and care for you, with grace for your failings, with joy for all that is wonderful about you, with belief in your potential for goodness. Jesus loves us complicated, complex human beings and enters our story with love and grace so that resurrection to new life right here and right now might become part of the wonderful story that is you and me.