

Coming Clean: John 4:5-42

There is something wonderful about hearing the unexpected truth when you are mired in other people's expectations. I want to talk about that today, beginning with a story about a Harvard graduation ceremony and then with the story of the Samaritan woman speaking with Jesus at the well.

In the spring of 1998, the senior class at Harvard University chapel gathered to hear the minister offer some words of encouragement on the very day that they would graduate. Chaplain Rev. Gomes spoke about how they were now rumoured to be educated and the best and the brightest and then left the usual speech aside and said slowly and with emphasis "but you. Know. Just. How. Dumb. You. Really.Are." (The senior class cheered in agreement). "Nevertheless, there is reason to hope," Rev. Gomes promised. "The future is God's gift to you. God has not brought you this far to this place to abandon you or leave you here alone and afraid. Thus, my beloved and bewildered young friends, do not be afraid." The students cheered even more wildly. Why? The pressure they felt to be perfect and more than they felt they could be had been lifted from their shoulders.

Our Gospel reading today is a long one for a short-ish sermon. So I'm going to focus on just verses 16-18. Let's hear them again: "Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, '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!'"

Why does Jesus say this to her? Is he trying to shame her? NO.. far from retreating in shame, the woman at the well opened up to Jesus after he told her the truth about herself. She moved from being concerned about drinking water to thirsting for living water. She isn't offended; she's amazed. As she later tells her neighbours, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! Could he be the Messiah?" Often when I've read John chapter 4 I've thought to myself, "If that had been my dark history exposed like that—in front of Jesus, no

less—I would probably run away. Or at least cry.’ But this woman—this outcast, Samaritan woman—sticks around for a theological conversation. How strange. And wonderful. These two stories, I believe, reflect something very true about human nature: We long to come clean. We long to be unmasked; to live honestly before God, others, and ourselves. And we long to know that whatever we’ve done can be forgiven. Coming clean sets us free. Jesus did everything to set the stage for the woman of Samaria to face the truth and be set free.

How did he connect with her? Well first he had to break some rules. In the context of their culture and time, men didn’t talk to a woman who was alone, and a Jew would not talk to a Samaritan. And this particular woman is also a social pariah even among her own people. She’s on man number five, and in the time and culture, that was a very, very large and bad deal. That’s why she was at the well by herself, in the middle of the day, in the hot sun. All the other women would have sensibly gone out in the cooler morning, but she couldn’t join them because she’s not one of the good girls. Jesus would have been expected to walk away. But no... He asks for a drink. And He offers her living water. He tells her he knows all about her, but in almost the same breath he also tells her he is the Messiah. He offers her passage OUT of the mess she’s IN.. He offers hope rather than blame. And that’s why, instead of shrinking in shame and embarrassment, she becomes Samaria’s first preacher of the Gospel. By the end of our reading, this woman who had to come alone to the well is making herself seen around town with this simple message: Come and see. Come and see this man who told me everything I ever did. Come and see this man who knew me but didn’t condemn me. Come and see.”

We don’t know, but I believe this woman did not move on to man #6, and in this brief little snapshot of her life, I see great hope. We need to highlight the hope. Unfortunately, Christianity can have a reputation of being all about judgement and hypocrisy. Today’s gospel reminds us that, while the fact of divine justice is indeed part of our faith, Jesus is much more interested in offering life

than in threatening punishment . His gaze is penetrating, but it is full of kindness. And the woman at the well shows us that coming clean with God leads to freedom. Instead of running away from people, she now runs toward them because no matter what she's done or where she's been, she's got good news.

Well we may or may not be able to relate to this woman's specific so-called shame. But we've all got our shadow sides. We've all done things we're far from proud of. But those things do not stop Christ from coming to us, and when we've received God's forgiveness, **shame has no place**. Even our saddest stories can, when transformed by Christ, reflect the glory of God.

Recently I read a wonderful story by author Joni Eareckson Tada. Some of you will recognize that name. In 1967 Joni was in a diving accident that left her a quadriplegic, and she now runs a Christian mission for people with disabilities in California. This particular story begins with a common event. She loses an earring...one still in her ear, and one gone. It was golden and square and quite shiny. While searching for it around the house, she accidentally ran over it with her wheelchair. Crunch. It was a crumpled mess. Since it was her favourite pair, she took both earrings to a jeweller's. Could he repair the crumpled earring and make it smooth and shiny like its partner? "No", the jeweller said, he couldn't fix it. But he offered to do something else. "I can hammer away at the good earring and make it match the broken one," he said. She figured a different pair was better than nothing, so she said yes. And the new pair of earrings, bent and twisted as they were, ended up reflecting more light than before. In a similar way, some of the things we've done in our lives can't be "fixed". But God can still make something beautiful of us. And as we meditate in this season of Lent on the cross, this story of Joni's earrings takes on a deeper meaning still...instead of demanding that we clean up our act before we can be forgiven, Jesus joins us in our brokenness. Our sin makes us resemble the twisted, crumpled earring. Jesus did not join us in our acts of sin, but He was hammered with nails and mangled by the sin not His own so that with Him we are a new matched pair. The Scripture for

this wonderful news is simply: "He who knew no sin became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" -that's how we really get to match! His gift.

What wondrous love is this! So don't be afraid to come clean. Come and see this man. Come and trust this God. Come and drink the living water. You'll have good news to tell. Amen.