

Jesus' Encounters with Three Women*

I have chosen these episodes because they are compelling accounts of how Jesus' ministry was shaped by responsive attention to the circumstances of those he teaches, heals, and befriends.

The Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-42):

Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman is described as a one-on-one encounter from which even his closest disciples are absent. The fact that the principles are a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman renders the encounter profoundly irregular, as the woman herself notes.

The woman recognizes that Jesus is no ordinary traveler ("Sir, I see that you are a prophet," (v. 19).and on that basis seeks to explore with him specifically theological matters ("Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is Jerusalem," (v. 20). Yet what Jesus teaches is specific to her situation. Thus when she returns to town to report what has happened, she does not refer to "living water" (the ostensible subject of Jesus' teaching in vv. 7-15), the nature of true worship (vv. 21-24), or even the fact that Jesus claims to be the Messiah (v. 26). Instead, she says simply, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done! Is this not the Christ?" (v. 29 alt.).

At first glance, the reader might be inclined to associate the woman's words with Jesus' comments about her marital relations (vv. 16-18). But given that Jesus' display of such knowledge comes in the middle of his discourse rather than as a climatic revelation at the end, and remembering that in the balance of the conversation the woman demonstrates considerable theological literacy, culminating with a discussion of the role of the Messiah, it seems odd to suppose that the one matter that stuck in her mind would be Jesus' reference to her marital status.

The story is a helpful reminder of the way the evangelists depict him as knowing others in such a way that they become known to themselves. It is presumably this experience, rather than Jesus' factual knowledge of her biography, that has impressed the woman. It is also in this way that Jesus' human knowledge is properly equated with the knowledge of God: not by virtue of its extent, but as a knowledge that corresponds perfectly to the situation of the one who is known.

The Canaanite woman (Matt, 15:21-28):

To first century Jewish ears, the designation "Canaanite" would have had uniformly negative connotations. The Canaanites were those whom Israel had dispossessed in taking up residence in the promised land. They are hated by God, and Israel is charged with their destruction (Deut. 20:17; cf. Num. 21:1-3; Josh 17:18; Judg. 1:1-4). All interaction with them is forbidden, lest close association with them tempt Israel to abandon their covenant with the Lord (Exod. 23:32-33; 34:11-18; Deut. 7:2b-4; Ezra 9:1; cf. Judg. 2:1-3). From this perspective, the fact that Jesus, when followed by a Canaanite woman shouting for him to

heal her daughter, “did not answer her at all” (Matt: 15:23) demonstrates exactly that sort of behavior from a pious Jew.

That the disciples urged him to speak to her, if only to send her away, shows their willingness to sacrifice principle for practicality. But Jesus does not yield to their entreaties, insisting, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 28).

Yet because Jesus evidently does not send her away, the woman persists; and since following after Jesus has done no good, she falls prostrate before him to renew her plea for aid. At this point, Jesus at last speaks to her directly: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v. 26). In so speaking, Jesus has exposed this woman’s situation in the most cutting way possible: she is not merely a gentile, but a gentile of the lowest order—one of those whose wickedness was the occasion for God driving them from the land (Deut. 9:4).

To be sure God rules and provides for all nations (see Amos 9:7). But it is Israel alone—in spite of its own objective unworthiness and legacy of unfaithfulness—is and remains the unique object of God’s love (Deut. 7:7-8; cf. Num. 23:8-9; Amos 3:2). Gentiles are not part of the covenant people, and, as such, have no claim on the grace and mercy of Israel’s God.

It is to the credit of the woman that she does not contest Jesus’ judgement: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” She accepts that the gentiles have no expectation of—let alone any right to—the blessings that God has promised to Israel. But she argues that these blessings are so abundant that they naturally spread beyond the limits of the chosen people in such a way as to benefit the gentiles as well. So it is that all nations—even the hated Canaanites—will be blessed through Abraham’s progeny: not because Jesus brings blessings to gentiles alongside (let alone instead of) Jews, but because although God’s blessings come to Israel alone, their infinite richness cause them to spill over to benefit all nations.

At this point in the story, the Canaanite gains her blessing: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish” (v. 28). It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that she gained it by way of exchange, as though her daughter’s health were restored as a reward for her great faith. Rather, her faith is precisely that God’s blessing is already there, bestowed so fully that its benefits have overflowed Israel’s table and are there for the taking. Jesus’ words to her are simply an affirmation of what she already claimed: the ability as an outsider to recognize and draw on the abundance of what has been granted to Israel in the person of Jesus.

The sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50):

Although the story of the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment is found in all four Gospels, Luke’s account is twice the length of any of the other three. Luke completely decouples the story from Jesus’ passion. Moreover, he shifts the setting from the environs of Jerusalem to Galilee and describes the host as a Pharisee rather than a leper.

The most significant feature of Luke's account, however, is that the woman is explicitly introduced as a "sinner" (v. 37) and it is on this point that his telling of the story turns. While Luke, like the other evangelists, records that the anointing gives rise to complaint, in Luke alone the complaint is at Jesus for allowing himself to be touched by a known sinner.

Jesus' identity is called into question: "If this man were a prophet, *he would have known* who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she was a sinner" (Luke 7:39). To be sure, the subsequent narrative makes it quite clear that Jesus knows the woman's character (v. 47). But the issue of his knowledge remains important for what Luke communicates here about Jesus' ministry.

Unlike the Samaritan and the Canaanite, this woman was evidently a Jew, but one who, as a sinner, has proved faithless to God's covenant and thus dismissive of God's blessing; and yet she is forgiven. The fact that we are not told the content of the woman's sins (only that they were, in Jesus' words, "many") is just as well, for it allows us to imagine the worst—and thereby to understand that no sin is beyond the reach of divine forgiveness.

A cursory reading might seem to suggest a logic of exchange, according to which forgiveness is granted as recompense for the woman's love, demonstrated by her care for Jesus. That such an interpretation is incorrect is shown by the parable Jesus tells to illustrate the woman's situation: "A certain creditor had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." (Luke 7:41-43). Jesus makes it clear that the creditor's act of forgiveness is motivated by nothing whatsoever in the situation of the debtors other than their dire need (namely, the fact that neither could pay). Correspondingly, the debtors' love is a response to, not the cause of, their debts being forgiven.

If the woman's case is to be interpreted in these terms, then the love she shows Jesus in anointing his feet (vv. 38, 44-46) must be related to her being forgiven as consequence rather than cause. And any lingering suspicion that the woman has somehow earned forgiveness by her love is refuted by the chapter's concluding verse, where Jesus says to her, "Your *faith* has saved you, go in peace."

These three episodes illustrate something of the texture of Jesus' prophetic ministry, which, like that of the Old Testament, takes shape in and through particular interactions. It is a ministry of "suffering" in the broad sense of exhibiting Jesus not as imposing his will on the world around him but responding to the contingencies of time and place.

In and through these contingencies, Jesus shows himself to be sovereign: to know the situations of those he encounters and to speak words of truth, healing, and forgiveness. He shows himself to be Lord and Savior—but as one who rules and saves by emptying

himself of pretension and exercising authority in response to those in need, rather than demanding subordination and service from others.

In this way, his ministry exemplifies power exercised *with* and for others rather than *over* them. Exercising power in this way does not entail any diminishment of Jesus' sovereignty—it is precisely as one who teaches with authority that Jesus proclaims, “I am among you as one who serves”—but it does clarify the character of this power: Jesus proves to be Lord precisely insofar as he is revealed as Savior.

--Ian McFarland, “A Relational Prophet,” *Christian Century*, September 25, 2019, pp. 26-29.

*Women in the Greco-Roman world were by-in-large relegated to domestic servitude, while men attended to all “public” affairs which meant controlling the power and wealth of society. Therefore, in general, women were easily dismissed, ignored, or vilified as were the women Jesus spoke with in these stories. A careful reading of the Gospels shows that Jesus valued women differently than did his contemporary society.