

Homily – You Raise Us Up

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Back in the 1960s a movement in the church started called Take Back the Bible. For so many years, the Bible has been used to push down women into a subservient role. This inspired word of God still speaks to us today, but it also gets misused to justify some things that are the direct opposite of Jesus. Slavery, homophobia, war and the divine right of kings have all been justified by the Bible. Every time we use the Bible to justify things that are the opposite of God, we are taking the Lord's name in vain. And, perhaps this has been most egregious in the subjugation of women. If the Bible showed women as property then those cultural norms of two thousand years ago must still be good for us today. Right? Wrong! So, some wise ones started a movement in the church to take the Bible back from misuse. In particular, there was a wholesale re-examination of the Bible to find positive role models of women – women who played pivotal roles in the stories of ancient Israel and as disciples and early followers of Jesus. And today, we have one of those recast stories which we often call the woman at the well or the woman of Samaria.

In the old way of telling today's Gospel story, the woman at the well was "sensuous," "promiscuous," "unchaste," and "immoral." In some sermons, she was described quite explicitly as a prostitute. A "fallen" woman. A harlot. And the grace of the story in this version — the "Good News" — resided in nothing more than Jesus's shocking condescension: "God even forgives the sins of such a woman." However, nowhere in the narrative is the Samaritan woman described as promiscuous. Nowhere does Jesus call her a sinner, sexual or otherwise. And nowhere does he tell her, as he tells so many others, to "go and sin no more." Today's Gospel reading is not a story about morality. It is not a story about Jesus liberating a woman from her own sex life. It is a story about Jesus revealing himself as the Messiah to a fellow human being in whom he sees genuine spiritual hunger, a learned and engaged mind, and a tremendous gift for preaching, evangelism, and apostleship.

So, let's begin with what the story actually is. As theologian Barbara Brown Taylor points out, Jesus's dialogue with the woman at the well is his longest recorded conversation in the New Testament. He talks to the Samaritan woman longer than he talks to his twelve disciples, or to his accusers, or even to his own family members. Moreover, she is the first person to whom Jesus reveals his identity in John's Gospel. And, this might be the most compelling fact of all, she is the first believer in any of the Gospels to straightaway become an evangelist, and bring her entire city to a saving knowledge of Jesus. This is not the story of a fallen woman. It is the story of one of the first and greatest followers of Jesus. Two thousand years ago, the genius of Jesus was to see this potential in the woman at the well, and then he

guides her in ways that raise her up to that potential. Using a modern day term, Jesus acted as a spiritual director so that the woman could see God at work in and around her. And in particular, she could see God at work in Jesus.

Now, every culture and religious tradition has some method of passing on spiritual wisdom and for helping individuals to discover their own. The Christian tradition of spiritual direction finds its origin in Jesus' own way of relating to his disciples and the many, like the woman at the well, who sought him out for healing and instruction. Jesus had a deep intimacy with God as the source of his authority that he encourages others to rely on as well. Jesus is the ultimate spiritual director because of his intimacy with God, his Abba. Jesus listened and responded to others out of his attentiveness to the Father, out of his participation in the Jewish covenant community, and out of his knowledge of Scripture and Jewish law. But the Father's love and presence and the Holy Spirit's anointing were the most powerful influences in Jesus' life and his source of direction for others.

Jesus taught and offered direction to his disciples and others before and after the resurrection. In each case, he spoke to their personal situation within the framework of God's faithfulness and invited them to recognize God's loving presence and availability to guide and bless. At Jacob's well Jesus listened to a woman about her relationship with God and her human relationships. And in response Jesus pointed her directly to God.

Now, Eugene Peterson wrote a contemporary version of the Bible that is not a word for word translation from the Greek. Instead, it is the Bible put into twenty-first century English. This version is called The Message, and it has language that helps us unpack the beauty of the Scriptures. And from today's Gospel reading here are verses twenty-three and twenty-four from the Message version. "It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration."

With these words Jesus is guiding and directing the woman at the well. He is leading her to grow into her true self and bring that true self before God in worship. That spiritual direction from Jesus is still valid for us today. We too must worship God with our true selves.

Over and over we see that Jesus used stories to offer spiritual direction by challenging people to look more closely at what they believed and why. He had them dwell on their own experience of God, and how they interpreted these experiences.

This is the essence of spiritual direction—encouraging people to listen to and follow God. In Scripture we observe Jesus always listening for the voice of his Abba, and then using that insight in relationship to his disciples, and in particular with the woman at the well. Present-day spiritual directors attempt to function in the same way by listening to the Holy Spirit and responding to directees and others out of prayerful attentiveness to God.

Now, Father Richard Rohr says, “If you do not have someone to guide you, to hold onto you during the times of not knowing, you will normally stay at your present level of growth.” Through deep listening, a spiritual companion can help others explore a deeper relationship with God. Like other forms of contemplation, a spiritual companion or spiritual director helps people connect more deeply with the True Self, without judging, proselytizing, or preaching.

The spiritual journey is often a lonely path, especially in difficult or trying times. A sacred companion, like a spiritual director or friend, can guide and reflect back to us God’s presence in our life and the world—awakening new possibilities, connections, and deeper meaning. As Father Richard says, “The job of the spiritual director is to hold on to spirit. Directors must recognize their own immense need for control and let it go. Instead the Spirit is the guide. In this way Spiritual Directors help directees find a different meaning and expand the limits of their perspectives.”

We are very blessed here at St. Barnabas. We have two trained and certified spiritual directors, Matt O’Connor and Linda Flynn. We have four retired clergy, and we have two active clergy. And we have others with the wisdom and life experience to be pretty good at spiritual direction. I have my own spiritual director who is a ninety-year old Franciscan. We have been walking together for about a dozen years, and she now lives in Bellingham, Washington, so we meet every five weeks on Zoom. Here, closer to home, there is an organization called Spiritual Directors of the Central Coast. So prayerful consider whether it is time for someone to come along side you as a spiritual companion. And if you would prefer a group setting, I recommend our Tuesday afternoon group called Spirituality of Aging.

Like Jesus at the well with his first evangelist, a spiritual director can help us accept the unconditional love and undeserved mercy that God offers us. And, then we can allow God to love others through us in the same way. It is God in you loving you, warts and all, and God in you loving others as they are. This is why the love you have available to give away is limitless. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman, “The water that I shall give you will turn into a spring inside of you, welling up into limitless life.”

I hope you can see how this retelling of the story of the woman at the well is a life giving story, not only for women, but for all of us. Through insightful spiritual

direction, Jesus raises up the woman and in turn she does the same for others. May we be a place where we raise each other up and where we walk together with one another in the love of Jesus.