

Mission Awareness Sunday: The Shady Lady

by Rev. L.E. Ted Siverns, PhD

John 4: 7–30

7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” 8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” 11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” 13 Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” 15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” 17 The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” 19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” 25 The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” 27 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” 28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29 “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” 30 They left the city and were on their way to him.

Mission? Some people sneer at the very word. But Jesus, God’s Great Missionary, was and continues as our example. Mission is the outreach of God’s caring for the whole world. Those who engage in mission are called missionaries. I am addressing you as fellow missionaries.

Here is an example of mission remembered in the Gospel of John: It seemed that there was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans. But when Jesus met the woman at the well the situation changed, the outsiders became insiders and the Samaritans were recognized as part of the Family of God.² He denied the tribal approach of ‘us and them’ or ‘you and them’.

Not just in the Gospel of John but the other Gospels tell of mission and ‘the outsider’. Luke remembered a parable about a Samaritan man, ‘the Good Samaritan’ whom Jesus held up as an example of what it means to be a part of the Family of God³, an example of mission engagement. Mark and Matthew also told of Jesus and a foreign woman from present day Lebanon who became the occasion for the Mission to those outside of Israel.⁴ Jesus, the human face of God ministered at home but also in foreign territory, foreign for some but not foreign to the love of God.

In Samaria, Jesus was resting at a well and in the heat of the day a woman went to the well to get water.⁵ High noon is hot in the Middle East and perhaps you remember that Noel Coward insisted that only “Mad dogs and English men go out in the midday sun.”⁶ Not quite true as here we must include those who seek to avoid others. Going at high noon meant travelling alone, an indication that she was not the most popular person in town. The inference is: who cared about her, a disgusting, disparaged woman with a very shady background? Have you any idea of how often the WMS/AMS or our own congregation has reached out to people like that Samaritan woman?

Jesus, a man, talked to a woman in a public place. Jesus a Jew talks to a Samaritan. This was not common practice; this is not usual behaviour. It must have something to do with gospel, good news, good news to those who are despised and are seen or see themselves as outcasts.

Jesus spoke to her. Oops! Not culturally acceptable! A man speaking to a woman who was not his wife, daughter, mother or sister. Surprised? The woman was surprised. Did this person have ulterior motives? The missionary may often be suspect. In Lebanon during the civil war your missionaries there were initially suspect and a common question and accusation was: Why are you here? It must be because you are paid very well or because you are a spy.

It would be easy to criticize Jesus of not being aware of the cultural taboos, or if he was aware, of not respecting them. Certainly there were lots of laws and traditions that he consciously set aside as unimportant. Very often our adherence to traditions, even laws, deny and undermine our commitment to God, our sisters and brothers, God’s children,. Should George Leslie MacKay when he went to Taiwan in 1871 have accepted rather

than condemned the practice of some tribes of the indigenous population who had a perfectly good argument for head hunting? MacKay concluded that head-hunting was wrong and worked to end the practice.

There is always a good argument to keep what is. And there is always a good argument not to venture to something new, something that could be.

“Water, I’ve come for water” and Jesus, God’s Great Missionary entered into discussion about water as a symbol of life. That discussion of the relationship between the needs of the body and the needs of the ‘soul’ has long been encouraged and supported in the mission of the church. Men and women continue to step forward to offer the good news of the One who quenches our deep desires and genuine needs. Especially in Africa our mission includes digging wells so that women do not have to walk for miles to carry water to their families.

To that Samaritan woman, an outcast, that shady lady, an apparent outcast from her own society, that woman, someone normally ignored by an adult male, Jesus spoke and asked for her help. He was thirsty; he was willing to drink from her water container and in doing so ritually contaminated himself. How unusual. And so she was confused: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan for a drink?” Jesus invited himself to join that Samaritan woman in drinking together out of the same cup, a common cup as it were and a reminder for us that communion with the outcasts is part of our tradition. Many are the Women’s Missionary Society/Atlantic Mission Society sponsored people who ate and drank with those who had not heard of the Good News of the love of God for any and for all.

Mission includes sharing the food and drink of others, developing a taste for what is important to others. That is shocking to many as we would prefer our separate cups rather than sharing with ‘those people.’

Being a Samaritan and a woman was two strikes against her but there is a third strike. This woman was not a good example, not a paragon of virtue, not a nice person. Jesus, God’s Missionary didn’t turn his back on her. She wore the labels of disrespectability that had been placed on her by others. Nor should we turn our backs to those men and women who wear labels that read no good, untouchable, upsetting or even disgusting. That is still true isn’t it? The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus spent his time with such characters.

The women of the church have not been afraid to embrace those who are different. Five husbands and living common-law, yet our sister and beloved child of God? Yes! For

sure! The Missionary was asked: “Where is the appropriate place to worship, Jerusalem or Gerazim, my church or your church?” Justin Martyr over 1900 years ago observed that “all truth belongs to the Christians.” That is, wherever truth is found is where our faith should be. Jesus answered the woman’s question this way: “Neither. True worship is worship in the spirit of truth.” That’s the kind of worship that God wants. God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in the spirit of truth.

Something else. Mission can be costly and dangerous. Many women and men of the church have quietly contributed income, health, popularity, reputation, sometimes even life as missionaries. They are largely forgotten —except by God.

When in Aleppo, Syria we heard the story of a missionary who returned to his or her home after many years and when the plane landed there was a huge crowd with ‘welcome home’ signs. Slight disappointment ensued when the missionary realized that the ‘welcome home’ was not for him but for the Prime Minister who was returning from a two week vacation on a Caribbean Island. Then there was a spirit-like whisper in her ear: Don’t forget you have not arrived home yet.

Again, mission can be dangerous. God’s Great Missionary said: follow me but the government didn’t like that. The religious authorities did not like that. The empire did not like that and it struck back. Jesus joined the ranks of the many who were crucified, in his case because of Rome but on behalf of his brothers and sisters. And we are invited to follow him down that same road, the road that leads us to God knows where. For the WMS that road is by way of: India, Malawi, Afghanistan, Taiwan, Haiti, Japan, China and even difficult places in Canada.

Our mission is to individuals and communities. It is to support health projects. It is to undertake educational tasks. It is to teach the joy of music and worship. It is to build and not tear down. It is to accept and not reject. It is to support the women and children of Afghanistan. It is to support theological education in Taiwan, Lebanon and Malawi. It is to translate and be translated. It is to challenge gender inequalities in Canada. It is to help those who, like Jesus, were refugees. It is to provide bandages for the wounded but also to address the reasons why there are so many wounded while a few control the economy.