

If you've ever re-watched a favorite movie with someone who has never seen it before, you know what it's like to no longer be surprised by a story line designed to surprise, scare, or bring relief; it still does that for others, but not for you, because you're too familiar with it. That, unfortunately, is what can happen for us with scripture. It's bad enough when the humor gets lost in translation, or we don't understand the nuances of the cultural context, or we know the stories too well to be surprised by the plot twists; but even worse is when we *think* we remember details about scripture that aren't even there.

Let's take apart some misconceptions about this passage. When John says that Jesus had to pass through Samaria, he doesn't mean it was a geographic necessity. Sychar may have been on the most direct route from Judea to Galilee, but normally Jewish people would go to whatever lengths necessary to detour around Samaria, because of the animosity between the two cultures. Jesus *chooses* to go to Samaria, and although the Samaritans are "outsiders" as far as he, his disciples, and the Jewish community in general were concerned, Jesus puts himself in the minority position by traveling in this foreign territory. Although the woman at the well points out one disagreement between them—where it is permissible to worship—the estrangement runs deeper than piety: Israelites and Samaritans had common ancestry but besides religious differences, shifting alliances during hundreds of years of war and occupation made them enemies—the kind of enemies that can only come from once being united and then parting ways. All other issues aside, a serious cultural divide separates Jesus and the woman at the well.

But at least as significant as their religion, if not more so, is the fact that she is, well, a woman. John describes the disciples as "astonished" when they find Jesus talking to a woman, and at that point, they know nothing about her except her gender and that, given their location, she's probably a Samaritan. It would have been rare for a rabbi to engage a woman in conversation, especially alone; that's what the disciples find scandalous. Yet over the years, many, many assumptions have been made about this woman to try to make her appear super-sinful. The problem is that's not supported by what the scripture actually says. Jesus knows that the woman has been married five times and is currently not married. The text does *not* say she committed adultery or was

divorced five times—although even if she was, anyone who has been divorced even once can tell you that’s a tragedy and not an occasion for judgment. But in first century Samaria, even if she had been divorced five times, she almost certainly would not have been the one to initiate those divorces; a woman who has to draw her own water in the hottest part of the day would not have had the family connections or financial resources to work around a legal system that only allowed men to sue for divorce. The most logical guess is that she had either been left by five husbands or widowed five times. That’s tragic, not disgraceful. Everyone may have thought she was cursed, but they likely did not think that she was amoral. And notice that Jesus—who by her own testimony tells her everything she has ever done—does *not* tell her to repent; he simply has a conversation with her as if—in spite of being a woman, and a Samaritan, and extremely unlucky in marriage—she is a person, worthy of his time and attention.

This is the longest exchange that Jesus has with any individual in John’s gospel—a conversation about history, spirituality, and identity—and he has this conversation with someone who is the “other” by virtue of gender, ethnicity, religion, and family. So many lines that human society would draw between this woman and Jesus, and he crosses all of them, and by doing so, restores the woman to a place in her community; it is because of her testimony that everyone else goes to see Jesus—and only then do they have the opportunity to experience diving connection for themselves.

As a pastor, I sometimes hear people who are at a low point in life wonder—maybe not if they’re cursed; that’s not usually the language we use these days—but at least wonder why God is putting them through so much tragedy. But Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well shows that God doesn’t curse us; God is the one who reaches out to us to break our curses. And if God does that for us, then we know what we are called to do for others, especially those on the other side of the lines we draw to divide up our human community. Jesus crossed every boundary to see the woman as a beloved child of God, to speak to her with compassion, and to treat her with dignity. May we follow where Jesus has shown the way.