

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL – John 4 – Marilyn McEntyre

Main Points with Discussion Questions

Two women speaking from the margins: Hester Prynne and the Woman at the Well

Marilyn introduces us to one of her favorite characters, Hester Prynne, of *The Scarlet Letter*. Here are some of the pertinent things she mentions about Hester Prynne: she has borne Rev. Dimmesdale's child out of wedlock, but refuses to betray him; ostracized, she lives on the outer edge of her community. Hester is smart, articulate, intuitive and subversive in her quiet way. And inside, she is a wild woman—wild in the sense that she no longer inhabits a domestic sphere defined by the male authorities who have no imagination for her situation, her feelings, or her way of knowing. She ends up being a prophet and teacher to a circle of women who find in her a wisdom they haven't encountered anywhere else.

Questions for discussion

- Hester Prynne has a child out of wedlock and is shunned as a result. She must make her way in the world without society's approval and without the support of a man. Yet, in a way she is freed from being "defined by the male authorities who have no imagination for her situation, her feelings, or her way of knowing." What does this mean? What special challenges do women in Hester's situation face today?
- Marilyn describes Hester as "being a prophet and teacher to a circle of women who find in her a wisdom they haven't encountered anywhere else." Why do you think this might be the case? Where does Hester's wisdom come from? What characteristics do you associate with being a prophet, a teacher, and a wise woman? Why might other women seek Hester out?

Read John 4:3-26 English Standard Version (ESV)

Jesus left Judea and departed again for Galilee. ⁴ And he had to pass through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings 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 nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” 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 now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 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 is seeking such people 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 (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

Questions for discussion – letting the Bible speak

- What is your favorite sentence or phrase in the story? Why does it capture your attention?
- When Jesus teaches, he typically leaves something in the shadows—undisclosed, mysterious, ambiguous—something that might be understood when we have grown into more mature spiritual understanding. What elements of this story do you find most mysterious?
- Where are the tensions in the story? What remains unresolved? What are we left to wrestle with?
- Women still keep villages alive by drawing water from wells, and carrying it home in heavy pots. How does the symbolic (and sacramental) element of water suggest something about the nature of Christ’s message and gift to the world?
- We shouldn’t miss a slightly comic element in this story. Princeton Seminary professor, George Hunsinger, calls the woman at the well “cheeky.” Where does the story make you smile?
- What does this story invite you to reconsider? Reevaluate? Reinterpret? How does it complement or amplify what you’ve been learning from other stories of women in scripture?

Rembrandt’s painting of the woman at the well – letting art speak

Below is one of Rembrandt’s paintings (c. 1658), likely done with one of his pupils. He often painted and sketched biblical stories, offering rich interpretations.



Some things the painting shows us about the woman at the well [the parenthetical comments marked by "R" refer to the painting]:

-- **She's an outsider.** She's a Samaritan - considered by Jews to be heretical, and thereby alien and inferior people. She's a woman who has no business conversing with a Jewish rabbi. We can also infer that she may have borne some ostracism from her own people. (R: Notice how there's a barrier between her and Jesus, emphasizing the fact that there are significant boundaries between them.)

-- **She's poor.** She has no servant to draw her water. (R: Notice how her sleeves are pushed up like those of a working woman.)

-- **She's daring:** (R: Notice how she leans in almost aggressively, commanding the space between them). She's transgressing social boundaries even talking with Jesus. She challenges him. A theologian friend, George Hunsinger, once preached a beautiful sermon on this story in which he called her "quick-witted, self-possessed, cheeky, and deftly evasive." I can't put it better than that.

-- **She's transgressive:** She knows Jesus is breaking Jewish law even to talk with her, and certainly to share a drinking vessel with her, but instead of scurrying away, she takes him on. (R: Again, notice her posture)

-- **She's curious:** Eagerly so. (R: Notice her facial expression—almost like anger. It's certainly intense. A furrowed brow like that also suggests fierce concentration. "Fierce" is a word worth considering in the list of her attributes. It's better, stronger, more focused than anger and more purposeful than resentment. Her questions are real. They have spiritual and intellectual depth. She wants to know. She's willing to take some risks for the sake of understanding. She doesn't dismiss the possibility Jesus offers.

-- **She's had a complicated life.** Her husband may have divorced her because she was barren. Or perhaps she was married off to one brother after another as her spouses died. In any event, she's had several husbands and is living with a man who isn't her husband. Commentators have pointed out that, given the social prescriptions of the time, she may be living with a man to avoid abject poverty. (R: Again, note that face—not a lot of patience or submissiveness. She's had to deal with a lot of men).

-- **She's told that Jesus is her expected Messiah.** (R: Jesus isn't leaning back or keeping social distance. His body signifies energetic attention: he's open to her. Indeed, he reveals more to her in their short conversation than some of his disciples have yet been able to grasp).

-- **She's chosen by Christ.** This story echoes three Old Testament encounters at a well, where future couples meet for the first time: Moses and Zipporah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel. Early readers would have recognized the way this story echoes the earlier ones of unions ordained and blessed by God. Ironically, and significantly, those parallels suggest that we see this woman—this spunky, transgressive, resilient outsider—as an example of those Christ has chosen to be his church: she who labors and is heavy laden; who is clueless, but curious; female and foreigner; yet seen, heard, and accepted and eventually sent to bear God's word to her people. Her story ends with John 4:39: "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony."

Questions for discussion

- How do you reconcile this woman's unworthiness with the fact that it is to her that Jesus reveals his identity as Messiah? What do you imagine she was thinking and feeling? How did this conversation change this woman?
- Why doesn't Jesus condemn the woman for living with a man who is not her husband? Did Jesus not care or was there another reason?
- What message does this story have for those who have been divorced or shunned or broken; for those who live in the aftermath of life-changing losses or costly decisions; and for those who are underestimated or misunderstood?
- Marilyn ends by saying, "Even before we are properly trained and tailored, corrected or fully healed, Christ meets us with welcome...and sends us back into the world with opened eyes." What messages do you hear in the story of the woman at the well?

For those who want literally to hear this story, listen to Mahalia Jackson's rendition of the woman at the well...<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gTDvPWkJNo>