

Identity confirmation: John 4:5-42

Respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, not at noon.

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

Jesus talks longer to the woman at the well than he does to anyone else in all the Gospels—longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his accusers, longer than he talks to any of his own family. She is the first person he reveals himself to in the Gospel of John. She is the first outsider to guess who he is and tell others. She is the first evangelist, John tells us, and her testimony brings many to faith.

Jesus' choice of her is a curious one, because when I say outsider, I mean outsider. The woman at the well was a triple outsider. In the first place, she was a Samaritan, which made her a half-breed and full pagan as far as the purists were concerned.

She was also, of course, a woman. In Jesus' time, women were not what you would call liberated. They were not even allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions included the prayer, "Thank God I am not a woman."

Women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially not by holy men, who did not speak to their own wives in public. One group of pious men was known as "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses.

She was a Samaritan and a woman, but that was not all. She was also a fallen woman. Respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, when they could greet one another and talk about the news. But this woman was one of the people they talked about, and the fact that she showed up at noon was a sure sign that she was not welcome at their morning social hour. As Jesus soon deduced, she had been married as many times as Elizabeth Taylor and was living in sin at the moment, which made it all around less painful for her to go to the well alone, after

the others had gone.

So imagine her surprise when she comes in the heat of the day with her water bucket balanced on her head and sees a strange man sitting beside the well. He could be anyone, but when he lifts his head and asks her for a drink, she sees the olive skin, the dark eyes, the strong nose. He is no half-breed. The man is a Jew, but what in the world is he doing there? Has he lost his way? Has he lost his *faith*, to be talking to her like that? The Jews have endless rules about what they may and may not eat and drink. She knows that much at least, and she knows that this man will be breaking the law if she lets him sip from her bucket.

So they talk about it, and while it is never clear whether they are on the same wavelength, the woman understands that she wants what Jesus is offering her. "Sir, give me this water," she says, which is when he tells her to go fetch her husband. It is an abrupt change of subject, to which she might object. She might say, "I thought we were talking about religion. Why are you getting personal?" Or she might lie. Instead, she squares her shoulders and looks him right in the eye.

"I have no husband," she says, and with that shred of truth from her, he tells her the rest of the truth about herself. Note that he does not pull away from her. If anything, he gets closer. He still wants a drink from her, and he wants to give her one too, only the intimacy of it all seems suddenly too much for her.

So she changes the subject back to religion again, trying to draw him back into an argument about Jews versus Samaritans. You can hardly blame her. If he knows about all her husbands, there is no telling what else he knows about her, and she decides she would rather not find out. It is time to introduce some mental static so that the man with the X-ray eyes cannot read her so well, time to step back from him and cover herself up again.

But it does not work. When she steps back, he steps toward her. When she steps out of the light, he steps into it. He will not let her retreat. If she is determined to show him less of herself, then he will show her more of himself. "I know that Messiah is coming," she says, and he says, "I am he."

It is the first time he has said that to another living soul. It is a moment of full disclosure, in which the triple outsider and the Messiah of God stand face to face with no pretense about who they are. Both stand fully lit at high noon for one bright moment in time, while all the rules, taboos and history that separate them fall

forgotten to the ground.

By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is. By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens. The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are—the good and bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is—who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises—speaking to you like someone you have known all your life, bubbling up in your life like a well that needs no dipper, so that you go back to face people you thought you could never face again, speaking to them as boldly as he spoke to you. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.”

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