Not the Leader You Expected

The Samaritan Woman: Don’t Look Too Closely at the Resume

John 4: 5-30, 39

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I will never forget the day when my then pastoral colleague and I met with a woman who was new to our church. She asked for an appointment “that might take a little time”, she said, because she wanted us to get to know her on her own terms, from the start. It was an unusual request; it was our practice to take new folks interested in the church to lunch, as a way to get to know something about them and also to introduce them to the church and answer any questions. But she wasn’t interested in that. She wanted to meet at the office. So we did. Early, like 9 am. As we got settled, she unrolled an enormously long piece of brown butcher paper, (you know what I mean?), got out a roll of masking tape and asked if she could tape this to the wall. It literally was about 10 feet long!

This was the history of her life; it began *before* she was born, with her parent’s marriage, and charted *every single thing* of importance to her in the 45 years hence! And starting at the beginning, she described each and every one of those things: the births of her siblings, her early church life and baptism, her school years—everything that had happened in the last 45 years! We sat stunned (and also amused and bored and puzzled) for nearly four hours! And still she wasn’t done! Not having any more time to offer her that day, we politely invited her back to finish, which she did another day, complete with her personal timeline once again! She evidently thought that it was important for us as her pastor’s to know *everything* she could say about her life! I tell *you* this story to ask you this question: **how *much* does the past really matter?!**

Wondering what some of the prevailing views were on that question I did what lots of folks do these days and Goggled the question, “Does the past matter?” What I discovered was that while there is some disagreement, the majority of folks seem to think it does.

Participants in the stock market think the past matters; “The Persistence Scorecard” keeps track of trends in the S & P and Dow Jones indices. “Successful management lies in the ability to generate above average returns consistently over multiple periods!” (Aye M Soe, June 2015)

Folks writing about personal relationships are split on the matter but most think the past *is* important: while you don’t want something called “retroactive jealousy” to mess up your current relationship, it does seem to matter to folks how many sexual encounters their current partners have had.

Historians say a resounding “YES!” when asked if the past matters. Then they say all those familiar things we’ve heard before, like “the past is the foundation for the future” and “those who don’t know the past are doomed to repeat it” and “we must cherish our history to pass on to future generations.”

And of course, already in the presidential election run up we have been made to listen to the dregs of each candidate’s past, thrown into the political hopper as evidence or fodder or just plain hatefulness in an effort to position one person over another.

But there *are* folks who disagree. Some articles suggested that the past just that, *past*, over; we should forget about it and move on. One blogger made the comment that the “past has no bearing on what is possible in the future.” *Really?* I heard myself saying out loud! And a philosophy website argued that determinists don’t care about the past because they think the future is already planned out; it doesn’t matter what we do anyway.

In response to my initial question, overwhelmingly the consensus in my non-scientific web wandering seemed to be that *the past matters*; that our collective and individual pasts are significant and in some way inform who we are and what we will do and be in the future. That may be true for todays’ researchers and bloggers and relationship experts but it **wasn’t true for Jesus**. (He wasn’t much of a consensus candidate anyway I guess!) This story of his encounter with the woman at the well speaks of many things, but holding onto the past wasn’t one of them.

This is most likely a very familiar story to you all. It is filled with all kinds of interesting dynamics not the least of which is the extensive markers of exclusion that in every other circumstance would have prevented these two from talking at all!

What am I talking about? I am talking about the fact that although this is the longest recorded conversation Jesus has with anyone in any of the gospels, this woman has no name. I am talking about the fact that she is Samaritan and he is Jewish. There is more distance between those two groups than between Trump and Clinton! I am talking about the fact that she is a woman and he a man and men and women who are strangers to each other don’t talk in public during this time. I am talking about the fact that she comes to draw water at mid-day; women drew the water for the homes, and they came at morning and evening, when the day was most cool. As they drew they chatted and laughed and deepened their relationships. This woman was not welcomed like the others. Why? Because of her past…..because she is known to have multiple sexual partners, for whatever reasons, and so she is shut out, shunned, cast aside but everyone but Jesus.

All these are reasons why this story is marked by exclusion! But that’s not *all* it’s marked with: it’s also marked by *cultural subversion*, on the part of Jesus. He engages her in conversation; seven times they go back and forth, not talking about the weather or the harvest but about theology and politics and personal matters! Some scholars see this as the most significant theological discussion Jesus has with anyone in the gospel narratives. He is *subversive* in that he talks about “male things”: like politics (the differences between them as Samaritan and Jew), like religion (what is and isn’t ritually pure?), about worship (what does true worship mean?) and about her past: he knows it before she acknowledges it. Jesus accepts her questions, engages her mind as well as her spirit and welcomes her *in spite of what her life has been.* And because the past history of their respective people, the past history of their individual understanding of tradition and worship, the past history of this woman’s lifestyle is ***not permitted* to get in the way of the present action of God’s Spirit,** this woman, incredulous, believes! And because of her witness, because of her honest, open invitation to “come and see!” her entire community believes too! And that’s the key here I think: **the past is not permitted to become a barrier** to this woman’s understanding and welcoming of Jesus into her life, and in turn, the life of her community.

I guess if I were asked I would say our past *does* matter; there are many things that we can learn if we can think carefully and critically about our past---as individuals, as a congregation and as a society together. We don’t want to repeat mistakes we have made (and we have ALL made them); we don’t want to perpetuate stereotypes, exclusionary practices, and traditions that are outdated and meaningless. But our past is only helpful in that it teaches us how to become better: more humane, more loving, more forgiving, more peaceful, more graceful, more generous, more trusting, more vulnerable, more open, more creative, more daring and more Christ-like in the future. Our past does *not* serve us when it locks us into a particular time, place or mind-set; it *only* serves us when it frees us to become all God has envisioned us to be.

Deb and I know a pastor who made some terribly bad choices in the past. He confessed to those he needed to confess to; he apologized to those he needed to apologize to. He embraced a season of repentance and forgiveness and accompaniment by colleagues who did not judge him, but served him, supported him in his recovery, and believed that forgiven, he could serve again. And I know a church that called him. He honestly told them his entire story. They humbly accepted his truth and welcomed his ministry. Together they are happily and eagerly serving Christ in their community and wider world.

Why do I tell you that? Because to most of us, the past does matter. We all have one, including the person God is calling to be your new pastor, including the person we will collectively chose to lead our country. It mattered to Jesus in his encounter with the woman he met in Samaria *only as far as* she was truthful about it; then he engaged her heart and mind and made her a witness to the good news of love and redemption offered to us all.

No matter what we’ve done or thought or said, no matter where we’ve been or not been, God still loves us, God still forgives us, God still calls us. Remember that… and as you claim that truth for yourself, be sure you offer it to others.