



“Those Kind of People”

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The Rev. Dr. Mary Ellen Kilsby, the former senior minister at First Congregational Church in Long Beach, California (1988–2000), is a bit of a legend in her own time. She was one of the first women to serve as senior minister of a large church in our denomination, and she has been a guiding light and proponent of liberal Protestant theology and social justice work throughout her life.

Mary Ellen has, for example, been a proponent for LGBT rights, and was one of the first five pastors in the state of California to lead her congregation through the Open and Affirming process back in 1992.¹

Mary Ellen is a true inspiration. I’ll share just a couple of my favorite stories about her ministry. The first was told to me by a lay leader at FCC Long Beach, whom I interviewed about their ONA process years ago. In the interview, I asked the church leader to tell me how their congregation expressed its ONA identity.

The person with whom I spoke explained that the congregation decided to celebrate by entering themselves in the Long Beach Gay Pride parade. One member volunteered his red convertible and put signs on the side of his car that said, “The Rev. Dr. Mary Ellen Kilsby, and her lovely husband ‘Bud.’” Some 40-plus members of the congregation marched behind the convertible carrying signs with messages saying things like this:

- Straight but not narrow
- Jesus loves you
- We’re an “Open and Affirming” Church

Another of my favorite stories about Mary Ellen was told to me by her successor, the Rev. Dr. Jerry Stinson. Jerry explained that every time the congregation did something a little edgy in the eyes of the general public, Mary Ellen would go down to the Long Beach *Press-Telegram* office, take out her checkbook, and buy a full page ad in the Saturday paper that said, “We’re that church with those kind of people. Come and worship with us!”

¹ <http://www.firstchurchlb.org/history.html>

Part of Mary Ellen's effectiveness as a leader was that she has always come at social justice challenges like a force of nature, and that she has also brought a kind of Carol Burnett-like wit and charm to her efforts that has enabled her to make pithy comments that are memorable and not easily dismissed, even by her greatest adversaries.

I've never actually asked Mary Ellen this question before, but I think she would agree that if one were looking for a slogan to characterize the community that gathered around Jesus, she might just describe it the same way that she described First Congregational Church in Long Beach: "We're that church with those kind of people."

II

Today's gospel reading is one in a long list of gospel stories that depicts the community around Jesus as being comprised of "those kind of people." The woman whom Jesus encountered at the well in John's gospel was one of "those kind of people."

The Samaritan woman wasn't gay or lesbian or part of a Pride Parade, like those who marched behind Mary Ellen's convertible in Long Beach, but the Samaritan woman was seen as "other" by the majority of the people in her world, in her time.

The only things that the Samaritan woman seemed to have had in common with her peers were that we never learned her name, and that she spent 40 percent of her time fetching and hauling water.

In every other way, the Samaritan woman was seen as different, as other. She was, first of all, a person from a different branch of Jesus' family tree, who practiced a different expression of the Abrahamic faith. Both Jesus and the Samaritan woman traced their tribal roots back to Jacob, one of the ancient Jewish patriarchs. (Remember Jacob, as in Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph?) Religiously speaking though, the two didn't mix. Jesus was a Jew. The woman at the well was a Samaritan.²

Samaritans were from Northern Israel. Jesus was from the Southern Kingdom. The two nations had split following the death of King David, over 900 years earlier.³

Samaritans and Jews disagreed on which texts were most sacred, about how to interpret the texts that they shared in common, and over cleanliness laws. They also disagreed on which site was the true place to worship Yahweh. The Jews favored Jerusalem in Judah, while the Samaritans favored Mt. Gerizim in Northern Israel.⁴

So, for as long as anyone could remember in Jesus' day, Jews and Samaritans did not get along, and they did not mix. And yet, there they were—this Samaritan woman and

² James D. Purvis, "Samaritans," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 898-899.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 898 and 890.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 898-899.

this Jewish prophet. There they were at Jacob's well—mixing. There they were at the crossroads of the community, at the well dug by their common ancestor. There they were engaging in the longest conversation that Jesus had had with anyone in the entire gospels. There they were—testing taboos, bridging boundaries, and wading into deep waters.

III

It seems by the very fact that this Samaritan woman was at the well at midday that she had gone out of her way to avoid others, and to avoid the experience of being pitied, or criticized, or maybe even ostracized by others who would have come to the well early in the day.

She, by contrast, had gone to the well at high noon, while the other women were enjoying a siesta from the midday heat. Why?

Maybe she was hoping to be alone. Maybe she was a woman of questionable reputation. After all, Jesus pointed out that she had had many husbands. Perhaps she had gone through husbands like bananas, and they had all divorced and publicly disgraced her. It's possible.

In Jesus' day, for example, wives could not divorce husbands, but husbands could divorce wives. Husbands could divorce wives by going to the public square and saying seven times in a row, "I divorce thee."

Marriage wasn't based on amorous feelings in those days, or for most of human history. Marriage was then, as it is today in many cultures, primarily an economic institution, and a means of defining paternity and passing on wealth. A husband might divorce a wife for several reasons, including infertility (which was always assumed to be a female issue, not a male issue), infidelity (ditto on who's responsible for that too), or whatever reason the man deemed worthy of dismissing his wife.

When a husband divorced a wife, back in Jesus' day, he wasn't saying to the public, "The two of us just seem to have grown apart." He was putting his spouse and the community on notice that he would no longer take economic responsibility for his wife, and she was now on her own to beg or to prostitute herself, if her family was unwilling or unable to take her in.

In most cases in those days, a divorced woman would have been left to her own devices, because 90 percent or more of the population was poor and no one but royalty and a few merchants would have been able to afford to take in an abandoned person. Furthermore, most families, by cultural standards, would not have wanted a disgraced woman to have been associated with them, because it would have lowered their reputation and position in the community. Similarly most men would have resisted marrying a divorced woman for similar reasons.

With few economic options available to an abandoned woman, it doesn't take too much imagination to infer that Jesus might have been using the term "husbands" euphemistically in today's gospel reading, meaning "male companions," rather than marriage partners. Perhaps the Samaritan woman was a prostitute (for all the reasons and more than I have explained), and perhaps she had not been married to any or many of the men whom Jesus' mentioned. This is the conventional interpretation of the passage.

If this conventional reading of John 4 is correct, then the Samaritan woman may have been seen as a threat to other women and their marriages, and so she may have come to Jacob's well at high noon in order to avoid the scrutiny and ire of other women.

An alternate read on John's gospel is offered by some feminist scholars, who have ventured that the Samaritan woman had had many husbands because she married young and her first husband had been much older than she, and that he had died and that perhaps his brothers, who would have been expected in the Levirate marriage system of the day to marry their sister-in-law, had died too.

Perhaps the Samaritan woman had known more grief in her youth than most people know in a lifetime, and that to add insult to injury, there was now no one left in her husband's family to marry her. So her "social security" in essence had run out and she was now not only a widow, but a woman whom everyone pitied. So perhaps she went to Jacob's well at midday because she needed solitude more than pity.

And instead of finding what she expected—hot sun and peace and quiet—she encountered more than she could have ever imagined. She encountered a person who knew all about her—a person to whom she did not have to explain anything—a person who welcomed her openly—a person who offered her more than water and solitude—a person who offered her living water that quenched her soul.

III

If we can imagine a situation like any of these, then perhaps we can also imagine ourselves as that woman—as one of those kinds of people—who has endured many challenges and many losses, including being the talk of the town.

Perhaps, too, we can imagine ourselves coming daily to Jacob's well at high noon with our empty vessels, eager to fill the void and to avoid the crowd, all the while knowing that what we really need was the water of life, not just water for today.

And then when we arrive, we meet Jesus, the one who acknowledges our common humanity, who says that he's thirsty, too, and who exchanges our cup of cold water with the water of life, which flows from a well that never runs dry.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: we're that church, who welcomes those kinds of people. Come to the water and drink deeply from Jacob's well, trusting that what is offered here is living water, and the well never runs dry. Amen.