

Gospel Fireworks (An article for The Villager) By Scot Pollok

It was a fireworks display of political incorrectness. Jesus was at the very center.

Some have remarked that the central concern with the American church is that it is too *American* and not enough *church*. The fireworks in this particular passage often go unnoticed because of the tinted western, American, affluent glasses through which we read. What passage? The fourth chapter of the gospel of John records the memorable episode of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, and it's like the fourth of July.

John 4:3, "[Jesus] *left Judea and went away again into Galilee. And He had to pass through Samaria.*" BOOM. Relations between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus were volatile. Do you remember the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10? There is a firework shot in that story too. It comes when the hero of the story is revealed as "a Samaritan!" You could have heard the gasps. "Say it isn't so, Jesus...not a Samaritan." So deep was this seven-century long hatred that many Jews, though not all, chose to take a much longer route around Samaria when traveling. Jesus decided to go straight through the heart of Samaria, chocked full of unclean, half-breed outcasts.

Tired from the journey, Jesus sat down by a well to rest. John 4:7, "*There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.'*" BANG. BOOM. Jewish writings at the time of Jesus make it painfully clear that male Jewish leadership, such as a rabbi or teacher, do not waste time speaking to women, even their wives. They definitely did not initiate conversation with a woman. Moreover, to ask an "unclean" Samaritan woman for a drink was equivalent to religious excommunication because it made a Jew unclean, thus unable to offer sacrifices and enter the temple precinct. The woman's response in John 4:9 was grounded in this same shocking political incorrectness.

After the intervening dialogue of misunderstanding and confusion, Jesus lights the fuse of the biggest bomb yet. Out of nowhere comes John 4:16, "[Jesus] *said to her, 'Go call your husband.'*" Back peddle. "*I have no husband,*" is her response, and the shortest statement in the entire passage. Jesus responds by revealing just a sliver of His unlimited knowledge and grace, and the woman downshifts. She does what most of us would have done in the same situation, deflect, digress, change the subject.

"*Sir, I perceive you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this [Samaritan] mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.*" Foregoing the former quandary, she puts veiled words to the core of Jewish and Samaritan disagreement. She and Jesus were standing in the shadow of Mount Gerizim, which likely had smoke billowing from its summit at that very moment. Atop the mountain were the ruins of the Samaritan temple, rival to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. In Jesus' response we see the fuse getting dangerously short. "*Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...but an hour is coming when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.*" BOOM.

To declare Mount Gerizim in Samaria and Mount Zion in Jerusalem to be equal was an explosion in itself. Jesus did more however. He declared a time when they both would be obsolete. This was a shot that could rock the Jewish world off its axis.

Clarification was in order. *“The woman said to Him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming, when that one comes he will declare all things to us.’* She tentatively associated these cataclysmic changes with a ruler yet to come. She had hope. *“Jesus said to her, ‘I AM...the one speaking to you.’”* The difficult phrasing of his response highlighted its reference. When Moses asked God for His name in Exodus 3 the response was *“I AM WHO I AM.”* Boom.

The final parlay in this show comes as a grand finale. As we’ve already established, many women in the time of Jesus were marginalized and oppressed, abused and forsaken. They were not allowed to be legal witnesses and their opinions on common matters were disregarded. These facts set the whole episode of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in stark contrast. But there is more. The woman abruptly leaves Jesus at the well and rushes across the field to her village. After cautiously relaying the happenings to the village men, they began to come out of the city themselves...and in droves. John 4:39, *“From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman...”* Whoa.

This story offers much more than fleeting awe and a wisp of carbonized smoke. It reveals an unexpected beauty in Jesus and calls us to emulate it. We see that, even within the culture of His day, Jesus was not held hostage by racism. He purposely reached out to a hated people. Neither was Jesus imprisoned by sexism. He (and the author of the gospel) lifts up women to heights formerly unknown. Nor was Jesus shackled by classism. He transformed a lowly and immoral outcast woman into a village missionary. Pursuing Jesus in our everyday lives should summon us in these same directions.

That’s a fireworks display I can appreciate. That’s a Savior I can follow.

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