

I've got a problem with spray whipped cream. It's not unusual for me to spray it straight into my mouth from the bottle as I'm perusing the fridge for something to have for a snack or dinner. One day when my willpower was malfunctioning and I thought Jesse was watching football in our bedroom, I indulged in that sweet snack more than once in a very short period of time.

Soon after, I went into our bedroom, expecting to talk to Jesse but he wasn't on the bed watching football. I went back through the kitchen and opened the pass through door to the garage and hollered for him in there but instead of his voice coming from his workshop area, his reply seemed to come from our living room. Now normally this wouldn't be a problem except that this time I knew it meant he'd heard the evidence of my weakness because our kitchen is open at one end to our living room. And, sure enough, when I sheepishly walked into the living room he had a knowing smile on his face and said, "I heard that. I heard you hit that three times."

I was mortified! He has always been so gracious about refraining from comment about the number of empty cans of whipped cream in the trash and I am diligent about restocking every time we go to Aldi so that if he wants some whipped cream, I haven't eaten it all. It's been a fine symbiotic relationship. But, to have it all just so "out there" that day, well, I knew I'd been busted.

Have you ever been busted? You thought you were getting away with something a little bit naughty only you were wrong and someone found out about it? Likely it's happened to all of us and it seems to have happened to the woman at the well in the story Ashlea read to us from scripture this morning.

Jesus told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

BUSTED! The Woman at the Well's immorality and wicked ways have been found out and Jesus calls her on it.

Or at least, if you're like me, that's what you've been taught about the Woman at the Well. And yet, the first commentator I read on the passage in preparation for this sermon, a woman who is a scholar at Princeton Theological School, one of the finest divinity schools in the world, she refutes that view on the passage.

And she writes . . .

"What this story is not . . . A "shady lady" goes to a well in the middle of the day because her bad reputation has made her an outcast from society. Jesus, the hero, calls out her sinful lifestyle and offers her living water. Convicted and moved, she repents, converts, and is washed clean."

Uhh, yep, that about sums up what I had planned to preach about this story when I first chose it. The author goes on . . .

"What this story just might be . . . A woman -- strong, smart, and savvy despite her vulnerable location in the world -- becomes an example of someone who crosses boundaries to encounter Jesus in a real way. Refusing easy answers, her exchange with Jesus presents a powerful image of who Jesus is -- a tired man without a bucket asking for a drink, and the Messianic giver of water for life, eternal and abundant, Savior for the world.[\[1\]](#)

After reading that I thought, "Oh, come on. That can't be." So I went back to the books, only to find a second author, also of learned pedigree, who supports a similar interpretation. And he writes,

". . . this is a passage and story that has, in my opinion, been notoriously misinterpreted . . .

I don't think the Samaritan woman is a prostitute. I don't think that she has a shady past . . .

The character who occupies center stage of this passage is a woman of Samaritan descent, and even if we don't know what that means, John goes out of his way to tell us. First, Jews and Samaritans don't get along (verse 9); second, women and men generally keep a safe social distance from each other (verse 27).

All of which explains why she is so surprised when Jesus asks her for a drink. When she makes a remark to that effect, he offers her living water. Confused, but intrigued, she asks about this miraculous water. Jesus eventually invites her to call her husband, and when she replies that she has no husband, he agrees: 'You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband' (4:18).

And that's precisely the sentence that has moved preachers of all stripes and across the centuries to brand her a prostitute. Yet if we read more closely we discover that there is nothing in the passage that makes this an obvious interpretation. Neither John as narrator nor Jesus as the central character supply that information. Jesus at no point invites repentance or, for that matter, speaks of sin at all. [Which he does without hesitation in other stories in scripture.] She very easily could have been widowed or have been abandoned or divorced. Five times would be heartbreaking, but not impossible. . . There are any number of ways, in fact, that one might imagine this woman's story as tragic rather than scandalous."[\[2\]](#)

And yet, in all my twenty years of ordained ministry, I have taken the scandalous interpretation I learned in childhood Sunday School class at face value without ever stopping to consider if what I thought I knew about it was well-founded or well-supported by a wide variety of people who know more about the Gospel of John than I do—indeed people who have dedicated much of their vocation to studying the Gospel of John.

And so what started as a sermon about the Woman at the Well getting busted by Jesus morphed into a sermon about the preacher getting busted for failing to carefully study and consider the scripture at hand from various viewpoints. Sometimes I just am not amused by the stirrings of the Holy Spirit, especially when I'm working on a deadline and really do not have time to reconsider long-held prejudices and have my preconceived notions challenged, for heaven's sake!

But, I kept going down this unexpected path, wondering why I thought what I thought about the passage and my wonderings were quickly addressed by one of our commentators on the passage who writes . . .

“Why we assume the worst about this woman . . . She's known as a 'bad girl of the Bible,' a 'lady of the night.' Why? The fact is, we are conditioned to label this woman, as we are conditioned to unfairly label most women who find themselves in unfortunate and vulnerable situations. This is the result of patriarchy, of centuries of socially constructed ideologies of gender, of bad theology . . . We read the Woman at the Well this way for the same reasons that we call Bathsheeba an adulteress instead of a victim of rape.

If we approach this story without these preconceived notions about the woman, we can see that she plays a powerful role in the story as a positive model of encountering Jesus and sharing his message that makes us reconsider who's in and who's out."[\[3\]](#)

Now, I don't want to get lost in the weeds of interpreting this passage. Skilled, educated, and faithful scholars of scripture regularly disagree on matters of Biblical interpretation and it's likely that most of us do, too. I'm not trying to convince you of anything. I'm simply sharing the remarkable ways in which taking time to really look into something and consider voices other than those I've heard most of my life gave me the opportunity this week to re-examine some of my long-held beliefs and notions about this story. I feel liberated because I have, indeed, been busted. I feel as though I've busted out of the limited ways in which I used to interpret the story. It

didn't feel very relevant to me before because I could just say to myself, "Well, at least I've only had two husbands and not five like this lady" and sort of leave it there sitting in self-righteous satisfaction.

But now, now that the morality lesson fades to the background, I better understand that Jesus didn't bust the Woman at the Well, Jesus busted through TO the Woman at the Well. And, I'll admit, to me. Once I got past what I thought I knew, I discovered a deeper truth, a more important truth about this passage. And isn't that just the way it is sometimes—once we get past what we thought we knew about a person or a situation, a deeper, usually more compassionate truth is revealed. In this case, having my preconceived notions about the Woman at the Well challenged by reputable and credible scholars makes me one with the Woman at the Well, not one who stands in judgment of her.

The Woman at the Well—be she a woman of ill repute or unfortunate circumstance—and all of us—be we people lacking in self-control, self-discipline, self-esteem, or self-whatever-else that makes us feel unworthy or unwanted—Jesus busts through all of the shame, all of the wondering, all of the doubt, all of the insecurity. Jesus busts through preconceived notions, learned biases, and fears fed by the media and pundits. Jesus busts through it all to offer us living water. With Jesus, we're all busted—busted open to experience new thoughts, new people, new ideas, new compassion, new life, and the life everlasting. Thanks be to God.

[1] https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3386

[2] https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1920

[3] https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3386