

The Gospel of John
Session Four – Increasing Opposition to Jesus
(John 3:22 – 5:47)



*The Water of Life Discourse between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well,
by Giacomo Franceschini, 17-18th century (Photo credit: Wikipedia)*

Harmonizing the Gospels
The Gospel wouldn't Work Without Her: The Samaritan Woman
The Man Crippled for Thirty-eight Years

Harmonizing the Gospels

Each of the Gospel writers saw Jesus as utterly fundamental to the Christian message and to their own lives, and indeed to all of human history, but each had a slightly different “take.” And if they had different takes, then so can we. In other words, we can be thankful that, as we began to notice even in the book of Genesis, the Bible – and in this case the Gospel section of the Bible – is not univocal, but polyphonic. It is a coat of many colors, as is the Christian movement, and new tints and shades are still being added.

The problem is that a certain nervousness about varying even differing, views on the significance of Jesus also arose quite early. The same centralizing and homogenizing forces that would soon lead to the attempt to impose a single creed also went to work on the disparities in the Bible itself, and in the Gospels at the heart of the Bible. This jumpiness about the perceived dangers of diversity led to the attempt to iron the differences among the four Gospels to yield a single narrative, which later became known as a “harmony.”

The earliest of these harmonies was stapled together by a scholar named Tatian the Assyrian (120 – 180 CE); he called it *Diatessaron*. But this blending continued to appear into the Middle Ages. Even more were attempted during the reformation when ordinary people began actually to read the Bible, and

some theologians feared that being confronted with diverse portraits of Christ might create unsettling confusion. There have been numerous efforts to smooth out the differences among the Gospels ever since, and various stabs at harmonization still roll off the presses today. Needless to say, most film versions of the life of Christ also resort to harmonizations, since exposing moviegoers to dissimilar takes on Jesus would be hard to do on screen. Pier Pasolini (1925 – 75) confronted this issue head-on in filming perhaps the best movie about Jesus ever made, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. He did it by explicitly confining himself to the that Gospel alone.

Undoubtedly the motivation to craft harmonies is sincere, but they have an unintended negative effect. In attempting to forge one “Gospel,” editors must lay aside all considerations on the special setting in which each of the Gospels was written and the differing cultures for which they were intended. But this tears the Gospels out of their real history and invents a whole new ersatz homogenized text. Except possibly for children’s biblical stories, the effort to squeeze out the obvious inconsistencies between the Gospels robs readers of the refreshing realization that, as we have said, a diversity of interpretations of who Jesus was and what his significance is marked the earliest years of Christianity.

– Harvey Cox (from *How to Read the Bible*, Harper One, New York, 2015)

The Gospel wouldn’t Work Without Her: The Samaritan Woman

Jesus grants the Samaritan woman abundant life, and instead of even imagining hoarding it, she immediately shares the news. She “gets a life” and she shares it. But she isn’t content for her people to have a secondhand faith. She insists, “Come and see!” She wants them to experience Jesus firsthand.

We’ve seen some ways the Samaritan woman compares to Nicodemus. She’s a person on the margins with respect to religion, ethnicity, gender, class, status, education, financial stability and so on. Nicodemus is quite the opposite. She is the “other” with respect to Jesus; Nicodemus, as a Jewish teacher of Israel, is one of Jesus’ own. Nicodemus is associated with the dark, she with the light. He clams up; she has the most extended conversation with Jesus in the New Testament, receives a theophany, and progressively verbalizes her deepening understanding of his identity. And so on.

But notice how John also interlaces the Samaritan woman and the disciples. Right in the middle of the conversation about drinking, the author inserts this parenthetical note: “(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)” (4:8). “OK,” you the reader may say. They show up back on the scene during Jesus’ revelatory interaction with her. Awkward. Even more awkward is their response, or lack of. In the midst of this glorious, life-changing event, they take the tried-and-true, entirely

unimaginative tack and worry about Jesus' inappropriate boundary crossing when it comes to gender. Perhaps Jesus didn't know that there was supposed to be a glass ceiling when it comes to divine revelations and commission to do ministry in the name of Jesus Christ by addressing males in the public square? Not only are they reflexively status quo here, but they are also too cowardly to own their bias. That can happen.

The Samaritan woman doesn't have time to stay and deal with their sexist notions; she has too much preaching to do to those in need of some good news. She is so effective in her testimony, the people head back to find Jesus for themselves. Meanwhile, the disciples, just like Nicodemus, are so focused on the literal level that they cannot or will not engage the spiritual significance of what lies right before them. As a result, while she is working, they are kerfuffling around. What she has sown, they will reap. She's building a foundation that they will, eventually, add to (4:37 – 38).

Does it strike you as surprising, unexpected, even ironic that, in contrast to Nicodemus and the disciples, this unnamed, non-Israelite unorthodox female who finds herself passed from male to male in a society where males rule is the very one God lifts up as the example we are to follow in our faith journey? Does God still do that today?

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

The Man Crippled for Thirty-eight Years

Jesus is in Jerusalem and he goes to a site known to be frequented by people in search of a cure. By a portal known as the Sheep's Gate is a pool that in the Hebrew language is called Bethzatha. Around this pool are five porticoes, inside which lie multitudes of invalids. John portrays these victims as "blind, lame, and paralyzed." They are specimens of human life yearning for wholeness.

Folklore born in Jewish mythology had apparently developed around this pool. The waters of this pool were said to be miraculously troubled periodically and at those times to have therapeutic power. The popular conviction was that the first one who stepped into those troubled waters would experience healing. The fascination with healing miracles has a long history in human experience, as healing shrines like Lourdes and Fatima illustrate, and as the number of faith healers will testify. The wish is, I fear, sometimes the creator of the reality. The pool of Bethzatha had also achieved this popular reputation.

In this setting the author of this gospel brings one of the invalids front and center. The man's affliction has to do with his inability to walk. A detail as specific as the

one stating that this crippled status has been endured for thirty-eight years is always suspicious. Is the number of years a historical memory or a symbolic truth? I am convinced it is symbolic, but its meaning has been lost in the sands of time. Perhaps it was related to the number of years in which the tensions had grown between the followers of Jesus and the synagogue authorities., which led to the expulsion of the Christians, occurring somewhere around the year 88 CE, although we cannot fasten on any event in 50 CE to be the starting point. The story does suggest, however, a significant time during which the followers of Jesus had endured a wounding persecution and a crippled state of life from the religious authorities, as they struggled in an ever-anticipatory way, always hoping against hope for the healing of the fracture. Some other details in this story seem to validate this hypothesis, but I do not believe it can be pressed too far. Just keep this possibility in mind as the story develops.

Jesus is once again endowed by the author with clairvoyant knowledge. He knows that this man has been trapped in that state of expectation for a long, long time (John 5:6). He speaks to the man directly: "Do you want to be healed?" The crippled man responds with an excuse: "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going, another steps down before me." Indecision is always someone else's fault. Stepping out of the familiar religious forms of yesterday and into the post-religious freedom of tomorrow is never easy. It takes courage and a willingness to think outside religious boundaries. One does not easily admit either a lack of courage or the sin of indecisiveness.

Jesus cuts through these debilitating fears quite directly by saying: "Rise, take up your pallet and walk" (John 5:8). The command empowers the man, who immediately rises, takes up his bedding and walks. Then John notes that "that day was the Sabbath" (John 5:9). The boundaries of the conflict are now in place. New life and new wholeness are challenged by the religious rules of the past. That becomes the plight of this now whole, but formerly crippled man. Opening himself to wholeness, he trembles because he can no longer hide from his fears inside the excuses of his past. How often it is that after one does an audacious thing one then trembles at one's own audacity!

He tells the synagogue authority that he did not know the source of his new and ecstatic grasp of freedom. Later, John says, Jesus found this man in the Temple and gave him one more chance to choose faith over fear, life over religion. "See, you are well," Jesus said. Don't sink back into your fears and your behaviors of the past. Those who cannot deal with wholeness and life, those who retreat once again to the security of clinging to their sweet sickness, frequently lack the courage to seek a second chance.

The healed-crippled man went to the authorities, who charged this man Jesus not only with breaking the Sabbath, but also with identifying himself with God. He made himself equal with God. The healed crippled man experienced new life and wholeness, but it is clear that he did not grasp it and he did not enter it. He could

not stand in this new life, this new freedom, this thing Paul had called “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). He chose rather to seek the favor of the synagogue authorities, to trust in the security of his religious rules. He trembled on the edge of new consciousness and then fell back into what he believed was the certainty of the past.

That is how the Fourth Gospel viewed the conflict between the synagogue and the now-excommunicated Johannine community. Many members of that community could not finally endure the split. They could not imagine that they could survive without clinging to the past. They had to worship in Jerusalem rather than “in spirit and in truth.” Not all of the followers of Jesus could walk the walk into the new consciousness that John was outlining. They could not see the cross as the place where the glory of God was revealed. They could not embrace this new reality. They could not bear the anxiety of uncertainty that maturity always requires. They wanted rules, scriptures that were authoritative, sacred traditions that were set and fixed. They actually wanted to hide in something less than life. They could not make the transition that following Jesus required.

This crippled man, who had found wholeness in Jesus, symbolized this. Despite his experience with the new life, he was not able to live in that wholeness, so he drifted back into the symbols of his broken and crippled past. John sees what Jesus offers in a dramatically different way. It is a costly decision to choose life, but that is finally what the followers of Jesus must do. Choose life, grasp life, enter life and claim life.

John is painting a picture of new life being born. He is not writing about theology and religion; he is creating a vision of what expanding life might look like and what a new identity and a universal consciousness might symbolize. This gospel is about the ancient and time-bound Jewish understanding of God moving into the mystical experience of life unfettered by fear or the needs that human beings have for religious security. Not everyone can bear this vision, but those who can, Jesus suggests, will enter a new dimension of life which is eternal.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

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