

Grace Pools Up at the Lowest Places

John 4:1-29, 39-42

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For a long time one of my deepest wounds and sources of shame was my struggle with depression. Depression has shaped my life since middle school, and for years I was embarrassed about it. I didn't tell people because I liked to think I projected an image of having it all together, and I thought if people knew, they would judge me.

There are dozens of ways to read this text. It can be read literally or symbolically. It can be about ethnic divisions, or forms of worship, or relationships between different genders, but today I want to talk about this woman's wounds and shame.

Maybe you can relate to my shame around mental illness. Or maybe not. We all have different stuff. But we all have stuff, something—a wound at the heart of us, a shame we hesitate to share, a secret we can't bear to admit.

For this woman her pain was tied up with having been married five times. The traditional interpretation is that she's some kind of harlot, chronically unfaithful, addicted to adultery. But I don't buy it. I'm tired of assuming that all shame is sexual shame. At that time, a woman couldn't have gotten away with never-ending infidelity. She would have been stoned.

We don't know why she's had five husbands, but we can say with certainty this can't be how she dreamed her life would go when she was a little girl. Maybe she'd been divorced because of infertility? Maybe she was widowed and then passed along from elderly relative to elderly relative? We don't know. But it couldn't have been how she'd hoped her life would go.

And it was apparently isolating. She's drawing water at an odd time of day—in the heat of noon instead of the cool of morning. Did they ostracize her? Or did she keep herself separate because she was embarrassed? After everything she's been through, of course she feared judgment.

It seems kind of mean of Jesus to push on that tender place almost immediately, like pushing a thumb into a bruise. They've barely started talking, and he says, "Go get your husband," when apparently, he knows full well she doesn't have one. Is he taunting her, judging her? I don't think so. Because here's the thing with Jesus: he is always working to heal us and set us free. He's able to go to the places of our shame without any shame on his part and walk with us out of there. That's what Jesus does for this woman. He sees her and knows her and loves her.

My own shame about mental illness began to unravel when it became very public during what we might as well call a breakdown six years ago. Given the choice, I would have skipped it. But it became impossible to pretend anymore, and everyone who knew and loved me suddenly knew about this private struggle. It was hard, and at the same time,

the shame was washed away. People knew this thing about me and loved me anyway. Christ met me at the well.

Remember? Grace is like water.¹ Water always finds the lowest places. That why I have a sump pump in my basement. Living water is no different. Its clear, cool running streams pool up in the lowest places of our lives and dissolve our shame, clean out our wounds.

You know what this woman was able to do after her interaction with Jesus? She leaves her water jug and runs back to all those people she's avoided or who have avoided her and tells them about what has just happened to her. She becomes the first evangelist. "Come and see this person who's seen me and known me and set me free." And they come.

Christ is always at work healing. There's no shame too great, no wound too deep, no secret too big to be healed. Grace pools up in the lowest places of our lives.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024

¹ With gratitude to my dear friend and mentor, Kris Rocke, for his lifesaving acceptance, as well as this image and the phrase, "Grace pools up in the lowest places."