

“The Truth Will Set Us Free”

John 4:5-19, 28-30, 39-42; John 8:31-36 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Christianity & Democracy Series, Part II

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might remember and honor
the light of love that draws us in. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

How would you feel? If you met someone and within five minutes they told you “everything you ever did,” more or less, how would you respond? The Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar seems astonished, impressed, and intrigued. She’s maybe a bit overwhelmed. But in a positive way. She immediately identifies Jesus as a prophet, and she’s already starting to wonder if he might be the Messiah. But how would you feel? One could just as easily be suspicious, defensive, offended, angry even. How is that any of your business? Who’ve you been talking to? There are many possible reactions to having your past laid bare.

That’s why the story of the woman at the well is so important, because her reaction is not necessarily how most of us would respond. Almost immediately, she recognizes the freedom that Jesus talks about later, the freedom that comes from being fully known without having to hide anything. And she knows that it is a holy gift. It is a sharp contrast from the conversation Jesus has in chapter 8. It’s interesting to me that these interlocutors are originally described as “Jews who had believed in him.” It seems the deeper they wade into debate, the less they’re buying

what he's selling. Unlike the Samaritan woman, they get defensive about their past before Jesus even brings it up. "We have never been slaves," they insist. Which is distinctly odd, coming from folks whose religious heritage includes regular reminders of when they were slaves in Egypt and how God delivered them. It's not that they're trying to pretend they have no past, for they claim their status as "descendants of Abraham" in the same breath. But the ugly parts of that past? Painted over and denied completely. Even the freedom Jesus is offering them does not convince them to look more honestly at where they came from.

So how would you respond? These two stories present two contrasting possible reactions, but they also show us that the humility and honesty required for faithfulness matter on both the individual level and the societal level. We cannot fully embrace the mercy of God as individuals if we won't own up to everything that's happened in our own lives. But we also can't live fully in that grace if we're not willing to fully acknowledge our shared history as a people.

Before we dive into why that matters and how it applies to the current moment, let's just marvel once more at the Samaritan women's reception of Jesus' truth-telling about her life. She was amazed, but beyond that, she wanted to hear more. It was clear that she wasn't receiving his description of her past as a judgment, but as the blessing of being known, of not having to explain her situation and try to justify her existence. You've heard sermons about this story before, which no doubt clarified

that the woman must have been something of an outcast, as evidenced by the mention of her coming to draw water at noon, rather than in the cooler morning hours when the other women from the village likely had been there. The five husbands thing like was the cause of that, though we're never told what the circumstances of those losses were. At some point, if you're unlucky enough, people start to assume it must be your own fault. To have this stranger know the worst thing about her and yet continue to talk to her, to debate theology with her even, must have been an experience of shocking relief. The way she heads back to the village and proclaims that Jesus "told me everything I have ever done," as if that's obviously a reason they should all come listen to him shows us that she received these truths as liberation, not condemnation.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever gotten found out, caught in the act or maybe later, but survived through the process to the other side, when the relief of not having to hide anymore kicked in? There is an astonishing release of tension, isn't there? I think that must be a hint of what salvation feels like. And that's what the Samaritan woman was experiencing. That is what it feels like to have the truth set us free. The question is whether we're humble and honest enough to welcome the truth into our lives. And this question applies just as well to how we live as a people, as it does to our lives as individuals.

So as we continue this Christianity and Democracy Series, on our second Sunday of Reconciliation, I want to apply this question to the state of the church in 2022, when Christian Nationalism is threatening both our faith and our nation. And today, I want to focus on a particular part of that problem. Whenever Christian Nationalism comes up in conversation, we must inevitably address the overlap between Christian Nationalism and White Nationalism. Some folks will argue that it would be more accurate to use the phrase White Christian Nationalism, but I think that ends up being too many words and so it just doesn't happen.

As far as I can tell, it is fair to say that the lion's share of people ascribing to Christian Nationalist beliefs also qualify as White Nationalists, either passively or intentionally. I'm not sure that all White Nationalists fall into the category of Christian Nationalists, though, as many of them simply don't use the language and rhetoric Christian Nationalists have appropriated from our religious tradition. The point is that Christian Nationalism is predominantly a White movement; their ideals involve White people running things, and they believe God wants it that way, so the ideology is functionally a White Nationalist endeavor.

Now, I'm sure that I've said the phrase "White Nationalist" enough times that many of us are really uncomfortable at this point. So let's be clear: "White Nationalist" does not refer to all White people. This is not a condemnation of being White. The problem is that Christian Nationalism and White Nationalism have often

operated under the radar in this country to create a subtle assumption that White is synonymous with Christian, and that both categories are superior to anything non-White or non-Christian. The ideology of White Supremacy has infected the church in the United States from the very beginning, starting with the Doctrine of Discovery that justified the genocide of the indigenous peoples who were here first. This is ugly, unpleasant stuff, so it's not surprising that it makes us uncomfortable to talk about. But the question is whether we're going to respond like the Samaritan woman and welcome the truth that will set us free, or whether we're going to engage in denial like those resistant interlocutors who refused the liberation Jesus was offering them.

The anti-democratic movement that is afoot in our country right now, which is rooted in White Nationalism and Christian Nationalism, is putting a lot of effort into trying to stifle honest assessments of our shared history. They want to white-wash over the ugly parts and pretend things have always been harmonious and lovely. They do not seem to understand how true freedom can only be achieved through thorough truth-telling and facing up to the whole of how we got here. We need to resist these demands for denial, as good citizens, but even more so, as faithful Christians.

Because the truth is that the church in this country, or at least the predominantly White portion of the church in this country, bears some responsibility for how easily our traditions have been coopted by the racist agendas of White Nationalism. We have been reluctant to call out misuses of scripture and imagery.

We have not spoken up in situations we should have and thus given our children the impression that racism isn't really a big deal and not our problem. The sad reality is that White people who attend church more in this country – whether Evangelical, Catholic, or mainline Protestant like us – are more likely to hold racist beliefs than those who don't go to church.¹ When I learned about the research religion scholar Dr. Robert P. Jones has done showing these trends, I was both heart-broken and surprised. Church is where I learned about racism and our gospel call to cast it from our hearts and dismantle it within our society. But the church I love has instead been propping the systems of White supremacy up, if by inaction as much as intentional effort. Our complicity is being laid bare.

So here we are at the well, dear church. The question is whether we will open ourselves to the truth that will set us free or whether we will continue in the denial that keeps us bound to the ugly past we pretend not to see. Can we tap into the Samaritan woman's courage and understand that it's liberation that awaits on the other side of confession and repentance? Will we dare to learn more about our historic complicity in propping up systems of racial dominance, so that we can be better equipped to shut them down? How deeply do we believe in the grace of God? Enough to humbly admit to our desperate need for it? How clearly do we understand that our God is the God of every person and people and place, and that to equate

¹ See the work of the Public Religion Research Institute, founded by Robert P. Jones at www.prii.org.

Christianity with Whiteness is heresy? Are you ready to experience the liberating relief of Christ's piercing mercy? She really did make it seem like a good thing. It is my prayer that we will continue asking the Holy Spirit to soften and open our hearts, so that we can welcome in the God's liberating love. Hallelujah and Amen.