

Dialogue is Therapy and Therapy is Dialogue: With Reference to
the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

Cecilia M Kariuki

September 16, 2016

Introduction

Jesus amazed his disciples when they came back from their mission to buy food from a Samaritan village. They found Jesus engaged and having a dialogue with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Jesus was a Jew and this woman was a Samaritan, and the two groups had no association, especially when it was a man and woman. The differences between Jews and Samaritans were historical. Jews from Judah had been exiled in Babylon beginning from 597 B.C. with the capture of the city of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar's army from Babylon. The restoration of the Israelites to Judea was ordered by King Cyrus of Persia in 538 B.C. Cyrus the Persian king made this possible when he captured Babylon in 540 B.C. He issued a decree known as the Cyrus Cylinder, that allowed captive peoples to return to their countries and even provided funds for them to rebuild their temples.

The Jews returned to Judea during a time of religious and political turmoil in Jerusalem. While the Israelites were in exile, some of their ancestral enemies had ascended to power, and the landscape had changed. Many of the area's poor and peasant farmers left behind were suffering. In Samaria, the area around the former capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, foreigners had intermarried with the Jews who were not taken into exile. The Samaritans, as they were called, considered themselves followers of the Jewish faith. The returning exiles, however, rejected them and did not accept them as Jews. By the time of Jesus, these differences between the Jews and the Samaritans had entrenched themselves such that:

- Jews typically could not talk to Samaritans
- Jews taught that the Samaritans and everything they touched were ritually unclean. Therefore, drinking water from a Samaritan would make a Jew unclean, forcing that person to undergo purification rituals.

- Rabbis did not usually talk to women in public as this was considered inappropriate behavior, and this was all the more serious if it was a Samaritan woman.
- Jews normally avoided traversing the land of the Samaritans especially when they were traveling to the Temple in Jerusalem.

It was against this background that Jesus had met the Samaritan woman at the well and requested her to give him a drink of the water that she had come to draw from the well.

The Samaritan Woman Encounter with Jesus

Jesus and his disciples were traveling home from Jerusalem to Galilee, a region which is in northern Israel. The shortest route was to go through Samaria, but most Jews would avoid to travel this way and would instead travel along the coast of the Mediterranean sea, or beside the Jordan river. But Jesus decided to walk right into the heart of the region of Samaria. At noon, Jesus arrived at Jacob's Well outside Sychar about 30 miles north of Jerusalem. Here he sent his disciples into town to buy food, while he sat by the well and waited. The well was deep, more than 100 feet. Women usually came to the well in groups during the cool hours in the morning or evening. The act of drawing water was both a chore and a social event.

But suddenly, in the heat of the day, a solitary woman showed up, bucket in hand. Jesus began a discussion and asked her for a drink. This request shocked the Samaritan woman because Jesus was a Jew and she was a Samaritan. The woman protested that Jesus being a Jew was ethically not supposed to ask her, a Samaritan, for a drink. Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." (John 4:10). The woman interpreted living water in the literal sense. Living water meant running water: water from a river, a stream, a spring, or a well that is fed by the underground water table. It is not water from a pond or a cistern that stores water in a plaster-coated rock pit. "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water

welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” (John 4: 11-15).

Clearly, Jesus was not talking about the living water from the well, spring, or river. The Samaritan woman did not realize this. She thought he was talking about some magic water, an eternal thirst quencher that would enable her never to be physically thirsty again. But Jesus was talking about eternal, the everlasting life, the eternal death-quencher.

The Samaritan woman eventually realized that Jesus was a holy man. She figured this out after Jesus told her that she had been married five times and was currently living with a man who was not her husband. Jewish law limited women to three divorces. And so in her case, she was considered an immoral woman, and all the more reason for a respectable Rabbi to avoid her. This is probably the reason why she came to draw water alone at the odd hour of midday rather than joining the women groups that came to draw water in the cool of morning or evening. But this did not deter Jesus from achieving his mission – to call back sinners.

When Jesus disciples came back and found him in dialogue with the woman, they were shocked but none dared to ask him a question. The Samaritan woman on her part, rushed back to her village to tell the people about Jesus. The woman posed to them, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” (John4:29). The villagers invited Jesus to stay in the village and he stayed there for two days. During that time, he convinced many that he is indeed the Christ. They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.” (John 4:42).

Here is a good example of the effect of a dialogue between two people, a Jew and a Samaritan. Jesus went against the Jewish norms and traditions that kept Samaritans segregated from the Jews. In addition, as a Jewish male Rabbi, he broke the rule that discouraged Rabbi to speak to women in public, and especially a Samaritan woman. It is against this background that Jesus disciples were amazed when they returned to find Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman. However, this dialogue was therapeutic to the Samaritan woman. She felt accepted despite her sinful past. Here she was, talking to a Jewish Rabbi, who she perceived to be the

Messiah, who accepted and even knew her past and present life. Out of this dialogue, the Samaritan woman achieved the healing of heart and soul and became a disciple of Jesus.

The Symbolism of the Living Water

The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman was about eternal life that was symbolized by the living water. Here the water is put at the root of the universe and is depicted as God's pathway. In its first paragraph, the Bible connects water with the "beginning". The Bible states, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." (Genesis 1: 1-2).

As we all know, water is a necessity for all Christian initiations. In the Baptism rite, the water symbolizes cleansing of sin, death and resurrection, rebirth and incorporation to the Christian family. The phrase "living water" has a double meaning. It is used for a stream of water, as opposed to stagnant water. Africans used stream water for initiation. The deeper meaning of the word points to the life giving water which is the precious quality of the God head, which fills our spiritual vacuum and gives us love and the peace which passes all understanding. If we are filled with this substance, we will not need drugs or alcohol in order to be high.

Christ is the giver of the living water to both the Samaritans and the Jews. And yet, as explained above, the Jews did not associate with the Samaritans. They would not use the same cups and bowls that the Samaritans used. In the modern times, within our context, the Jews and the Samaritans could not board in the same bus, use the same bathrooms, attend the same schools, or worship in the same church. The two people shared an abhorrent racial prejudice. This situation is not unique because even today, we still experience this ruinous racial prejudice.

My Experience in Kenya

When I finished seventh grade in Kenya, I was admitted to an all-girls secondary school. The school was in Eastleigh on the eastern part of Nairobi City. It was a Catholic day secondary

school. Before our independence, black girls were not allowed in the school because the school was open only to white people and Asians. When the new African government took control, the President of Kenya changed the rules and all schools were opened to black students. About ten black girls were admitted at St. Theresa's Girls Secondary School in 1970, and I was one of the ten. White nuns were in charge of the school and they blatantly favored the Asian and white girls. All of the black girls were placed in one class with a few Asian and white girls.

The classroom lessons were in general OK. However, during P.E. (Physical education) we would play various games like French dance and other games that required holding hands. This upset the white girls. They did not feel free to hold our hands. Swimming was also taught and it was good as well. We all had the same teacher and the water was for all. Gradually, the black girls, the white girls and the Asian girls began to dialogue and came to know each other despite the previous prejudices. We all became friends as the years passed, but the first couple of years were very difficult. Swimming and dialogue made us love one another. We were all new swimmers and we all enjoyed the water.

My Own Experience in USA

In the United States I experienced issues like the ones I did in the secondary school in Kenya, but in a different way. My children had come to America to pursue their education. This was after they had finished their secondary education and they were able to qualify to attend University in the United States. My husband and I thought that it would be better if they went to school in America because they wanted to and they loved the idea of it. By that time our country had experienced some difficulties after the death of our first president Jomo Kenyatta, especially on the side of the economy and security. The university students in Kenya were rioting and looting and it was not a safe situation. Many parents were sending their children abroad for further education.

In June 2000, I traveled to USA to visit my children, three of whom were already studying here. I was very happy and excited when I arrived in the USA. It struck me as a very nice country. The cleanliness especially the beauty of summer here was overwhelming. People were kind talking to me. I got a job in a nursing home in Alabama where my children were

attending college. We were a mixed group of workers. The white women were polite but they did not talk much. On the other end of the spectrum, the African American women were very interested to know about Africa and I was very happy to answer all of their questions. They could not understand how I had come to have a Christian name. They could ask me whether I got that name when I arrived in the United States. They also did not understand the way I chose my meals because I was eating very healthy food in small amounts. I was also dressing very well and again I was being able to speak English, something they did not expect. They suddenly became very rude to me and they would call me names and they would say that I lived with animals and with goat skins. The black women thought I was lying to them when I told them that I was from Kenya, because my skin was lighter. Once they brought a Kenyan woman from their church to speak to me in Kiswahili and they would surround me in a circle. Sometimes I couldn't eat lunch with my coworkers because I was too tired of their confrontation. In this group we were all Africans. We all had the same complexion and the same features, the only difference was that their ancestors had been slaves and they were mistreated by white people. Little did they know that even in Kenya we were under the rule of the British.

During the colonial days in Kenya, we were in a very difficult situation, we really suffered, we had no say, and we were mistreated. We worked hard with limited access to education, which normally ended at fourth grade. The British would send exams from Britain, and usually only two or three pupils would pass the test. We didn't even have a university for black students. We had to fight for our freedom from 1952 to 1960. Jomo Kenyatta, the first President of Kenya, had a chance to go study in London where he obtained a degree in law. He would later become our first president in 1963. The land that had once belonged to the whites was now ruled by Kenyans, and all children were admitted into the formerly segregated schools.

Today, the white people in Kenya are treated like everybody else. We all give and receive respect from each other. Schools are open to all students of all races, gender, and ages, to whomever can afford them. Yet, still people live very different lives. Naturally, people are drawn to live with others that they can identify with: so Asians live with each other, blacks with blacks, and whites, but there are no laws saying it has to be that way.

When we came to the United States we failed to understand how and why the African Americans were treated so poorly and the big gap between them and the white people. There is a lot of misunderstanding and hatred just as the author of Christ the Roots, Professor Dr. John Githiga indicates in the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. However, if we drink the life-giving water, we will be aware of the fact that we, black and white, share the same humanity, similar strengths and limitations. We share the same air, the same sun, and the rain and similar human feelings. We are all created in the image of God. Indeed, if we wade in the living water, we will realize that we came and that we will leave this world in the same manner, no matter what color our skin is. The same earth is our home. The same God is our father. No matter which name you give him, we all share the same supernatural being. And for that reason we must have equal rights and opportunities. This is the life-giving water that flows in human life and which can create intimate relationships between male and female, young and old, rich and poor, white people and black people.

The Natural Living Water

We can draw the living water from a well, river, or spring with a bucket. In this country, we may not understand the importance of a bucket for drawing water. We may not even realize the importance of water since to get water all you need to do is turn on the tap and the water comes out. At my ancestral home in Kenya, when we were growing up as teenagers, we used to go to the river to fetch water with buckets. One of the main river comes from the Aberdare mountains and passes near my father's farm or land. The house is in the hills and the river is in a valley below. To get the water, we had to walk through a deep thick bush. It was scary because there were leopards in that area. Once in a while they could come during the night and snatch a dog or a goat. We had no other way to get to the water for our needs. We used to get the water daily before we went to school. We had to walk to school and be there at 7:00 a.m. in the morning. If you were late even for 5 minutes you had to prepare your hand to be caned. The mornings were very cold and this made the punishment very painful. When we drew water we carried it in open buckets on our heads. The water poured on our heads as we walked in a hurry.

Today, we have tap water in our homes. God is kind to his children; he gave us living water, which we don't have to struggle to get. All we have to do is turn on a tap and the water pours out.

Jesus – The Life-Giving Water

God's love and kindness surpasses all measure. He did not stop at providing us with the living water. He proceeded to give us the Life-Giving water through His Son Jesus Christ. The life-giving water guides us to all truth. Jesus, in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman, led her to a deep truth. The truth about herself and the truth about God. He enabled her to turn herself. He 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." (John 4:16-18). Jesus made her more aware of her sexual relationships. The woman realized that Jesus was the Messiah. This led her to a deep truth about God. She became cognizant of the fact that the true worship is the worship in the Spirit.

Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "Woman, believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." (John 4:21-24). In his book *Christ the Roots*, the Author explains this concept and poses the following questions: "This implies that the true worship is opening all the windows of our being, so that the holy being may fill us with life-giving water. Now the question we must ask ourselves is: if Jesus is the life-giving water to both Jews and the Samaritans, why is all of human garbage projected on the "Samaritans" the blacks, while the clean part of humanity is projected on the "Jews" the whites? How long will blacks be disparaged by both whites and blacks? Why are these sons and daughters of the King depreciated day in and day out? How long will human supremacy be projected to our white brothers and sisters – by both whites and blacks – and thereby making them suffer from an

inflated ego? When shall we be fully conscious of the fact that we are all created in the image of God?? How can we improve our means and methods of communication? How can we enhance a positive dialogue among us? Are our souls watered by the life-giving water? If so why don't we grow? Why don't' we wade in the precious water moment by moment?"

Jesus, the life-giving water creates a dialogue where there is no communication. There was no communication between Jews and the Samaritans but Christ, the Messiah, established a dialogue between him and the Samaritan woman. If we allow this water to flow in our lives, it will facilitate a positive conversation which results in friendship and mutual understanding and love. As the Kikuyu love song indicates: *to talk is to love; to keep silent is to foster hatred*. This implies that communication is love and love is communication. Positive communication is effective medication to cure a sick person. In the words of C.G. Jung, "Therapy is dialogue and dialogue is therapy."

References:

1. Christ the Roots by Dr. John G. Githiga
2. Stephen M Miller. The Complete Guide to the Bible. Barbour Books, 2007
3. NIV Study Bible. Zondervan, 2011

Cecilia M Kariuki