

Reflection Paper: “Hermeneutical Conversation with a Gospel”

A CONVERSATION WITH THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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John's Gospel has always been my favorite. I have never really studied his writing, strictly speaking. I have always been attracted to his presentation of Jesus as someone very different from his contemporaries in some hidden, mysterious way. As a Protestant, I would dwell on his writings in light of my own struggles in life. My favorite story is of the woman caught in the act of adultery<sup>1</sup> because of the mercy, gentleness, forgiveness and love that Jesus shows the woman. Religion has provided for my life both deep pain and suffering and also a peace and richness. I left my Catholic Church because people told me she was the whore of Revelation. I was not educated in my faith so that I might defend myself against these onslaughts. My Catholic education taught me a principle of consistency that my actions must be consistent with what I believed. I left my Mother for a life of hurt, bitterness, pain and estrangement from the peaceful world I once knew. They seemed so sincere and I could not imagine someone purposely lying about such a thing. This experience has shattered my world many times because of this experience with religion and I am often defensive about this subject matter for this reason. This defense includes clinging stubbornly to what I know to be true and assuming the worst of the other side. In this paper, I will try to have a hermeneutical conversation with this Gospel, examining John's vision of Jesus and his theology of discipleship. In doing this, I will endeavor to relate my experiences in faith and ministry.

I have the aforementioned story (Jn 7:53-8:11) highlighted in my Authorised Bible. The note I penned in reads, "This is out or in brackets or italics." This piqued my curiosity and so I read the passage with special attention. I have returned to this story many times for solace from my pain. I see in this passage corruption, guilt, innocence and real mercy triumphing over justice. I wondered if I too could be the recipient of this

mercy. This was something I longed for with all my heart. When times are difficult for me even today, I return to this passage as a wellspring that always seems to quench my thirst. Throughout my life, I have seen those who will always conspire against others for various reasons. The Pharisees personified this for me in John's entire Gospel. I often times wonder how they caught this woman in the *very* act of adultery. This is how the King James reads (8:4), as if they were spying on her, even though the NAB does not indicate this as clearly. They did not do it because they hated the woman, but because they wanted to trap Jesus so they could accuse him (8:6). He intruded in on their power over the people and they were well aware of the threat he was to them. I have often wondered what Jesus wrote with his finger as he allowed them time to quit their feeble attempt to trip him up. Jesus says, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone," and "They left starting with the oldest (8: 7b & 9 KJV)." The fact that the oldest left first I believe is significant because the oldest would be the first to recognize the truth of his words, be wise enough to heed the advice and leave. When they all are gone so that two were alone, he seems to pay attention again, as if he were waiting for those who refused to believe to leave. It seems to me as if this were Jesus as God who resists the proud, but reveals himself to the humble (Prv 3:34). Is there a better way to humble a person than through humiliation? His forgiveness surpasses anything I could imagine. I see the woman as representative of all human beings, for we are all as sinful before God by nature as this woman caught in the act of adultery is. To me, adultery symbolizes the ultimate in unfaithfulness. This is consonant with the Old Testament image used to describe Israel's relationship with God (for example, see Is 50:1; Jer 3:7-10; Hos 1:1ff). I

recognize that I am guilty and so stand before the Lord of all and pray in my heart for forgiveness.

Commentaries do not have much to relate about this story. Perkins says about 8:4,

Deut 22:23-24 prescribes stoning for a married woman who commits adultery. If John 18:31 is correct...the Romans had deprived the Jews the right to carry out the death penalty in cases where their law required it. Jesus must...reject either the law of Moses or the authority of Rome (965)."

This clarifies and concretizes the trap for me. The Patristic explanation for 8:6 (see note 1) is enlightening. I always understood that Jesus was giving them time to stop trying to trap him for he refused to justify this trap with a response. He seems to wait before laying down his challenge. The Patristic authors, when they interpret Jesus' action of 8:6 in this way, give the text a meaning the present scholars do not seem to be able to come to grips with because they seem so intent upon dismissing it from the Gospel altogether.

In terms of discipleship, the woman is a perfect candidate to be a disciple because of her humiliation, her acceptance of Jesus' forgiveness and her own willingness to obey. This willingness emanates from Jesus, who gives her a new lease on life. I think it quite conceivable that she knew well the punishment the law commanded for her sin. The commandment rules by fear, it seems, yet is somewhat distant from one and so only motivates for a period. In contrast, the Pharisees could never be his disciples. They gave him a direct challenge in bringing this woman caught in the very act before him, thinking they were already knowledgeable about the law. This smugness is what keeps them from being able to follow Christ because they have this self-assured knowledge. Though none of the characters was his disciples, he seems intent upon making this woman one. This speaks to my own life in that God calls me through activities of my life, especially my

sins and shortcomings. He calls me to be his disciple and I am humbled, knowing my guilt, yet receiving the mercy of God in the sacrament.

John's presentation of how the original 12 came to follow Jesus is very haphazard and different from the other Gospel writers (1:35-2:2). In four of five instances (Andrew, John,<sup>2</sup> Peter and Nathaniel), someone else points out Jesus to them. The only one Jesus actually calls in this retelling is Philip. When the entire episode is over, Jesus is recorded to have five disciples. John uses the disciples' names infrequently.<sup>3</sup> John seems to be writing to an audience that has never seen Jesus, but is familiar with the characters of the story, because of the way in which he uses names and writes of those who believe without seeing (17:20-26, 20:24-29). John's presentation of Jesus' interaction with Peter almost seems out of place (1:42). When Jesus names him Cephas, the Aramaic for rock, John seems to be alluding to the authority with which Jesus invests Peter (Matt 16:16-19<sup>4</sup>). If it is true that John or one of his predecessors is writing this to some community long after the demolition of the Jerusalem Temple (Johnson 466ff, Ludwig 142ff), it would appear the writer is making it a point to let his community know where the final authority lies for those who follow the Anointed One (Flanagan 11).

"John seems to be laying out an artistic first week in the good news of Christian re-creation." A diagram is used to illustrate a relation to the creation account in Genesis as follows: "1st Day (19-28), 2nd (29-34), 3rd (35-39), 4th (40-42), 5th (43-51) and 7th (2:1-11) (Flanagan 9-10)." The discussion continues on to how John seems to contradict Mark's account and concludes that "John is not attempting to give a historical presentation...rather, he wishes to impress these Christological statements on the minds of his audience at the very start (Flanagan 11)." De la Potterie complements this by claiming

that John "presents a vision and a theological reflection...and in it perceives the typological symbolic meaning of the persons and events (70)." The symbolic imagery that John uses is enunciated by both, revealing that John's writings are of a different genre than that of the Synoptic Gospels. The typological symbolic meaning of de la Potterie is brought out in Flanagan's list of Johannine characters that "typify the basic personal elements of the Christian community: (1) John the Baptist, precursor to the new creation, whose sole function is to witness; (2) the Savior; (3) disciples who hear, follow, look for, and stay; (4) Peter, the rock; (5) missionaries like Andrew and Philip who spread the good news; (6) Nathaniel, the true Israelite in whom there is no guile, who, as some Jewish traditions expressed it, studied law under a fig tree and was rewarded (9-11)."

In light of this commentary, John seems to introduce Jesus who started gathering disciples, written to an audience that was already familiar with the core group of 12 disciples. He uses the characters to represent, typologically, characteristics of both individual responses to Jesus as well as elements of community. John also seems to be providing a basis for their structure of community. They have an authority to resolve disputes in Kephais, are called to witness to Jesus, follow him and be people of strong character. Discipleship in this passage occurs within a faith community, not as isolated individuals, as they strive to follow Jesus and spread the guileless message. To spread such a message the followers must imitate Nathaniel, an archetype of the believing follower of Christ. My own personal experience of faith is many times like these disciples about which John writes. This understanding makes me a more effective teacher because I can use these typological and symbolical insights in my work with the Rite of

Christian Initiation of Adults (those considering becoming Catholic) and other groups. This new understanding will enable us to better reflect upon scripture, not so much as a source of information and knowledge about teachings or doctrines as do fundamentalists, as if the purpose of the scriptures were to be a source-text to prove a position, but as a source of meditation and a mirror to look into to judge how we are doing in our own lives.

The story of the Samaritan woman continues John's revelation of Christology and theology of discipleship that demands reflection (4:4-42). Jesus breaks with all kinds of prejudice and hatred by speaking to a Samaritan woman. Samaritans were of mixed pagan and Jewish origin and it is because of their law, that the Jews regarded them with contempt and seem to approach them as a people that were corrupt and beyond redemption. In addition, women were not citizens, nor did they hold any position in society. This explains why the disciples were so disconcerted when they found the Master speaking with this woman. Yet the conversation goes straight to the heart of the matter. After expressing the truth in Joel-like fashion (Joel 3:1-2) that she did not understand, he started with her own life. He told her things he apparently should not have known and then plainly reveals to her that he is the awaited Messiah. We then seem to have a pause in the story as Jesus and his disciples talk about food and the will of his Father. They clearly do not understand Jesus' veiled language any more than the woman does. After this short apparent reprieve, the woman comes back with the entire town, who believe at her word initially, but after they hear him believe because they met and encountered Jesus.

This passage "is surely one of the most dramatically constructed in the Gospel" when divided into its different speaking parts (Flanagan 19). The structure of the writing facilitates the conversation between Jesus and both the woman and the disciples by the absence of the other (Flanagan 19, Perkins 957). Samaritans originate from the Assyrian de- and re-population in Northern Israel in which the new settlers partially adopted Israel's religion over time, starting in about 722 BC, as is outlined in 2 Kgs 17:23-41 (Flanagan 22). Flanagan notes that John usually portrays Jesus as divine, but that here he paints a very human picture of both the Samaritan and the Jew. He also shows how "there are theological bi-levels," such as "the water changed into wine (ch.2) really speaking of the old covenant giving way to the new. In this chapter, water symbolizes the eternal life given by the Spirit of truth, the theological bi-level." Yet he claims the encounter with the Samaritan woman is on the historical bi-level because it was "influenced by the later, post-resurrection outreach to the Samaritans" (22). Perkins add to these insights, "Jacob's well provides the basis for the symbolism in which Jesus proves to be greater than Jacob," the father to which the Samaritans trace themselves back. "We have already seen hints of such Jacob typology in 1:51." That Jesus claims to be the "gift of God" and the source of "living water leads to" this "Christological insight" that shows Jesus as greater than Jacob (956). The same question is later repeated of Abraham in John 8:58.

Permanent possession of the 'living water' could refer to four different things in a Jewish symbolic system: to God's Spirit purifying the righteous community (implied in 3:5), to God, "the fountain of living waters" (Jer 2:13) that worshipper's drink from (Ps 36:8), to the law, or to Wisdom (Sir 24:23-29). If the wisdom passage in Sirach is referred to, Jesus' saying would be a deliberate reversal of Wisdom's claim. "Samaritan



tradition expected 'the prophet' to uncover the lost temple vessels and to vindicate its own tradition of worship, not in Jerusalem, but on Mt. Gerizim, which they took to be the location of Jacob's heavenly vision in Gen 28:16-18. Jesus proclaims that in the messianic age, which has now dawned, worship of God will not be tied to a holy place" or a special people. The relativization of the cultic site does not in any way relativize worship. "The Essenes described the Torah as a well dug by their teachers from which they drew knowledge of truth," yet for John, Jesus personifies truth because "he is the revelation of God." The discourse concludes when Jesus responds to the woman's suggestion that Jesus might be the messianic prophet with "I Am. Any Johannine Christian would recognize the absolute use of this expression." In the woman's actions of bringing her entire community to Christ, is one of "Christian mission. Her action reflects the pattern established in the discipleship stories" in 1:40-49. In verse 36, the reception of wages by the sower and reaper is "another sign of the new age." There is a question concerning the passage, *one sows, another reaps*, of

how the proverb is applied to the disciples. Will they reap what he has sown among the Samaritans or does it refer to the post-resurrection 'sending' of the disciples (17:18; 20:21)? The narrative structure of the Gospel favors the latter. The saying cautions the community against taking credit for its missionary success, (but) merely reaps the fruits of others' labor: primarily that of Jesus, but reference to the first generation of Christian missionaries could also be applied (Perkins 957).

This story is obviously well written as is evidenced by the comments of Flanagan and Perkins above. In painting a picture of Jesus and the woman as very human, John prevents those who would like to use his gospel to support Gnostic or other incorrect ideas. The mystery of John's writing emanates from his use of bi-level writing. One in the story understands Jesus in one way, another in a different way. Readers are also able

to experience the same thing. In this way, John has shown us firsthand, as it were, what it was like to encounter Jesus. His use of Jacob as a type of Christ shows the depth of meaning in the Old Testament writings and reappropriates the meaning of those writings for a new generation who is living the fulfillment of such a great promise as that of the Messiah. As Perkins alludes to, it seems that Jesus redefines certain sayings such as the one found in Sirach referenced above. The disparity between the Samaritan woman's understanding of worship as tied to a place and Jesus' redefinition of such ideas show how different Jesus was. His refusal to disregard the limitations of the Jews as binding him from offering this mixed-breed eternal life and, by extension, a call to follow him as a disciple, shows that Jesus cannot be captured by one's understanding and ideas. The woman's misunderstanding of the water language shows Jesus adapting to the capabilities of the woman by addressing her person directly. He tells her all about herself and she then realizes he is a prophet. Jesus then responds directly to her inquiry and tells her plainly that he is the Messiah. Her informing the entire populace is a classic response of a disciple in John's Gospel. While the other disciples wondered in their heart, they did not have the gumption to question him about talking to the woman, but were still willing to follow him. When this is coupled with the Samaritan towns-people who believe it clearly illustrates that Jesus came for all people. It puts all of them on the same playing field, in other words, we are equal to one another in Jesus' eyes and we all need help.

I can truly benefit from this study in several ways. Jesus is shown in this Gospel to be both fully divine and at the same time fully human. We can relate to one another. This gives me a personal connection with Jesus as both my God and my friend. As God, many things he communicates to me I do not grasp. This engenders humility in me

because I do not have him figured out so that I can use him to my advantage as people seem to do naturally. As a human being, I can relate to him as one who struggled in life and actually suffered. This insight makes my suffering worthwhile because if he has suffered and struggled in such a drastic way as is recorded in the latter parts of this Gospel, how can I complain in my own suffering. This engenders a desire to persevere and remain steadfast because the Son of God, as John reveals in his Christology of Jesus, has borne worse than I have ever suffered, as I alluded to at the outset of this paper.

Ministry for me is changed with the renewed perspective that these insights have provided me. In my dealings with those who are struggling against the Church and yet want to enter into her fully through the RCIA, I can bring a certain knowledge that our Lord suffered and that they must not think their suffering to be greater or of more merit than his own. This gives me great comfort and I can offer this comfort to others who are plagued with such pains as my own. Jesus is obviously in this Gospel both fully divine and fully human. I can offer this explanation to those who misunderstand Jesus and cannot imagine either one or the other. Presenting Jesus as a forgiving and merciful God who really sees our pain and allows us to start over in order to renew our dedication to him by using the story of the woman caught in the very act is something that just blows me away. My experience in RCIA is that when the people hear the story they are overwhelmed with love for God, a desire to serve him and are strengthened in their resolves to continue on what is sometimes a bumpy road into the Church. The things I can help the people see about Jesus directly affect their desire to follow him in their lives. The example of the characters in the stories I used show clearly that disciples of Jesus follow without counting the cost (they just give everything), inasmuch as he captures

their whole attention as one worthy of following, like the Samaritan woman. Like many of the characters in the stories, when they get hold of the message and see the God whom they are being called to serve, they tell every one of their friends what they have found. I am also sometimes so excited that I cannot help but tell whoever happens to be around, be it those at work, Church, volleyball, or any other group with which I associate.

I have conversed with and examined several stories in John's Gospel, have searched my own thoughts and those of commentators, have tried to synthesize both and attempted to review how this could affect my own faith experience and some of the ministries I am involved in. John definitely bases his Christology on the fact that Jesus is referred to as Divine more often than human, but that he balances this presentation with a clear understanding that he was fully human as well. He has not written like the other Gospel writers in using the formal names of the characters in the stories, but rather paints portraits of types. It is for this reason that the reading of this Gospel can help one to encounter Christ just as he portrays the disciples and others experiencing Jesus. Some of the aspects of John's vision of discipleship include meeting Jesus, believing in him more after the encounter than before, telling those in your circle about him and introducing them to him.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a problem concerning the inclusion of the story as a part of John's Gospel that would nullify my use of it in this hermeneutical conversation. I address the issue here for that reason. Flanagan writes, "It is missing from our oldest and best Greek manuscripts and seems to have been unknown to the early Greek Fathers, since they did not comment on it. In various old manuscripts, it is found either at 8:1...after 7:36, or at the end of the Gospel, or after Luke 21:38. The earliest certain reference to the story is found in a

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third-century writing on discipline called the Didascalia. It sounds like a Lukan narrative, dealing with mercy, sin, and a woman. (45)" Perkins suggests that in 8:1, Jesus going to the mount of olives reflects Luke 21:37 and that "many exegetes think this story is a piece of the special Lukan material that was circulating in the tradition (965, n115)." Not having proof that the passage is a part of the writing does not automatically rule out its inclusion, in my view. Brown presents many speculative theories about the writing of this Gospel (171-182 & 25ff). These scholars, as honorable as their attempts at reconstruction are, simply do not know the full truth. It is quite possible there was another later redactor that included it in the Didascalia. The following is an example by Perkins to enhance my point. "The Patristic authors suggested '*wrote with his finger* (8:6)' was a reference to Jer 17:13, '*those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord,*' as the text that governed Jesus' action. This would indirectly remind the accusers of their own guilt. (965)." Just because this is missing from the Greek Fathers, the Patristic authors write of this, yet do not refute the canonicity of the story. I accept the authority of these Patristic writers as weightier than the speculations (Ludwig 166) of modern scholars for the former are proven, the latter are not. There is no proof that it ought to be removed. Since the canon was completed about a century after the Didascalia, I do not believe scholars have any authority to remove any passages from the sacred writings.

<sup>2</sup> Of verse 37, the unidentified one is traditionally John, son of Zebedee (Notes 1142).

<sup>3</sup> There seems to be a different division of this Gospel when examined through the lens of his use of proper names. Through the end of chapter 10, about halfway through the Gospel, we only see proper names of Jesus' disciples in 1:40-49, 6:5-8 and 6:69-71. After this the tone of the story changes in regard to the use of proper names, starting with the raising of Lazarus: 11:1-12:17, 12:21-22, 13:6-37, 14:5 & 22, 18:5-27, 19:25 & 38, 20:1-18, 20:24-28, 21:2-21. Chapters 14-17 do not have many references because the focus is Jesus' discourse. Neither Mary, the Mother of Jesus, nor the Beloved Disciple is named in John's Gospel. De la Potterie informs us that proper names are not important, as such, but that John uses them to present certain types of people (69ff).

<sup>4</sup> There is a little parallelism in this Matthean passage. Peter calls Jesus "Christos" and Jesus responds by calling Peter "Petros" (Hahn).

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