

(5th Sunday after Epiphany)

John 4:5-42

I discovered that I have to renew my drivers license this year. I can't believe all the new hoops I have to jump through to prove I am who I am! A current bill with my residence, my social security number, a valid passport or birth certificate, a marriage license if my name has changed. And it seems a drivers license is no longer just a drivers license, but a "Federal ID" identifying me as officially me!

However, an Identification Card, like a drivers license, can only reveal so much about who we are? Are we really who are identification card says we are?

Who are you, really? Is your identity simply defined by your appearance, your age, height, weight and gender? Is it only defined by where we live, work, or go to school? Or is there another distinguishing characteristic or personality trait that identifies you?

Now let me ask you about your "reputation." Reputation being - **"The widespread beliefs or opinions that are generally held about the particular habits or characteristics of someone."**

How we see and present ourselves is important in shaping our "identity". How others see us, defines our "reputation". Our reputations help to shape, in positive or negative ways, our public identity.

A positive reputation can open lots of doors in our lives. On the other hand, a negative reputation can strip us of our human dignity and value as a human being, isolating us, barring us from social circles and community groups, including churches. No matter how hard we try to restore our image in the community, our reputation can precede us, casting long, dark, suspicious shadows over the rest of our life.

Identity and Reputation. Who are you? Who are you in the eyes of others?

Identity and reputation are at the heart of John's Gospel story of the woman at the well.

John identifies for us her ethnicity and religion - she is a Samaritan. In that way, John also tells us something of her reputation which is tied to her people. As I mentioned, while they have Jewish roots, worshipping the same God, but with different beliefs around God. There was bad blood between the Jews and the Samaritans, which had even led to violence.

Among her own people, this woman seems to have her own reputation. She was married 5 times, and is now living with another man.

Now we do not know the circumstances surrounding her marriages and her current living arrangement. Was she a woman on the prowl, a "Courage"? Was she a "Black Widow"? Was she a woman with loose morals? That has long been her reputation throughout the history of our faith. But what if the circumstances around her marriages and current relationship were actually in keeping with the religious laws of her times?

Women were considered property, to be owned and cared for by men. A married woman's role was to produce children, especially sons. What if she was unable to have a child,

which would be reason for her previous husbands to divorce her. Or what if each her previous husbands had died, leaving her without a son to care for her? It would be the responsibility of her husband's brother to marry her. And if he died, for the next to care for her. It would be tragic, and it might have been her situation.

Whether deserved or not, she has earned an unfavorable reputation. Regardless of her reputation we know this, she is a Samaritan woman, alone, in a public place, Jacob's well, at about noon, and she has now come face-to-face with a Jewish man, and not just any Jewish male, but Jesus. He is hot, tired, and thirsty.

We may not think much about this encounter, because men and women constantly run into each other in public places, and it is no big deal. But in Jesus day, it was taboo. It was a major violation of the religious laws for a woman to be alone with another man in public, especially one who was not her husband.

Of course, if we see her as having loose morals, and bit forward in her manners, then what transpires would not be surprising. He asks her for a drink. Surprised, she speaks of the reputation Jews have towards Samaritans, saying: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus responds to her comment, by telling her God's gift of "Living Water" by which all who drink will never thirst again.

This whole conversation around "Living Water" can be just as confusing to us. So let me just say, that this story, is really not about violation of religious laws or taboo conversation between a Jewish man and Samaritan woman. It is not a story about a righteous, sinless man, Jesus, talking to a woman of ill-repute. It is not a story about immorality. Rather, it is a story about identity, reputation and human dignity.

Here is something we might want to keep in mind as we reflect on the Samaritan woman conversation with Jesus. If you remember, in the prior chapter, Nicodemus, a Jewish male and religious scholar, comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness as opposed to the noon day. He does so secretly as if he does not want anyone else to see him talking with Jesus. He cares about his reputation and does not want his identity discovered.

The Samaritan woman does not seem to care. Nicodemus is a man and he is powerful. She is his polar opposite, a female at the other end of the power spectrum, and a Samaritan to boot.

Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus is saying to him. The Samaritan woman, does.

Biblical Scholar, Dr. David Lose, suggests that: **"perhaps precisely because she is at the other end of the power spectrum, she recognizes not just who Jesus is but what he offers — dignity. Jesus invites her to not be defined by her circumstances and offers her an identity that lifts her above her tragedy."**

It is not literal water, he offers her, but the gift of "Living Water" - which restores her human dignity, that has been stripped from her by the religious laws, social norms, and

community in which she lives. Through the lens of God's love, Jesus sees her for who God created her to be - the Beloved Child of God. This is her true identity. It is ours too.

With her dignity restored, and despite what others might think of her, as David Lose goes on to say, **"she accepts, playing a unique role in Jesus' ministry as she is the first character in John's gospel to seek out others to tell them about Jesus..."**

Reputation and Identity. Who are we? By our presence here this morning, we want to identify ourselves as "Christians". That is how we want to identify ourselves, but what is our reputation as "Christians" who are connected to Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church, living and serving in the area?

Claiming the identity of "Christian" is not such a widely popular thing these days. As the late poet Ann Weems wrote: "He said, 'I am a Christian.' And I said, 'Then I am not.'"

Christians, especially in America, do not have the best of reputations in the eyes of other people, and around the world. Some of it is well deserved. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, we have our own past baggage we have been wed to and divorced from, over the centuries and in more recent times.

Right now, there are those who are claiming our faith language, using words like "compassion" and "mercy" to strip human dignity and value away from the most vulnerable in our midst, including women. The reputation of the "Christian Church" is that we will remain silent, fearful of being too "political", causing internal conflicts and offending some if we dare speak up on behalf of others.

Yet here we are this morning, wanting to be identified as "Christians", followers of Jesus, and yet still worried about our reputations in the community. Should we be worried about our reputations?

Identity and Reputation. Jesus didn't worry about this woman's identity or her reputation. And in discovering her true identity in Christ, she no longer feared her reputation. With her human dignity restored, she went and shared with others. She persisted and would no longer be silenced in her witness.

If, as David Lose says, **"We can rise above the misogyny and moralism that characterizes Christians today, we have the opportunity to tell this woman's story for what it is: a story of the transforming power of love and the capacity to receive and live into a new identity."**

Who are you? Who are we? How has Jesus shaped our identity and reputation?