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Building Bridges: Models from the New Testament

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Abstract: Matthew 15 presents a courageous mother who builds bridges between religions (Jews and Gentiles), cultures (Jewish and Canaanite) and genders (men and women). The woman's gender and non-Jewishness render her intervention with Jesus insignificant and marginal in the Jewish world of that time. She is, however, praised by Jesus for her "great faith" required of all true disciples of Jesus. This great faith consists in her ability to interpret her faith in response to the needs of the emerging situation or new context. She is reading the "signs of the times" and building bridges by making non-Jews recipients of God's blessings and bringing them into the family of God's chosen people.

At the beginning of the story in John 4, there existed no dealings between the Jews and the Samaritans, but by the end of the episode, they have become one covenant community. The confession of faith in Jesus as the Saviour of the world, and not just of the Samaritans, confirms the movement to a communion which transcends all sectarian boundaries. The Samaritan episode thus projects a world in the process of a dynamic movement from personal alienation, social discrimination and religious exclusion to human solidarity, liberative communion and transformative integration. The passage instructs us that the breaking down of all barriers will bring about a radical egalitarian understanding of the presence of the Church in the world today.

Keywords: Building bridges, Bridge-builders, Canaanite woman, Samaritan woman, liberation.

It is my privilege to contribute for the late Prof. Noel Sheth to commemorate his 75th birthday on the 31st October

2018. I have always been inspired by his simplicity of life, his passionate love for the priesthood and religious life, his absolute commitment to research and scholarship, his genuine interest in inter-religious dialogues and promotion of non-violence and peace, and the integrity of creation. He could reach out to millions of people from all walks of life in India and abroad: scholars and students; learned and illiterate; rich and poor; religious and lay people; women and men; Christians and non-Christians, Indians and non-Indians, and young and old – always building bridges and fostering communion.

In what follows, I present two examples from the New Testament – the Canaanite woman from the Gospel of Matthew and the Samaritan woman from the Gospel of John – who dared to transcend boundaries and build bridges between two religions and cultures. I have chosen two biblical women as models since Father Noel always respected the dignity and equality of women. He supported women's liberation from marginalization and encouraged women to take their rightful place in society. I hope he will accept this essay as a tribute to his enormous contribution to scholarship and inter-religious dialogue, his wise mentorship, and his empowering partnership in God's mission of reconciliation and harmony.

1. The Canaanite Woman: A Dynamic Bridge Builder

The Canaanite woman in Matt 15:21-28 is a courageous dialogue partner of Jesus. The evangelist Matthew presents her as the mother of a daughter possessed by a demon who will be the beneficiary of Jesus' healing ministry. The story, however, gives no attention to the healing itself; instead it focuses on the dialogue between Jesus and the woman.

The same story is narrated in the Gospel of Mark (7:24-30), but Matthew seems to have altered the Markan story. Matthew gives special significance to the woman and her interventions. By the specific reference to the place as Tyre and Sidon (Gentile territories) and the designation of the woman as Canaanite (indigenous people of Canaan and ancient enemies of Israel), Matthew presents the woman as a political enemy of, and a religious outsider for, the Jews. She encounters Jesus in a public place – the domain of men. In Matthew's version, the woman is presented as a social critic who transcends the traditional norms and conventions concerning the role of women in public, which appreciated the surrender and submissiveness of this woman pleading for the "fallen crumbs." The true image that emerges from the text is that of a bold and courageous woman who takes the initiative to come out on her own and make her request to Jesus by shouting: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David" (Matt 15:22). Her request reflects both the Christological titles of the early Christian communities ("Lord, Son of David") and the language of the Jewish prayer – the language of the lamentation psalms ("Have mercy on me"). A lament psalm is understood as an act of hope and trust in God's faithfulness to the covenant promises. Her persistent request (☒κραζεν) coupled with her liturgical posture of kneeling (προσκυν☒ω) underlines her desperate need as well as her confident faith in Jesus' divine power (as the expected Davidic Messiah) to heal her daughter (Matt 15:25). The woman thus seems to have transcended the boundaries of her own religious traditions, customs and beliefs.

Matthew portrays the woman as an active dialogue partner who dares to confront Jesus, the newly found Jewish prophet, with counter theological arguments. Jesus'

categorical statements: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24) and "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matt 15:26) are very rude and harsh. They contradict the usual charm, respect and compassion of Jesus. What is striking is the fact that in spite of Jesus' harsh words, she does not give up but challenges Jesus with equally powerful counter arguments: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." The implication of her response – "the dogs eat from the fallen crumbs" – is that "Gentiles as well as Jews are fed by God." Although she accepts the priority of the Jews in Salvation History, she challenges Jesus to include Gentiles as an integral part of the salvific community brought about by Jesus. She wins in this theological dispute concerning the boundaries of Jesus' mission and gets her daughter healed. She seems "to have opened the way for Jesus' (and the Church's) mission beyond the Jewish community." The divine power of Jesus is for all – Jews and Gentiles, men and women – and that all should be the beneficiaries of justice, peace and equality – the blessings of God's reign. Like the prophets in the Old Testament, the woman seems to be filled with the Spirit and the power of God to speak on behalf of God, and to reveal the will of God for her daughter's destiny.

2. The Samaritan Woman: A Creative Dialogue Partner

The Gospel of John presents women positively, and they play significant leadership roles in the narrative. There seem to be some women leaders and apostles in the Johannine community who are represented by the mother of Jesus (John 2 and 19), the Samaritan woman (John 4), Mary and Martha (John 11-12), and Mary Magdalene (John

20). This study focuses on the Samaritan story in John 4. In this missionary episode the evangelist makes a woman the protagonist; this is also one of the few texts in the Gospels, in which the issue of women is explicitly raised by the characters and responded to by Jesus (John 4:9.27). Like the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, the Samaritan woman is also presented as a social critic, a contextualized theologian and a committed apostle.

The Johannine Jesus allows the Samaritan woman to question him at every significant moment of the narrative. The request of Jesus in 4:7b: "give me a drink" is questioned by the woman in 4:9: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Her response establishes a two-fold division: she challenges the religious association between the Jews and the Samaritans and the social association between men and women. She has the ability to give water to Jesus, but she raises an objection because of the social and religious prohibitions. The woman introduces the issues of the national antagonism between the Jews and the Samaritans, and of the interaction between men and women in public. The polemic posture of Jews and Samaritans is reinforced by the comment of the narrator in 4:9b – "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." The reader familiar with Jewish traditions is aware that the request of Jesus is improper and undesirable. The question still remains: how do we interpret the "surprise" of the woman in 4:9? Is she in agreement with the twofold prohibition? By responding to Jesus and so agreeing to enter into dialogue with Jesus, she shows that she does not care about this prohibition. By dealing with her and talking with her, Jesus presents himself as someone who does not follow the religious and social prohibitions regarding interaction between Jews and Samaritans, and

between men and women. It is very striking that instead of debating the issue of separation, Jesus changes the topic to the issue of living water. Like Jesus, she has also shown an openness which transcends social traditions by entering into a dialogue with him. Her courage and freedom are great as she is completely unaware of the identity of Jesus.

Although the Samaritan woman is traditionally interpreted as a prostitute who was evangelised by Jesus, the dialogue between Jesus and the woman in 4:19-20 reveals that her sins are not the point of the story. It is in verses 19-20 that the woman takes an initiative in bringing forward a new topic and Jesus' prophetic character by raising the issue of the right place of worship. If her personal life were the central theme of the story, then, like the disciples of John the Baptist, very probably she would have asked a personal question: "What then shall I do?" (cf. Luke 3:10-14). On the contrary, what she brings forward is a national and religious issue pertinent to her people, namely, the right place of worship. According to the Scripture of the Samaritans, the Pentateuch, there is only one place of worship (Deut 12:2-12): Mount Gerizim is the mount of grace and blessing, because Noah and Abraham offered sacrifice on this mountain. In Deut 27:4 the Samaritan Pentateuch reads 'Mount Gerizim' instead of the 'Mount Ebal' of the Masoretic Text, thus Gerizim is considered a sacred mountain, the place of worship and God's revelation. Hence, for the Samaritans Mount Gerizim is as holy for the worship of God as Jerusalem for the Jews. This disagreement about the right place of worship was the most important and pertinent religious dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans believed that the Messiah would settle this dispute (John 4:25). In the words of Teresa Okure, "the woman thus proves to be remarkably

in touch with the current disputes between the two nations. As for finding a topic worthy of a Jewish prophet she could do no better than raise this longstanding issue of Gerizim versus Jerusalem." These verses thus reveal a woman well-versed in her religious tradition. She articulates the dispute from the perspective of the Samaritans: "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship" (John 4:20). Notice that instead of saying "we worship" she says "Our ancestors worshipped". By appealing to her ancestors, she seeks to strengthen the Samaritan practice in contrast to the Jewish one. She juxtaposes the tradition of the ancestors with the current practice and dogma of Judaism. The Samaritan tradition rests on the authority of the patriarchs; the woman thus questions Jesus by holding on to the authority of the ancestors. The Samaritan woman is depicted as a *theologian* who dares to confront a prophet and to discuss theological issues with him; and she does both these in the context of her own religious traditions. She is rooted in her traditions yet open to receive the revelation from Jesus. She is portrayed as someone who initiates and encourages dialogue and contextualization in our mission.

The woman's change from unbelief to belief in Jesus reflects the faith-journey of a committed believer. At the beginning she encounters Jesus with puzzlement because of her ignorance. She is however open to participate more and more actively as the dialogue progresses. When we look at John 4 within the literary context of the section "from Cana to Cana" (John 2-4), the Samaritan woman is clearly contrasted with Nicodemus (John 3:1-15), who is confused by Jesus' self-revelation and disappears into the shadows. Unlike Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman accepts the revelation of Jesus and brings others to him by

her witness. She becomes a model of "mature discipleship." Her response when she recognizes Jesus as the Messiah is very significant. She abandons the water jar and goes into the city to spread the good news of her encounter with Jesus, the Messiah. She fulfils the "standard characteristics" of an apostle by giving testimony to the people in the city and inviting them to "come and see" Jesus (John 1:43-50). The statement of the Samaritans in 4:42 that "it is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world", does not denigrate the apostolic activity of the woman. The role of the woman, like John the Baptist or any other faithful witness, is relativized only in relation to Jesus (cf. John 3:25-30). Therefore, the acknowledgment of the Samaritans in 4:42 does not belittle the witness of the woman, but rather confirms it. The transforming effect of her apostleship is marked by the whole-hearted response of the people from Sychar.

Conclusion

As we have seen above, in Matthew 15, the woman is presented as a courageous mother who builds bridges between religions (Jews and Gentiles), cultures (Jewish and Canaanite) and genders (men and women). The woman's gender and non-Jewishness render her intervention with Jesus insignificant and marginal in the Jewish world of that time. She is, however, praised by Jesus for her "great faith" required of all true disciples of Jesus. ("O woman, great is your faith" [15:28b]). This great faith consists in her ability to interpret her faith in response to the needs of the emerging situation or new context. She is reading the "signs of the times" and building bridges by making non-Jews recipients of God's blessings and bringing them into

the family of God's chosen people.

At the beginning of the story in John 4, there existed no dealings between the Jews and the Samaritans (4:9), but by the end of the episode, they have become one covenant community. The confession of faith in Jesus as the Saviour of the world (4:42), and not just of the Samaritans, confirms the movement to a communion which transcends all sectarian boundaries. The Samaritan episode thus projects a world in the process of a dynamic movement from personal alienation, social discrimination and religious exclusion to human solidarity, liberative communion and transformative integration. The passage instructs us that the breaking down of all barriers – gender, religious and racial – will bring about a radical egalitarian understanding of the presence of the Church in the world today.

The legacy of Father Sheth will be a blessing for all of us as we continue the mission of inter-religious dialogue in India, a ministry very dear to him. To the Indian Church, I will now let Father Noel Sheth speak in his own words from one of his interviews: "let us get out of our western shell and try to be more Indian ourselves." He highlighted inter-religious relationship more than inter-religious dialogue: a dialogue of spiritual sharing – sharing of spiritual experiences leading to deeper relationships and communion. Talking about those who persecute Christians, Father Noel once said: "to me the better way is not confrontation but embracing in love." May the memory of Father Noel Sheth – his legacy of building bridges, of reconciliation and love, of inner freedom, genuine scholarship, true ascetic life and his commitment as a religious – be a source of inspiration for all people of good will! May he continue to build bridges between heaven and earth!

1. This section on the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 is developed in detail, see Rekha Chennattu, "The Dignity of Women: Christian Perspectives," Journal of Dharma 37:1 (2012): 70-72.
2. Normally a woman is depicted as a "daughter of a man" or "sister of a man" or "wife of a man" or "mother of a son."
3. The understanding is that Mark's Gospel is earlier than Matthew's.
4. For the importance of these cities during the OT and NT periods, see LaMoine F. De Vries, Cities of the Biblical World (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006) 73-82.
5. The first century culture of the Mediterranean society relegated the activities of women to the private or domestic sphere; see Karen Jo Torjesen, "Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History," pages 290-310 in Searching the Scriptures, vol 1: A Feminist Introduction (ed., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993), esp. 304-7. See also Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant, Women's Life in Greece and Rome (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982).
6. See for example, "Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us" (LXX Ps 123:3a).
7. For a study of Matthew 15:21-28 and the Lament Psalm, see Gail O'Day, Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman, pages 114-25 in A Feminist Companion to Matthew (ed., Amy-Jill Levine; Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001) esp. 118-23.
8. Daniel Harrington, The Gospel of Matthew (Sacra Pagina 1; Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991) 235.
9. Sharon Ringe, "A Gentile Woman's Story," pages 65-72 in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible (ed., Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985) 65.
10. What follows is a summary of my article; see Rekha Chennattu, "Women in the Mission of the Church: An Interpretation of John 4," Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection 65 (2001): 760-73; reprinted in French, "Les femmes dans la mission de l'Église: interpretation de Jean 4." Bulletin de Litterature Ecclesiastique CVIII/3 (2007): 381-96.
11. Birger Olsson claims that the symmetrical use of participial construction in the Greek text in reference to Jesus on the one hand

and the woman on the other hand emphasizes this separation; see Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2, 1-11 and John 4, 1-42 (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1974) 177.

12. See John MacDonald, The Theology of the Samaritans (London: SCM, 1964) 406.

13. The belief in Mount Gerizim was one of the articles of the Samaritan creed; see John Bowman, Samaritische Probleme: Studien zum Verhältnis von Samaritanertum, Judentum und Urchristentum (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1967) 30.

14. Teresa Okure, The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42. WUNT 2/31. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988) 115.

15. From the perspective of history, the practices of the ancestors take precedence over the contemporary Jewish dogma of worship in Jerusalem which began only from the Davidic era (2 Sam 6); see Okure, The Johannine Approach to Mission, 114-115.

16. For a comparative study of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, see M. Pazdan, "Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman: Contrasting Models of Discipleship," BTB 17 (1987) 145-48, who considers the Samaritan woman as a model of "mature discipleship" while Nicodemus represents "initial discipleship" (p. 148). See also D. A. Lee, The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1994) 65-66 and Francis Moloney, Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 144.

17. This resembles the standard way of responding to the call of discipleship in the synoptic Gospels: leaving the boats in Mark 1:16-20 and leaving the tax stall in Matt 9:9.

18. See Lee, The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel, 91.

19. For the covenant motif in John's Gospel, see Rekha M. Chennattu, Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006).

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