

Don Quixote and the Woman at the Well

Did you ever try to do something, and everybody said it was impossible? Maybe you tried to change something—saw something wrong with the system and tried to make it right. Whatever your quest, if you're up against seemingly insurmountable odds, you might find a kindred spirit in the hero of Cervantes novel "Don Quixote" and its musical counterpart, "Man of La Mancha".

In the play, Alonzo Quijana, a Spanish country gentleman, dared "Dream the Impossible Dream"—to right the unrightable wrong and fight the unbeatable foe. Even though knighthood had been dead for 200 years, he took up his cause as a knight errant—complete with armor and sword—and assumed the persona of Don Quixote de la Mancha. Crazy old man!

Hardly an hour into his quest he encounters the archenemy of all goodness, and charges into combat. Turns out, it's a windmill. Crazy old man!

Then he falls in love with Aldonza, a local "lady of the evening": treats her like a lady: calls her Dulcinea ("Sweet One"). Her reaction was, "Are you crazy? Look at what I am!" Everyone laughs at "crazy" old Don Quixote.

But I think Don Quixote has a lot in common with Jesus of Nazareth, who tilted at a few windmills in His own time. A case in point is today's text—the story of Jesus and the Woman at the Well.

Jesus was going home from Jerusalem and passed through Samaria. The people there were descendants of Jews who had intermarried with the Assyrian conquerors 750 years earlier. Their intermarriage with Gentiles gave them favored status, and they fared better than Jews who resisted. So, great animosity grew up between Samaritans and Judeans, who considered Samaritans traitors, half-breeds, heretics.

Jews going from Judea to Galilee crossed the Jordan River at Jericho and went up the East Bank past Samaria. So, a sixty-mile trip became a hundred miles, but it was worth it to avoid the hated Samaritans.

Not Jesus. He wouldn't follow a trail blazed by fear and hatred. He went straight through Samaria. Near the village of Sychar, Jesus rested at Jacob's well while his disciples went into town for food. While he was resting, a woman came out from the city to draw water. Jesus asked her for a drink of water.

JOHN 4:9-10, 21-26, 39-42 (MESSAGE) *The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, "How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"*¹⁰ *Jesus answered, "If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water."*¹¹⁻¹² *The*

woman said, "Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this 'living water'?" *Are you better than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?"*¹³⁻¹⁴ *Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this wa-*

ter will get thirsty again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life." ¹⁵The woman said, "Sir, give me this water so I won't ever get thirsty, won't ever have to come back to this well again!"

There follows a conversation that includes some of the most beautiful statements in the New Testament—statements about the nature of God and the nature of true worship.

²⁵The woman said, "I don't know about that. I do know that Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we'll get the whole story." ²⁶"I am he," said Jesus. "You don't have to wait any longer or look any further."

At this point the disciples return and she goes back into the village.

²⁹⁻³⁰ Back in the village she told the people, "Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?" And they went out to see for themselves.

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³⁹⁻⁴² Many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to him because of the woman's witness: "He knew all about the things I did. He knows me inside and out!" They asked him to stay on, so Jesus stayed two days. A lot more people entrusted their lives to him when they heard what he had to say. They said to the woman, "We're no longer taking this on your say-so. We've heard it for ourselves and know it for sure. He's the Savior of the world!"

When the disciples returned from their shopping trip into town and found Jesus chatting with this woman they were shocked at his defiance of Jewish convention on at least three levels: (1) she was a Samaritan, (2) she was a woman, and (3) everybody knew she was a notorious sinner. By talking to her Jesus broke through several major barriers that divide the human family to this very day. Talk about fighting windmills! Here was one windmill after another:

There was **RACISM**. To Jews, Samaritans were half-breeds—mongrels to be avoided. Jesus walked through that barrier as if it weren't there. When he looked at the woman, he didn't see an inferior race. He saw a person made in the image of God.

And there was **PARTISANISM**. Jews hated Samaritans not only because they were half-breeds and heretics, but also because they were traitors who had accommodated an enemy—seven and a half centuries earlier. You don't forgive that!

And, if race and history won't justify hatred, ideology can. When the Samaritans built a temple to God on Mt. Gerizim in 400 B.C., Judeans came and destroyed it. So, is it any wonder that the Samaritan woman was astounded when Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, asks her for a drink? Whether it's Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda or Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, **TRIBALISM** is still a death-dealing sin—one of those windmills Jesus confronted.

And there was **SEXISM**. In that male-dominated society women were second-class citizens. No man would be seen talking in public to a woman outside his family. But Jesus did everything He could to keep the sexism of first century Palestine from infecting His Church. He openly conversed in public with women—welcomed them into His inner circle. After His resurrection, Jesus' first appearance was to a woman.

In some of the churches Paul established in Turkey and Greece he left women in charge. And he sent a husband/wife team—Aquila and Priscilla, from Corinth—as consultants to the church in Ephesus. Priscilla seems to have been the team leader.

Sadly, after about two hundred years in which women shared church leadership and presided at the Lord's Table, in the third century women suddenly were excluded from ordination and full participation in the life of the Church. Some denominations still don't follow the example of Jesus, who commissioned the Samaritan woman as his missionary to Sychar. There still are windmills to be fought.

If there was anything for which Jesus was regularly criticized by the Pharisees, it was consorting with sinners. He ate and drank with tax collectors—dined with Zacchaeus; called Matthew as an Apostle; let a prostitute anoint His feet with oil. And here He is again, sharing a dipper of water and discussing religion with a woman whose reputation as a tramp was so bad the other women wouldn't associate with her. And it is to her that He first reveals Himself as Messiah. This is the first instance in Scripture in which Jesus openly says Who He is. And He knew who she was.

He knew who she was; but he refused to single her out as uniquely deserving of condemnation. In fact, he singled her out as his evangelist to her village.

That's the way Jesus was.

I recall reading about a congregation in Virginia that weeded its membership. There was a girl, a member of that church, a pretty girl, according to the story—a teenager, wild as a March hare. She did it all: only fifteen or sixteen, and she'd been there and back a lot of times. Well, it was an embarrassment to the church, and so they met and they weeded her out. They said she was not to come into the church building, sing, listen, pray, give offering or take communion for a year. It tore the church up; tore up two or three families; tore up the town. "Leave the weeds alone," Jesus said. They'll be separated at God's judgment.

It's altogether right to hold high moral standards for yourselves and try to live by them, and bear witness to them; but never forget that we, too, are sinners in need of God's love and mercy and forgiveness. "Let God deal with the weeds."

An impossible dream? Maybe. But in the fictional play, when Don Quixote dies, Aldonza is at his side, weeping and claiming her identity as "Dulcinea".

In the real story Samaritans worshipped at the wrong place, used the wrong scriptures, so Jews called them heretics and weeded them out. They wouldn't even use a cup or bowl that had been used by a Samaritan. But Jesus asked to drink from her dipper. And at the end of the story, she is the means by which an entire community proclaims, "He is the Savior of the World."

How did that happen? In the text,

What would happen if that example were followed today by Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, Catholics and Orthodox in Bosnia, Southern Baptists and the American Baptists in North Carolina—all who practice a religion of exclusion. Jesus practiced a religion of inclusion; and during crises of belief and faith, the people God can use will do the same.

Jesus made believers of many of the Samaritans in the town of Sychar. He accepted them, as they were, where they were, for who they were.

And they accepted him as the Messiah they had been looking for—a Messiah for Samaritans as well as for Jews. Jesus was a Messiah for everyone. He still is.