



Samaritan Woman at the Well, Grigor Malinov

The Social (Media) is Political

BY MIHEE KIM-KORT

The word political carries a weight that many people are hesitant to take on. We want to discuss our priorities—the people, ideas or things we hold dear—but know that announcing our priorities can start heated exchanges, whether on social media or at Thanksgiving dinner. Etiquette guides suggest we should never discuss religion or politics, but as people of faith, how can we, in good conscience, not talk about these things?

“The personal is political” may be a familiar saying to you, whether from a bumper sticker or as a slogan of student movements and second-wave feminism in the late 1960s. The saying underscores the connections between our own experiences and priorities and how social and political structures support, impede or shape them. Today, the saying reminds us to be cognizant that our words and actions are not enacted in a vacuum and, like Jesus, we are called to orient ourselves to the periphery of our communities.

Yet, *political* is still kind of a dirty word. Perhaps you’ve heard Tony Campolo’s metaphor: “Mixing religion and politics is like mixing ice cream and manure. It doesn’t do much to the manure but it sure does ruin the ice cream.”¹ Although this might be a hyperbolic way of talking about the futility (or impending mess) of mixing religion and politics, many see the reality that doing so is unavoidable.

We need only to look at the Pew Research statistics on the correspondence between voting blocs and religious beliefs. Looking at the last five elections, there’s a clear trend that Hispanic Catholics, Jews and religious “nones” vote Democratic, while white born-again or evangelical Christians and white Catholics are more likely to vote Republican.² The point is that the political is all around us—in the air we breathe, our institutions, neighborhoods and, yes, our pews and pulpits. This is not always a negative phenomenon. Perhaps what is needed in our churches is a reflexive and courageous engagement of the ways that power is present and how we interact as individuals and as communities.



This passage provides us with a glimpse of what small moments of connection can look like. In a time when technology and social media offers opportunities for connection, how can we ensure that those spaces prioritize authenticity and compassion?

Today we see there are many ways that people interact with one another, and not simply in the more conventional third spaces of coffeehouses, libraries and gyms, but through social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook. Some might remember

the precursors to these “places,” although it was not too long ago that they were once the primary way people talked to each other—MySpace, blogging sites like Xanga, AOL Instant Messenger and even email.

Technology gives us instantaneous interaction. There’s a kind of intimacy

that is immediate and gratifying. While we have already witnessed some of the negative impact of social media—including everything from bullying to bogus news—we can’t deny the mobilizing power of these tools, and the creative ways people use them to learn, grow and gather.

Opening Litany (from Psalm 42)

Leader: As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

**All: My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?**

Leader: My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”

**All: These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, and led them in
procession to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a
multitude keeping festival.**

Leader: Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why
are you disquieted within me?

**All: Hope in God, for I shall again
praise him, my help and my God.**

Scripture

Read John 4:1–26.

While Jesus makes his way from Judea to Galilee, he stops at Jacob’s well in a Samaritan city called Sychar. Before we look at the dialog between Jesus and the Samaritan woman whom he encounters at the well, it’s important to know the context of their meeting. At the time, Jews and Samaritans had a history of hating each

other, dating back to when Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The Samaritans inhabited the former northern kingdom, the Jews inhabited the former southern kingdom—and they detested one another.

For 550 years, walls of bitterness were erected on both sides. These walls became institutions and structures grafted into the identities of every individual in the community. How people should interact with one another was determined by age, gender and socioeconomic class. A Jew wouldn’t have even glanced in the direction of a Samaritan. And yet, here, we see a disruption. A fissure appeared in the foundation of those systems that prescribed whom to talk to, whom to interact with and how.

I marvel at how Jesus ignores the ideological currents of hatred, prejudice and misogyny. Somehow, Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman freely. Traditional interpretations will simply claim the divinity of Jesus as the reason for his remarkable actions. While Jesus’ divinity and his legitimacy as the Messiah are clearly perpetual themes running throughout the Gospel of John, perhaps we might consider the possibilities in this space a little more carefully—this space where the Samaritan woman encounters Jesus at the farthest edges and outskirts of the narrative. The audacity of the Samaritan woman in responding to Jesus is also remarkable.

We don’t totally know the Samaritan woman’s backstory, but we tend to make pretty unfair assumptions about her sexuality and relationships. She is a complex and fascinating figure, and her interaction with Jesus wreaks havoc on all those seemingly impervious

“She must constantly make available to God her fallible humanity so that God might continually encourage, transform, and regenerate her for the work she is called to do for herself and her community.”

—Mitzi J. Smith, *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*

structures that tell us what was or is appropriate. It’s an expansive, generous text.

A Request, An Inquiry

Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, “Give me a drink.” In opening himself up to the Samaritan woman, he provides a model of authenticity that is rooted in vulnerability and fragility. It’s an opening that makes space for extending compassion.

The Samaritan woman responds to Jesus with a question: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” It’s an astonishing, brash question, but completely legitimate. Jesus shirks convention of the time by not only speaking to her but asking her for help. A Samaritan. A Samaritan woman!

Her response names Jesus’ identity and her own. In her few words, she reminds him of convention, of history and tradition. Questions him. Criticizes him. Judges him. While the Samaritan woman had a choice simply to respond to Jesus by giving him what he requested of her, she recognizes what Jesus is doing here and calls it out. It flies in the face of what’s normal and she tries to make sense of the possibility in this moment, as the structures of propriety begin to crumble around her.

Jesus extends the possibility of life without the conventions of mutual disdain and rigid social hierarchy. Even more than that, Jesus extends the possibility of eternal life. Jesus and the woman talk about living and eternal water. As usual, Jesus reveals some things about her life to her, and who he is, too.

This passage provides us with a glimpse of what small moments of connection can look like. In a time when technology and social media offers opportunities for connection, how can we ensure that those spaces prioritize authenticity and compassion? How can we model the scriptural example of expressing human dependency and honest, critical inquiry?

We have a choice, and that is evidence of the political nature of our lives in Christ—we have a choice to practice compassion, to receive, to give, to share, to love.

Questions

1. How do you define compassion?
2. What barriers did Jesus and the Samaritan woman have in their lives that prevented them from practicing compassion?
3. Why is it important to intentionally cultivate authenticity in terms of vulnerability and fragility in your own life?
4. What are some ways you might practice compassion and authenticity in all the spheres of your life—family, Facebook, work, volunteering or church?

Closing Prayer

Living and Holy God, you who have created us for connection, for intimacy, for community, fill us with your love, that we might be open to those around us, especially those who are in need. We acknowledge the ways that we are closed off, not only to others, but to you, and even to ourselves. Grant us the eyes to see the possibility of your presence in every moment, in every time and place, and your continuous call to also make present your compassion, whether in word or deed, comment or post. Give us the courage to ask, to seek, even to make those inevitable mistakes, trusting that you hold and carry us always. May we be attentive to your power in our lives—your joy, your hope, your strength—for the sake of bearing and carrying your kingdom into this world. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Mihee Kim-Kort is an ordained PC(USA) minister, a PhD student in religious studies at Indiana University, author of several books, wife, mother of three and blogger.

Notes

1. Jarrod McKenna, “Religion and Politics Is Like Ice-cream and Manure: They Don’t Mix,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 6, 2013; www.smh.com.au/opinion/religion-and-politics-is-like-ice-cream-and-manure-they-dont-mix-20130905-2t6ij.html.
2. Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martínez, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” Pew Research Center; www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis.
3. Segments adapted from my book *Outside the Lines: How Queerness Will Transform Your Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2018).